

## The Richard Olsen Richards Papers at the South Dakota Historical Resource Center

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Richard Olsen Richards was a leader of the progressive reform movement within the South Dakota Republican party in the first few decades of the twentieth century. He is most widely known as the author of the Richards Primary Law.

Richards was born 2 January 1866 in Sandefjord, Norway. The son of a ship owner and builder, he came to America in 1881 seeking greater opportunities. After several jobs in New York, Michigan, and Minnesota, he finally arrived in Dakota Territory in 1883, settling in Mitchell where he worked as a bookkeeper for the Mitchell State Bank. He moved to Huron in 1886, where he became successful in land investment. In addition to owning several banks, he also owned the Richards Trust Company in Huron. In 1891, Richards married Grace May Durell of Mitchell; they had six children.

Richards became involved in politics in 1903, when he ran, unsuccessfully, for the position of postmaster in Huron. In 1904, he supported the Crawford progressives in the Republican party. After the November election, the progressives concentrated on the direct primary issue, putting Richards in charge of getting a bill through the legislature. Richards presented the 1905 legislature with a direct primary petition containing 8,884 signatures, twice as many as needed. The legislature, at this time still controlled by the stalwarts, rejected the petition and re-



*Richard Olsen Richards*

placed it with the Honest Caucus Bill, which left nomination procedures in the hands of the party machine.

By 1906, the progressives had gained a majority in the Republican party and were able to elect Coe I. Crawford governor. Richards was prominently identified with the gubernatorial candidacies of both Crawford and Robert Vessey. During Crawford's tenure as governor, several reforms passed the legislature, including a primary law. This law created a number of unexpected problems and was amended by the 1909 legislature. The primary law was still not satisfactory to Richards, and in 1910 he began circulating another petition. The 1911 legislature decided to submit the petition, which became known as the Richards Primary Law, to the people. The Richards Primary Law was a complicated procedure for selecting party candidates and setting out party platforms. The hotly contested law was approved by the people in the 1912 election.

Though finally voted in by the people, the Richards Primary Law did not have smooth sailing. Already in 1913, opponents tried to replace it with the Coffey Bill, which was subsequently rejected by the people in 1914. The primary law was not favored by most politicians, and in 1917 the legislature did repeal it. Immediately, Richards prepared a new revised version, which was again approved by the people in 1918. The Richards Primary Law was finally replaced in the late 1920s by the Slocum Law.

Between 1912 and 1926, R. O. Richards became a perennial can-

didate for either the governorship or the United States senatorial seat. Richards would usually run as a Republican in the primary and, failing that, would run in the general election as an independent. In a 1914 letter to Doane Robinson, Richards claimed he was forced to run as an independent candidate to defend his primary law. Unless he was a candidate, no one would attend meetings to hear him speak about the primary issue. In all his attempts at public office, he was never once successful. R. O. Richards died on 11 May 1930 in Huron.

The Richards Papers at the South Dakota Historical Resource Center consist of correspondence, newspaper clippings, and a wide variety of political material. Unfortunately, much of the correspondence is not personal but, instead, consists of form letters sent out by the numerous organizations in which Richards was involved. In addition to the direct primary law, Richards was also involved in ending the spoils system, working with the prohibition issue, and supporting fair taxation efforts. Many organizations are, therefore, represented in the papers, including the Republican State Primary Organization, the South Dakota Direct Legislation Organization, the Progressive Republican Primary



R. O. (DICK) RICHARDS "HAS.CAME"



Organization, the Scandinavian Republican League, the Roosevelt Republican League, the South Dakota Civic Federation, the La Follette State Republican Club, the Republican Primary Organization, and the South Dakota Farmer-Labor Movement. Much can be learned about the issues and the personalities involved in South Dakota politics during the progressive period from the extensive letters written by Richards for the above organizations.

The newspaper clippings offer much information on Richards's political career, the progressive movement in South Dakota, and various political conventions and meetings. In addition, Richards kept clippings about his political opponents.

The political material in the Richards collection consists of papers on South Dakota politics in general, specific issues Richards worked on, and various Richards campaigns. Richards kept scrapbooks, ten in all, which he titled his "political file." The scrapbooks contain much of the form correspondence and most of the newspaper clippings. In addition, they contain such things as the constitution of the Republican State Primary League, 1904; lists of the Republican executive committees and precinct committeemen in each county; political broadsides and pamphlets supporting Richards and other Republican candidates; a 1903 list of postmasters in the state; several of Richards's political speeches and articles; and numerous petitions, ranging from a request for President Wilson to end the spoils system to the original 1905 petition urging the legislature to adopt a direct primary law.

The Richards Papers, which consist of three boxes and eight additional volumes of material, would be useful in supplementing research on the progressive movement in South Dakota, the development of direct primary laws, or a biography of Richards. For more information on the Richards Papers or other manuscript collections in the Historical Resource Center contact the Manuscript Curator, Historical Resource Center, Memorial Building, Pierre, S.Dak. 57501; telephone, 605-773-4372.

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