

WABASH VALLEY

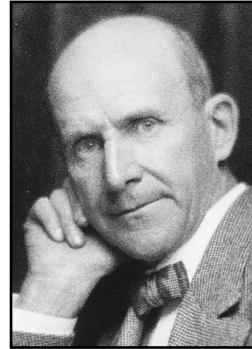
P R O F I L E S

A series of tributes to hometown people and events that have shaped our history.

Eugene V. Debs

During a century distinguished for remarkable social reforms, Terre Haute native Eugene Victor Debs was a trailblazer. Without doubt, the five-time candidate for president of the U.S. ranks among the most important people in American history.

Debs was born Nov. 10, 1855, in his parents' two-story home on North Fourth Street. Jean Daniel and Marguerite Marie (Bettrich) Debs — immigrants from Colmar in Alsace — operated a retail grocery in a downstairs room in the residence. Gene had four sisters — Marie Marguerite, Louise, Eugenie and Emily — and a younger brother Theodore, who eventually became his secretary.



When Debs attended Benny Hayes' Seminary in 1860, there were no public schools in Indiana. In 1867, he enrolled at Terre Haute High School. Though active in high school debating activities, he withdrew after two years to become a paintscraper with the Terre Haute & Indianapolis Railroad. Upon advancing to a job as fireman, he took classes at Terre Haute Commercial College. For a short time, he worked for the railroad in St. Louis, but returned to Terre Haute in 1874 to become a warehouseman for Hulman & Cox wholesale grocery and co-founded the Occidental Literary Club. On Feb. 27, 1875, he helped organize the Vigo Lodge of Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen (BLF). A few years later he was elected associate editor and then editor of the national BLF magazine.

In 1879 Democrat Debs was elected Terre Haute city clerk, serving two terms. Very popular with local voters, he also served one frustrating term in the Indiana legislature, drafting and supporting unsuccessful bills for women's suffrage and the abolishment of gender and race discrimination. On June 9, 1885, he married Katherine Metzger, stepdaughter of affluent Terre Haute druggist John Jacob Baur. Four years later, Gene and Kate built a large home on North Eighth Street, now a national historic site. Though Gene and Kate did not have children, they helped raise nephew Oscar Baur Jr.

In June 1893, Debs co-founded the American Railway Union. He was convicted of contempt of court after the bitter 1894 Pullman strike, catapulting him into national celebrity while serving a six-month sentence. Swayed to the Socialist cause during that incarceration, he was nominated as the Social Democratic Party candidate for president in 1900, but captured only 86,935 votes. He was the Socialist Party candidate in 1904, 1908 and 1912, gaining more support each time. In Canton, Ohio, June 18, 1918, he spoke out against the war and was convicted of violating the Espionage Act. While imprisoned, "Convict Number 9653" accumulated 913,664 votes for president. On Christmas day 1921, President Warren Harding commuted his 10-year sentence. A large crowd welcomed his return at Union Station here.

After a brief rest, Debs renewed his writing and speaking efforts on behalf of the Socialists. However, ill health forced him to spend several months in the Lindlahr sanitarium in Elmhurst, Ill. He died there Oct. 26, 1926. His ashes were interred at Highland Lawn Cemetery. Kate died Dec. 7, 1936.

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