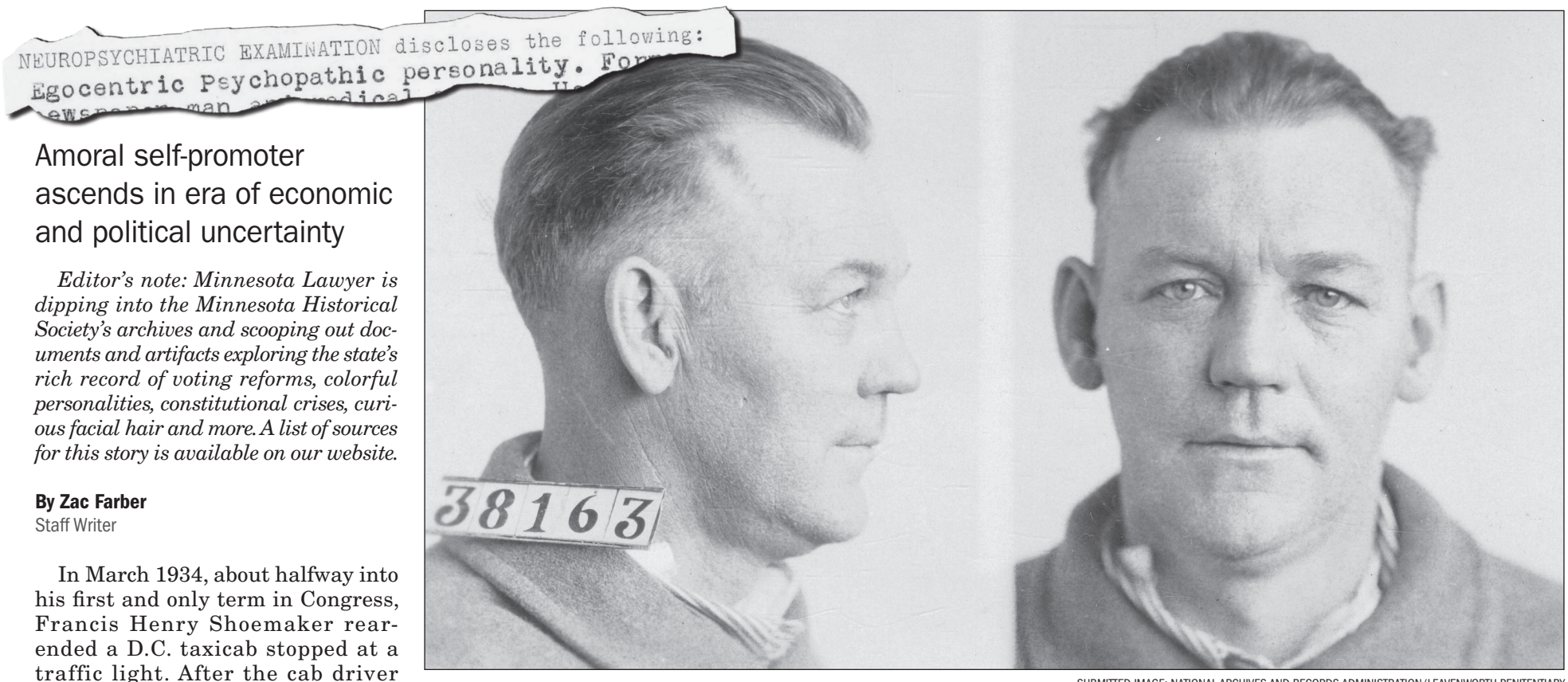
Politics of the Past

A 'psychopath' goes to Washington



SUBMITTED IMAGE: NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION/LEAVENWORTH PENITENTIARY

Francis H. Shoemaker was convicted of sending scurrilous and defamatory material through the mail in 1930 and given a suspended one-year sentence. But after he published a gloating account of the trial in his Red Wing Newspaper, the judge changed his mind and sent Shoemaker to prison.

Amoral self-promoter ascends in era of economic and political uncertainty

Editor's note: Minnesota Lawyer is dipping into the Minnesota Historical Society's archives and scooping out documents and artifacts exploring the state's rich record of voting reforms, colorful personalities, constitutional crises, curious facial hair and more. A list of sources for this story is available on our website.

By Zac Farber
Staff Writer

In March 1934, about halfway into his first and only term in Congress, Francis Henry Shoemaker rear-ended a D.C. taxicab stopped at a traffic light. After the cab driver thumbed his nose at the congressman, Shoemaker exited his vehicle and punched the 125-pound man in his right eye.

"Yes, I hit him and next time I will kill him," Shoemaker explained to a policeman the cabbie flagged down. He then boasted that "everybody knows me in Washington" and drove away.

Arrested later and charged with assault, Shoemaker was unrepentant. In a speech made during a failed campaign for Senate, he joked about his "pugilistic proclivities" but also denied he'd struck the taxi driver. He ranted about a "frame-up in Washington" coordinated by "big business" and the "kept press," and wisecracked that his victim was "not a taxi driver but the middleweight champion of the Marines, sent out to give me a nice trimming." The Washington press dubbed him "Statesman Shoemaker."

Mocking a workingman he'd assaulted did not, unfortunately, qualify as an atypical episode of Shoemaker's career, which included numerous trips to county jails and a yearlong stay in federal prison.

The Renville County native was a politically flexible rabble-rouser, a vulgar, vindictive narcissist with a short temper and fast fists. He was arrested four times during his two years in office, including once when he roughed up a neighbor for playing "Sweet Adeline" too loudly on the radio. He branded his opponents as "Wall Street tools" and saddled them with nicknames like "Judas" and "the jellyfish." He questioned the impartiality of judges who ruled against him, and a leader of his own party once bemoaned his compulsive habit of "spilling fabrications instead of facts."

But Shoemaker's profane style of populism appealed to many Minnesotans living in a time of economic anxiety and political mistrust. Despite his many lies, he was seen as a straight-talker, and his often boorish behavior belied a capacity for loyal friendship. Illinois Sen. Everett Dirksen praised Shoemaker's "great sense of humor" and "colorful" personality.

'No basis in fact'

In 1929, after the Progressive Farmers of America expelled him for misusing funds, Shoemaker took over the editorship of the Organized Farmer, a weekly newspaper based in Red Wing. He radicalized the leftist paper, using it as a platform to viciously attack business and political leaders. He accused Goodhue County's Republican congressman, August H. Andresen, of "stabb[ing] the farmers whom he misrepresents in the back." And he called the Red Wing Manufacturers Association a "gang of looting, thieving liars" for its opposition to public light and power utilities. The story's headline: "Leaching Lascivious Liars Loathly Lacerate Local Lame, Limping Lazaruses."

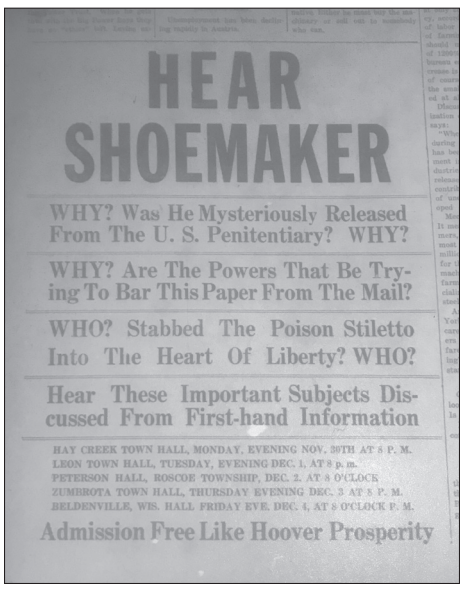
Shoemaker's aggressive approach was not initially successful. His vilification of local businesses cost the Organized Farmer advertising revenue, and he failed to win over the county's many farmers, whom his paper referred to as "peons." "The general public in the Goodhue County and Minnesota of the late 1920s showed little interest in his ideas," wrote Frederick L. Johnson, the county's historian.

Undiscouraged, Shoemaker ran for Andresen's 3rd District congressional seat in 1930, but his campaign nearly capsized when he was arrested by the investigatory arm of the U.S. Postal Service. A woman had come to him with a dubious story about how the stocks, bonds and cash in her dead husband's safe deposit box had been looted and replaced with less valuable securities. So Shoemaker had sent a letter to the banker Robert W. Putnam, addressed to "Robber of Widows and Orphans, Red Wing, Minn, in care of Temple of Greed and Chicanery." The feds charged him with sending scurrilous and defamatory material through the mail.

Despite his legal troubles, Shoemaker managed to win the Farmer-Labor primary, but he was routed by Andresen in the general election and, a month later, he lost in court. Giving no evidence to support his claims that Putnam preyed on widows and orphans, Shoemaker had written in his paper that the banker was a tyrant, a financial dictator and a Jekyll and Hyde. "You have been saying things about people which have no basis in fact," Judge John B. Sanborn told him during the St. Paul trial, doling out a $500 fine and a suspended one-year prison sentence.

Shoemaker returned to Red Wing and published an account of the trial — by turns triumphant and indignant — in which he celebrated the "Christmas gift" of the verdict but complained he didn't get the "customary opportunity" to address the court. When Judge Sanborn read the story, he changed his mind about Shoemaker's suspended sentence and the unregenerate yellow journalist was carted off to Leavenworth Penitentiary in Kansas.

A neuropsychiatric examination conducted upon Shoemaker's admission to prison yielded a diagnosis of "egocentric psychopathic personality." But the constraints of his new environment worked to subdue, temporarily, his manic inner drive: Locked behind bars, Shoemaker resigned himself to good behavior. Though he would remember his incarceration bitterly, his days, in truth, were not all that difficult. An old foot injury exempted him from heavy labor. And, despite giving his religious affiliation as "pagan," he was appointed assistant to the chaplain and entrusted with the registration of new inmates. "He became rather intimate with his cellmates," Dirksen wrote in his memoirs. "He would have felt at home anywhere, whether in or out of prison." Shoemaker would later hire a fellow convict onto his congressional staff.



After he was released from prison in 1931, Shoemaker began speaking in town halls across Goodhue County. He advertised his speeches in the Organized Farmer.

'Big interests' and big crowds

Paroled after 10 months, Shoemaker returned from Leavenworth to Red Wing full of wrath and ambition. Resuming his job at the Organized Farmer, he slammed Judge Sanborn's "religious bias" and "utter unfitness" in front-page headlines and insisted that he and his paper had been "singled out for persecution."

Soon, Shoemaker began revving up for another run for Congress, appearing nightly at town halls across the region. He advertised his appearances breathlessly in his paper. "Who stabbed the poison stiletto into the heart of liberty? WHO?" he asked readers, promising that admission would be "free like Hoover prosperity." After a Shoemaker speech, the paper would report hyperbolically on the size of his crowd. "The building was one solid mass of humanity from the very door," reads one such story about a Dec. 4, 1931, rally in Leon. "Never in the history of Goodhue

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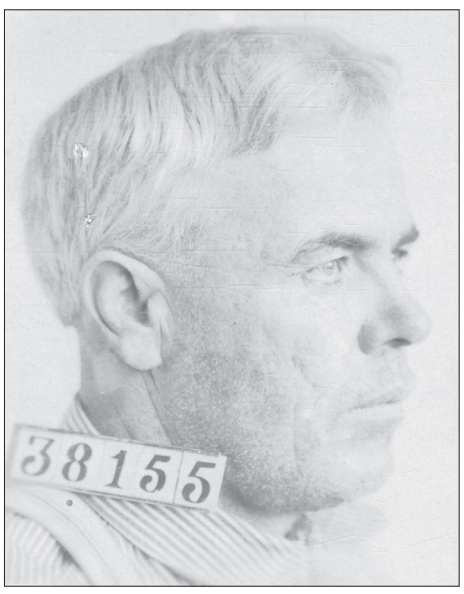
County was there such enthusiasm shown or profound interest taken by an audience listening to an address from a public platform."

To many, Shoemaker's act sounded like the same bombastic distortions and falsehoods that had landed him in prison. "The name Shoemaker is poison," the editor of a Stillwater Farmer-Labor newspaper wrote. But, this time around, something started to click. The crowds may have been exaggerated, but they weren't invented. His time at Leavenworth, instead of disqualifying him, had served to burnish his reputation across Minnesota as a populist willing to take the fight to rapacious bankers, corrupt politicians and other "big interests." Appearing "a victim of the system that many Depression-weary Minnesotans now distrusted," Johnson wrote, "he appealed to the widening circle of have-nots in the voting population at a time when many Americans were ready for radical solutions."

Shoemaker's campaign for office received a big break when the Supreme Court ruled in a gerrymandering-related lawsuit that the state's 1932 congressional races would be decided by an at-large election. It's unlikely Shoemaker could have prevailed in a head-to-head Red Wing race, but his brash antics had earned him statewide fame and, with an eighth-place showing, he eked out a victory, winning one of the nine at-large seats. "I go from the penitentiary to Congress, not like a great majority of Congressmen who go from Congress to the penitentiary," he said.



Owen M. Lamb

Power to the populist

Though Shoemaker ran for office on an anti-Wall Street platform, he appointed a former bank president as secretary of his congressional office. The optics were complicated by the fact that Shoemaker had met the man, Owen M. Lamb, in prison, where he was serving a sentence for embezzlement. Shoemaker defended Lamb as a "humanitarian." "He has the confidence of the people of his community," Shoemaker told a Pennsylvania newspaper. "They know he's honest and so do I." Franklin Roosevelt apparently agreed; on July 10, 1933, the president issued pardons to both Shoemaker and Lamb. "Not only am I the only ex-convict in Congress," Shoemaker quipped, "but the only man to emerge from the White House with two pardons as well."

A shameless self-promoter, Shoemaker had little attention for the hard work of governing. "I don't think he was at all interested in Washington," Johnson said in an interview. "He couldn't sit still for that kind of thing." Nor did he hold real political convictions; in his later years, the man elected on a Farmer-Labor ticket would also run for office as a Republican, an independent and a Democrat.

While Shoemaker didn't do much legislating, he had plenty of time for rehashing old grievances and giving histrionic harangues on the House floor. Still harboring a grudge against Judge Sanborn, he gave a speech to Congress the unsubtle title "My Judicial Crucifixion—How a Judicial Oligarchy Railroaded Me to a Penitentiary" and peppered it with digs against "alley rats," "ravenous fiends" and corrupt public officials "compared to whom Judas Iscariot would be a prince and a benefactor."

A defeated demagogue

After less than a year in Congress, Shoemaker began angling for a seat in the upper chamber, and he turned his sharp tongue on Sen. Henrik Shipstead, a political moderate who had helped Shoemaker get released early from prison. Shoemaker held nothing back in his attempt to wrest the Farmer-Labor nomination from the senator. During a speech at the state party convention in March 1934, the freshman congressman made hay of the more than $100,000 Shipstead had drawn in salary over 12 years of public service. "It takes money to advertise any product; it takes money to advertise Shipstead," he said. "The only union he ever belonged to was the big business union and he never scabbed on it."

The speech, met with rapturous applause, was possibly the high point of Shoemaker's political career. But it wasn't enough. Minnesotans couldn't trust the blustery demagogue, and he lost the primary by a 3-to-1 margin. To save face, Shoemaker told reporters that a news agency had asked him to be its European correspondent. The Pioneer Press responded with an acid rejoinder: "Never have the citizens of the state more anxiously and passionately desired to believe the congressman's word."

Shortly after losing his shot at the Senate, Shoemaker lost his marriage. Lydgia, his wife of 22 years, filed for divorce in August 1934 on grounds of cruelty and infidelity. They'd rarely slept in the same bed. Lydgia had declined to move from her home in New London, Wisconsin, to live with her husband in Red Wing or in Washington. The judge granted her $200 a month in alimony, with any income she earned to be deducted from the payments. Shoemaker craftily offered his wife a clerical job in his D.C. office, paying $196 a month. "If I were you, I wouldn't work," the judge advised.

Shoemaker ran unsuccessfully for Congress in the next four elections. In one campaign he offered a primary opponent his father's watch as a bribe to withdraw from the race. According to his congressional biography, Shoemaker spent his twilight years in North Redwood, Minnesota, where he "resumed agricultural pursuits." When he was 50, a judge found Shoemaker guilty of knocking a neighboring farmer unconscious. He spent little time in jail and ran twice more for Congress before his death in 1958, at age 69. "He was as amoral as he was immoral," Johnson said. "Never owned up to anything, he was always in the right."

Congressman crook: A life of lies, crimes and jibes

By Zac Farber
Staff Writer

Francis H. Shoemaker has staked out an indelible place in Minnesota's political history as probably the most rambunctious, unprincipled liar ever elected to public office. His life yielded an abundant supply of spectacular stories.

When Shoemaker ran for Congress in 1932, he made no effort to restrain his penchant for impulsive behavior. During a speech in Clarkfield, he knocked out a lumberyard manager. In Goodhue County, he claimed to have uncovered the Teapot Dome scandal by stealing the briefcase of the secretary of the interior. And in the Twin Cities, a radio station interrupted him seven times in 15 minutes for making "slanderous" assertions.

Elected anyway, Shoemaker appears to have celebrated his success with bouts of heavy drinking. On one occasion, he woke up woozy in a Minneapolis hospital and caused enough of a commotion that staff needed to call police to subdue him. The congressman-elect upstaged potential critics by leveling odd accusations against the hospital. He said he'd been straightjacketed, handcuffed, kidnapped and beaten by seven orderlies and, in a press conference outside the governor's office, he bared his chest to show reporters his bruises and demand an investigation. He explained that the perpetrators had only been able to get the jump on him because he was under anesthesia for a tooth extraction, and he bragged that his neighbor Harry Houdini had personally taught him how to escape from handcuffs. Less than a week later, Shoemaker lied about serving in the army to obtain a bed at the Fort Snelling veterans' hospital.

Shoemaker's erratic tendencies continued to surface in Washington. Along with throwing punches at a flippant taxi driver and a noisy neighbor, he attracted police attention by accosting a group of workmen outside his room at the Hotel Ritz. Their use of an acetylene torch early in the morning bothered the congressman, so he smashed six of their lanterns. Shoemaker was arrested but the charges were later dropped. On a trip back home to Minneapolis, he got in a high-speed car chase down Hennepin Avenue and refused to pay the $75 fine until a judge ordered officers to lock him up.

During the May 1934 Minneapolis truckers strike, Shoemaker inserted himself, unbidden, into the action, and his overzealous attempt to be helpful caused a permanent rift between local and national union leadership. While snooping around the Local 574 strike headquarters, Shoemaker spotted a telegram from the president of the Teamsters advising the chapter to seek arbitration. Consulting no one, the congressman wrote back: "Keep your scabby nose and scaly face out. This is a fight for human rights. Your rat job not involved." Shoemaker had the nerve to sign the scorched-earth message as Bill Brown, the name of Local 574's leader. The infuriated strikers would never forgive the brazen imposture. "We had trouble enough on our hands without going out of the way to antagonize Tobin," Farrell Dobbs wrote 38 years later, still fuming over a man he scorned as "irresponsible, adventuristic, and an exhibitionist to boot."

SUBMITTED IMAGE: U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

A narcissist and a compulsive liar, Francis H. Shoemaker could be an alienating figure, but his profane style of populism appealed to many Minnesotans living through the Depression. In 1932, not long after his release from prison, he won a congressional seat in an at-large election. "I go from the penitentiary to Congress, not like a great majority of congressmen who go from Congress to the penitentiary," he said.