

ELMHURST HISTORY HIGHLIGHT: The Last Days of Eugene Debs

Eugene V. Debs was a labor organizer, orator, and five-time candidate for President of the United States. One of the founding members of the Industrial Workers of the World and the American Railway Union, which orchestrated the Pullman Strike of 1894, Debs was leader of the Socialist Party of America from 1901 until 1926. While his illustrious and incendiary career took Debs all over the country, the end of his life found him in Elmhurst, Illinois.

In 1918, Debs was sentenced to prison for speaking out against the United States' involvement in the First World War. Upon his release in December 1921, his health was in decline. Elmhurst was home to the Lindlahr Sanitarium, a health resort founded

in 1914 that espoused the practices of naturopathic medicine. Debs made his first visit to the sanitarium in the summer in 1922 and took a liking to Dr. Henry Lindlahr, founder of the resort. His presence in the city was kept quiet due to the naturopathic prescription of seclusion, but his health seemed to improve with the physical therapy regimen, strict diet, and spa baths that Dr. Lindlahr's nature treatment entailed.

While in Elmhurst, Debs struck up a lasting friendship with Carl Sandburg, the distinguished poet and author who had previously been associated with the Socialist movement. Sandburg and his family moved to Elmhurst in 1919 and lived just a few blocks away from the sanitarium. The presence of these two bright minds attracted other luminaries to Elmhurst such as best-selling author Sinclair Lewis and prominent attorney Clarence Darrow of the Scopes Monkey Trial fame. Debs recalled one such meeting in a letter to his friend David Karsner: "Last night for the first time I had to break the Sanitarium's rules. I was with Carl Sandburg and Sinclair Lewis at the Sandburg home till midnight, and then that beautiful brace brought me home. It was a wonderful occasion—an event in our lives."

Soon after his memorable encounter with the Pulitzer Prize-winning authors in November of that year, Debs left Elmhurst in November of 1922 for his home in Terre Haute, Indiana. He would return to Elmhurst in 1924 after the death of Henry Lindlahr and again in September 1926. On the occasion of this last trip to the sanitarium, Debs was a dying man suffering from heart disease. In mid-October, Debs was returning from a visit to Sandburg's home when he collapsed into a coma. The naturopathic remedies were a cause of concern to Debs's family members, who arrived in Elmhurst upon learning of his



*Eugene Debs with Carl Sandburg and his children circa 1924.
Image courtesy of the Eugene V. Debs Foundation.*



Main building of the Lindlahr Sanitarium circa 1924. Debs can be seen at far right. EHM Collection photo.

collapse. Doctors were brought in from Chicago, including Dr. Morris Fishbein, editor of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, who later recalled that he was “well nigh aghast to see and hear what naturopaths do under difficult circumstances.”

Eugene Debs passed away at the Elmhurst sanitarium on October 20, 1926, at the age of 70, and his ashes are buried in his hometown of Terre Haute. Perhaps presciently, Carl Sandburg wrote a letter in November 1922 to his friend Debs following his first departure from Elmhurst: “Dear Gene, you will always be close to us. The only way we can decently remember you and what you left with us here will be a certain way of living it, maybe dying it.”

By Daniel Lund, Elmhurst History Museum Staff, 2020