



# THE LIFE AND TIMES OF MERLIN HULL

*THE FALLS HISTORY PROJECT  
BLACK RIVER FALLS HIGH SCHOOL  
2012*

# INTRODUCTION TO THE 2011-12 Project

*“All historical experience must be imagined before it can be understood.”*  
(Historian David Blight)

This year marks the 11<sup>th</sup> year of the Falls History Project. From the beginning, our goal has been to actively engage a young history student in the process of actually “doing” history. This involves narrowing a topic, researching local archives, possibly interviewing local citizens about an event or period of time, and ultimately producing a written product that is posted on-line and made available through the Jackson County History Room at our local library. Twelve outstanding young people have participated in the project since we started. Over the past decade we have tried to imagine this place at an earlier time with the goal of better grasping the story of our community.

Our 2011-12 research focuses on Merlin Hull. Hull was a lawyer, newspaper publisher, and elected official who moved to Black River Falls in 1894 as a young attorney. Most notably in regard to this project, Hull served in the US House of Representatives continuously from 1935 until his death in 1953. His longevity both as a public official and as an editor of a local paper make his story unique to say the least. Our intern this year has been Josh Hanson. Josh is a senior who will be attending Edgewood College in Madison next fall. He was a natural for this project due to his intense interest in all things political. Josh spent a week in March in Washington, D.C. as part of the Senate Youth Scholarship Program and has been active in local politics for at least a couple of years now. Not surprisingly, Josh jumped at the chance to study a local politician.

Wisconsin politics always provides fertile ground for research and this project is no exception. The state that spawned the Progressive Movement of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century and produced the likes of Robert LaFollette Sr., who carried that banner to the US Senate and a Presidential run in 1924, also claims Joseph McCarthy as a native son. McCarthy, of course, represents the most reactionary of political movements. Perhaps the divide that we are witnessing in 2012 is simply wired into our political DNA as a state. As with all our research, we only scratched the surface of a rather extensive story. What follows is a short biographical sketch of Merlin Hull, a summary of his elections from 1934 to 1952, a sampling of eulogies that were offered in the House of Representatives at the time of his death in 1953, a summary of the impact of the Progressive Movement in Wisconsin, and two of the hundreds of Hull’s weekly letters that were published in the Banner Journal while he served in the US House of Representatives.

The Hull letters, in my estimation, provide a treasure-trove of commentary on the period of 1934-1953, eventful years for Wisconsin, the nation, and the world. In a time of simpler media than we are experiencing in 2012, Hull’s letters “explained” the wider world to the newspaper readers of Black River Falls. The letters are impressive and incredibly informative--in fact, I would argue that we have nothing comparable in today’s local papers. Josh selected two letters surrounding the events of December 1941 and the attack on Pearl Harbor and they are reproduced in full with our project, along with commentary by Josh and me. We hope you enjoy this year’s edition of the Falls History Project.

--Paul S. Rykken BRFHS June 2012



## Merlin Hull

Merlin Hull was born in Warsaw Indiana on December 18, 1870. He spent much of his life living in Black River Falls, Wisconsin, where he owned and published the Jackson County Journal, which was later renamed to the Banner Journal. He graduated from Gale College in Galesville, Wisconsin. Later, he attended De Pauw University in Greencastle Indiana. He eventually finished his education at Columbian (now George Washington) University in Washington D.C., where he studied law.

In 1894, Hull was admitted to the Bar, and commenced practice in Black River Falls. He was no stranger to public service. As a journalist, Hull was popular among the area. In 1907, Hull became the Jackson County District Attorney. He served as district attorney for two years. In 1909, Hull was elected to the Wisconsin State Assembly. He served in the assembly for five years and was speaker in 1913. From 1917 to 1921, Hull served the state of Wisconsin as Secretary of State. After a seven year leave from the public eye, Hull was elected to Congress where he represented the 7<sup>th</sup> district from 1929-1931. Then, in 1934, Hull was elected to the 9<sup>th</sup> district, and served from 1935 to the end of his life in 1953.

Hull was deemed a “LaFollette Republican,” serving six congressional terms under the Progressive title and five terms under the Republican title. Hull was extremely popular in the area, often winning elections by large margins. In fact, Irving Swanson, a popular House Reading Clerk from Hudson Wisconsin once said, “He [Hull] was the undisputed king of his district. In other words, he would win by 92 percent and all that sort of thing...”

Hull kept a consistent track of his time in congress through his letters back to the Banner Journal. For almost all of his time in Congress, Hull wrote articles dealing with numerous issues. He also reported on the Washington happenings. Hull passed away on May 17, 1953 while still serving in Congress. After his passing, there were numerous eulogies given on the House floor in his honor. Hull was a respected member of Congress and the eulogies which were read strengthen that idea. See some of the eulogies below. Hull was buried in LaCrosse at Oak Grove Cemetery.

## Hull Election History

Year	Democrat	%	Republican	%	Progressive	%	Socialist	%
1934	Willis E. Donley	24%	Knute Anderson	23%	<b>Merlin Hull</b>	50%	Paul Boyd	3%
1936	Edwin J. Larkin	19%	<i>No Candidate</i>	--	<b>Merlin Hull</b>	81%	<i>No Candidate</i>	--
1938	William F. Crane	6%	Hugh M. Jones	40%	<b>Merlin Hull</b>	53%	<i>No Candidate</i>	--
1940	James E. Hughes	6%	John Nygaard	41%	<b>Merlin Hull</b>	53%	<i>No Candidate</i>	--
1942	Jack E. Joyce	6%	George H. Hipke	33%	<b>Merlin Hull</b>	62%	<i>No Candidate</i>	--
1944	<i>No Candidate</i>	--	<i>No Candidate</i>	--	<b>Merlin Hull</b>	99%	Adolph Maassen	1%
1946	<i>No Candidate</i>	--	<b>Merlin Hull</b>	99%	<i>No Candidate</i>	--	Adolph Maassen	1%
1948	<i>No Candidate</i>	--	<b>Merlin Hull</b>	99%	<i>No Candidate</i>	--	Howard Hendricks	1%
1950	Arthur L. Henning	29%	<b>Merlin Hull</b>	71%	<i>No Candidate</i>	--	<i>No Candidate</i>	--
1952	Kent L. Pillsbury	35%	<b>Merlin Hull</b>	65%	<i>No Candidate</i>	--	<i>No Candidate</i>	--

### Collection of Select Eulogies given on House Floor upon Hull's Passing:

*"Mr. SMITH of Wisconsin: Mr. Speaker, it is my sad responsibility to announce to the Members of the House the passing of our friend and colleague MERLIN HULL. Several weeks ago he submitted to surgery from which he never recovered. MERLIN HULL was born in Warsaw, Ind. At an early age his parents moved to Wisconsin. As a boy he worked as a farm hand. He also taught country school for a time. He learned the printing trade in the office of the Wisconsin Independent in his hometown of Black River Falls."*

--Representative Lawrence H. Smith

*"Mr. O'HARA of Illinois: Mr. Speaker, the passing of MERLIN HULL closes the living book on an era. He was part of the virile Wisconsin that changed the political thought of a nation. He stood at Armageddon with Teddy Roosevelt. No one more dynamic, no one more sincere than he in the great uprising of a people under the banners of the old Progressive Party. The Progressive Party of the early decades of the century, which established itself as a tremendous political force, now belongs only in history. One by one those who stood at Armageddon with Teddy Roosevelt have*

*walked far over the western slope to meet the setting sun. If it be given to man when mortal limitations are lifted to meet again in recognition dear friends on earth, what a joyous reunion there is now of MERLIN HULL with Bob La Follette and Theodore Roosevelt and Hiram Johnson, and all the other stalwarts of that era, the living book of which was closed with the death of our dear colleague.”*  
--Representative Barratt O’Hara

*“Mr. HAYS of Arkansas: Mr. Speaker, the passing of Hon. MERLIN HULL brings grief to all of us and deprives the House of a useful and deeply respected Member. His long service was characterized by a conscientious approach to the issues confronting the Congress and an earnest desire to maintain the highest standards of statesmanship. He was a good man as we have long been accustomed to use that phrase. His influence will continue to live.”*  
--Representative Brooks Hays

*“Mr. MARTIN of Massachusetts: Mr. Speaker, it is with great sadness we pause in our work today to do honor to the memory of a beloved colleague who has passed the Great Divide. It was my privilege to know MERLIN HULL for over 25 years. I admired his rugged patriotism, his broad humanitarianism, his devotion to his work, and his desire to benefit the poor people of our country as well as those living in other lands. As a fellow newspaperman, he liked to talk with me concerning the problems of the profession he had followed all his life. He loved the newspaper profession for the wide opportunities it opened for public service.”*  
--Representative Joseph W. Martin (Served as Speaker of House

# PROGRESSIVISM IN WISCONSIN

The following summary is primarily based on information from Volume IV of *The History of Wisconsin* (1998). Professor John D. Buenker of the University of Wisconsin-Parkside is the author of this particular volume, one of several that comprise the series.

- The Wisconsin Progressive Movement occurred from 1893 to 1918--and coincided with the National Progressive Movement (Teddy Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, etc...)
- The headliners in Wisconsin included "Fighting" Bob La Follette (who happened to have a bitter rivalry with Teddy Roosevelt), and Merlin Hull.

## PROGRESSIVISM IN TODAY'S POLITICS

A description of progressivism...

*"Progressivism is an umbrella term for a political ideology advocating or favoring social, political, and economic reform or changes through the state. Progressivism is often viewed by its advocates to be in opposition to conservative or reactionary ideologies.*

*The Progressive Movement began in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in cities with settlement workers and reformers who were interested in helping those facing harsh conditions at home and at work. The reformers spoke out about the need for laws regulating tenement housing and child labor. They also called for better working conditions for women.*

*The term progressivism emerged in reference to a more general response to the vast changes brought by industrialization: an alternative to the traditional conservative response to social and economic issues and, despite being associated with left-wing politics, to various more radical political movements, such as communism or anarchism.*

*Political parties, such as the Progressive Party, organized at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and progressivism was embraced in the administrations of American Presidents Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Lyndon Baines Johnson. Moreover, in the United States and Canada, the term "progressive" has occasionally been used by groups not particularly left-wing. The Progressive Democrats in the Republic of Ireland took the name "progressivism" despite being considered center-right or classical liberal. The European Progressive Democrats was a mainly heterogeneous political group in the European Union. For most of the period from 1942–2003, the largest conservative party in Canada was the Progressive Conservative Party."*

Nationally, there have been a few eras where progressive politics had emerged. The most notable is of course the time which is coined the Progressive Era, and it occurred between 1898-1917 (Essentially, Spanish-American War to End of WWI). Through the times, progressive ideology in politics has made numerous appearances. The current era saw its fair share of progressive elected representatives in the United States.

Wisconsin had a very strong progressive movement, electing people like Robert LaFollette, and, the subject of the project, Merlin Hull. Progressive roots dominated Wisconsin politics for approximately 19 years. The Progressive era was a time not of Republicans, nor was it a time of Democrats. The time was truly unique, for people from both parties were seen working together.

## Accomplishments of the Progressive Era

### **Four Constitutional Amendments were derived from the Progressive impulse:**

1. Authorization of an income tax.
2. Provision which directed us to the direct election of Senators
3. Extended the vote to women (often regarded to as one of the main parts.)
4. Prohibited the manufacture and sale of alcohol.

### **Also Remember...**

Muckraking journalists called attention to...

1. the exploitation of child labor
2. corruption in city governments
3. horror of lynching
4. ruthless business practices (monopolies)

### **What Progressivism meant in Wisconsin...**

People...

1. Robert LaFollette (True Progressive Champion)
2. James Davidson (WI Governor)
3. Henry A. Huber
4. Charles McCarthy
5. Francis E. McGovern
6. Merlin Hull

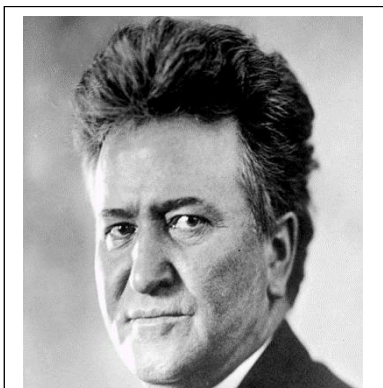
Changes... laws that provided for state control of corporation stock issues

1. an extension of the power of the railroad commission to regulate transportation
2. a fixing of railroad fares
3. stricter regulation of insurance companies
4. factory safety
5. established a state income tax
6. limited working hours for women and children
7. passed forest conservation acts
8. nation's first effective workmen's compensation program

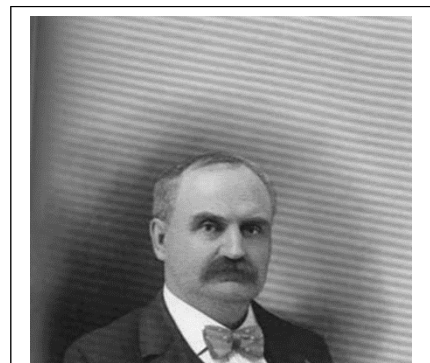
## Wisconsin impacted the national level in ways we can't even imagine...

*"By the 1930s, when depression and unemployment dominated American public life, the assumptions of the Wisconsin Progressives had penetrated deeply into national politics. Much of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal legislation was drafted by Wisconsin citizens, such as Edwin Witte (author of the 1935 Social Security act), who had been trained by Progressive Wisconsin economics professor John R. Commons. In fact, the momentum of La Follette and his allies rippled down through the decades into John Kennedy's "New Frontier" and Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society" programs."*

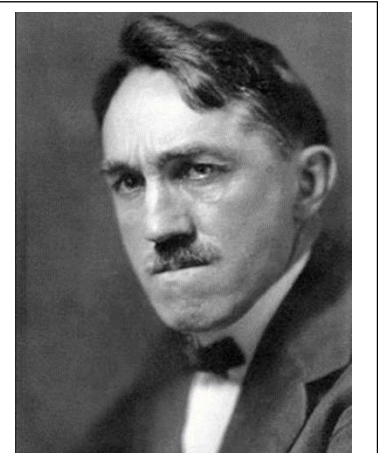
## Hull's Progressive Contemporaries in Wisconsin



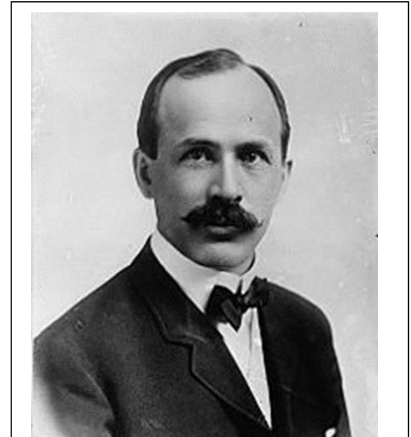
Robert LaFollete  
1855-1925



James Davidson  
1854-1922



Charles McCarthy  
1873-1921



Francis McGovern  
1866-1946



# LETTERS FROM HULL TO THE BANNER JOURNAL

## INTRODUCTION

As part of our exploration of Hull's career, we examined several of the letters or reports from Congress that he wrote on a nearly weekly basis for publication in the *Banner Journal*. The letters included here are from December of 1941, a particularly eventful moment in our nation's history. Our focus here was to see how Congressman Hull reported events from Washington to his constituents back home.

December 10, 1941

## Merlin Hull letter to the Banner Journal

"After two years of discussion of anti-strike legislation, and particularly legislation offered to prevent strikes in defense industries, the leaders loosened the lid which had been clamped down on the House committees, to let out a mild sort of measure which had been agreed upon. How many bills had been reposing in the committees on Labor and on Judiciary is not exactly known, but probably there were a score or more. One or two had emerged in the previous Congress, only to be quietly and effectively put away without definite action. Speeches galore upon strikes in the defense industries continued to pour forth on the floor, as one complicated situation and then another would rouse a new wave of sentiment for some kind of legislation. Then the President would take a hand, authorize the Army or Navy to take over a large industry and put it in operation, after which the talk would subside for a time.

The delay in action was not occasioned by a lack of sentiment in Congress or elsewhere in opposition to curtailment of production for National Defense. Undoubtedly that sentiment aided in bringing strike settlements through arbitration or mediation. Had such methods been a bit more expeditious, perhaps the crisis might have been avoided. But in the case of large industries, so many factors would evolve that weeks might pass before permanent solutions were obtained. In one steel industry alone, over 20,000 wage scales are in use, and in labor troubles the most of them would come in for consideration.

The coal strike ordered by John L. Lewis probably was more responsible for the change in front by administration leaders than anything else. Then there was a huge strike of railway unions in prospect, though it was settled by mediation before congressional action came about. The defiance of Mr. Lewis was brought into the discussions and the demand for action against Lewis became as loud as that for legislation. The administration leaders gave the "go" sign to the House committee on Labor. Odd as it may seem to those not familiar with congressional procedure, administrations having majority control of committees have long exercised control of legislation as well. Committee chairmen still have as much power to prevent committee action as they had in the palmy days of Joe Cannon. Committee chairmen who do not respond to the orders of the leaders of the administration in power just do not hold chairmanships very long. So the leaders give the high sign and start action. The Townsend bill is a fair illustration of the idea. It has been before Congress for years, and it never has been granted a separate hearing before the Ways and Means Committee. It still is there.

The leaders conferred and the Norton Ramspeck bill for strike control came out of the Labor committee. Two afternoons were given over to debate on the floor. Then came the amendments during which all or parts of six other bills as well as many other independent amendments were offered. The so-called Smith bill, regarded as the most drastic of all, came up first. Among other features was that authorizing the confiscation of industries in which strikes occur, which was particularly objected to by the manufacturers' association. That feature was eliminated, and then the Smith bill struck easy sailing. It eventually passed by a majority of 71, but not before the majority leaders sought to stop its course and bring up the administration measure. They failed and the Norton-Ramspeck bill was not even permitted to come to a vote. Probably there were many who did not know all that the Smith bill involved because of its many amendments. It has gone to the Senate, where it may rest for weeks while the leaders determine what they want to do with it.

The Japanese situation is no better than it has been for months, and possibly no worse. Secretary Cordell Hull is making plain and forcible statements to Japan, and the war party in the country continues to fulminate. One thing the latter would like to accomplish is to have our embargo raised, so that this year's silk crop may be sent over here and exchanged for oil and other materials which it needs for its army and navy. Our government is standing pat, and seems to be putting the question of war or peace up to Japan. The latter's negotiators seem to admit that in such a conflict, Japan would lose what it has stolen as well as much of what it had before it started its aggression against China. Still, they think that war might have a "nuisance value" owing to the European situation and would base peace on that valuation. War may start over there. It might interfere with our supply of tin, rubber and other essential materials and add many more billions to our heavily flooded national debt. But war against this country has been threatened by Japan for forty years or more. Our country apparently is ready for any ruckus the Japs may start, but does not intend that our policy shall be dictated by Tokio (Tokyo).

Investigations continue to bring on more investigating as the revelations reveal more of the obnoxious profiteering in National Defense contracts. Now a new line deals with the activities of the slick lobbyists who infest the city, who make their acquaintance with the defense departments and government purchasing their capital stock. Only a start has been made. The profits of some of the gentry who claim to be able to obtain contracts for business firms, which seem to be as careless of principle as are the lobbyists, so long as they can obtain the profits, already are large. One such is disclosed as having gathered in \$200,000 in a few months. The slicker crowd about Washington seems to have many from New York City and other big business centers in the game with them. Every dollar those shysters gain adds that much more to the cost of defense preparations. The government forbids their employment and does what it can to prevent their depredations, but in the rush to forward defense activities are many opportunities. Unfortunately, there are many relatively large corporations which are not above seeking great profits through such agencies. An enlargement of federal prison facilities and improvement of methods for landing there the questionable profiteers might be a real defense proposition which would save millions to the federal treasury.

In two day's time, the House will pass a bill to add nearly eight billions of dollars to the funds for national defense and for lend-lease. It will bring the total for such purposes to \$67 billion dollars. Much of the new appropriation will go to new Army and Navy supplies, including planes, tanks, mechanized units, and munitions, which will not be deliverable before 1943. Seemingly, the administration is looking ahead to a long war, with an ever increasing expansion of war industries. The lend-lease account will be \$15 billions upon the passage of this measure. As yet only a little

more than one billion dollars has been expended of the lend-lease funds, leaving many times as much to be spent for new factories and the war materials, they will produce. Late advices from the Treasury department are that the national debt will mount to \$100 billion, and that national annual taxation may rise to \$40 billion, or three time present amounts.”

--Merlin Hull

## Commentary by Josh Hanson on this letter:

Initially, when beginning to read these, I thought to myself--“what intensive reading this is!” By the end, those exact thoughts were still persistent. The Hull letters were continuously loaded with information relating to many issues. Often, they consisted of information related to congressional happenings. Through reading the articles, one could make the educated guess that Hull was a highly active member of Congress.

Focusing more on this letter specifically, a few things popped out to me. First and foremost, this particular article was published December 10, 1941. This was three days after the attack on Pearl Harbor--yet, Hull mentions nothing of it. Putting myself mentally into the times, I had to remember that the preferred-- and only form of long distance written communication--was snail mail--or simply *mail*, as they called it back then. So, my logic told me that this letter had been sent out quite some time in advance to meet the publishing time, which quickly explained to me why Pearl Harbor was not mentioned by Hull within the letter.

The other aspect that stuck out to me quite strongly was the 5<sup>th</sup> paragraph which details to the reader the Japan situation. Hull describes the situation as “no better than it has been for months, and possibly no worse.” The situation with Japan leading up to the Attack on Pearl Harbor was obviously very volatile, and neither side was instilling a lot of trust in the other. Hull references this throughout his article. Also, we see Hull makes an interesting comment at the end of this paragraph--“But war against this country has been threatened by Japan for forty years of more. Our country apparently is ready for any ruckus the Japs may start, but does not intend that our policy shall be dictated by Tokio (Tokyo).”

Something else to realize with the article is lack of mention of Germany and the situation in Europe. In today's society, we often look back to World War Two, and get the impression that Germany is what it was all about. The fact of the matter is, there seemed to be no real concern coming from many Americans in regard to this situation. The situation people closely watched was the Japan situation, and that seemed to be it.

The other aspect of this article deals a lot with congressional time wasting--which is not always intentional. In some cases, bills simply get caught up in the various committees. Also, there's a concern with those in power, and how they are handling bills. While reading this article, one could easily sense that there was an obvious level of frustration coming from Hull based on this very problem.

December 17, 1941

## Merlin Hull weekly letter to the Banner Journal

“The news from Pearl Harbor, Sunday afternoon struck official Washington with as much force as an airplane bomb so far as shock and surprise was concerned. The morning newspapers had their column or two about the peace endeavors of the Japanese ambassadors at the State department in negotiations which had been in progress since last April. Only the day before, those prize hypocrites had talked with reporters with their usual smiles and cordiality, uttering platitudes about the long peaceful relations between the two countries. Ever since June the lying representatives of the land of the rising sun had been protesting their friendship for our country and their desire to obtain peace with China in efforts to convince our people as well as our officials of their pacific intentions. At the same time their war-lords were preparing at home to launch their long awaited war upon us. For weeks as the pretended negotiations were being carried on, the very expeditions which made the attacks on Hawaii and Manilla were on their way. On Sunday morning the ambassadors again appeared at the State department to present the reply of their government which had been on the cables an in course of compilation not less than three days, possibly longer. While they were there, the bombardment of Hawaii and Manilla was in progress, unknown to the State department, of course. Such was the dastardly and treacherous conduct the so-called Japanese “statesmen” who lied like common old-fashioned horse thieves in every instance of their negotiations.

The State department officials were not unacquainted with Japanese duplicity. They knew of Japan’s alliance with Hitler. They knew of the long record of Japan in violating every promise and every treaty in the entire 85 years of its history since an American warship had gone into a Japanese harbor and sought a peaceful relationship with that country dominated then as ever since by barbarian rulers. The attack on Russia in 1904 in much the same manner as the attack on Pearl Harbor and the more recent murderous assault upon China, undoubtedly were in mind. That Japan’s protestations were mere hypocritical advances and that for years Japan entertained suppressed warlike intentions was known. But this country more than all the rest of the world had contributed to the development of Japanese industry and commercial progress. Secretary Cordell Hull wanted to avoid war for the present if it could be done. He was neither fooled nor even misled by the false front of the ambassadors, but in a final effort to keep war away from our country he listened long and patiently to their proposals. Sunday, he denounced them for their duplicity, and they returned to their palatial embassy. Within three hours came the news from the Pacific.

So, our country is at war with Japan, a war of defense and not aggression on our part. In a few hours of surprise attacks our Navy suffered its greatest loss in its history at Pearl Harbor. That President Roosevelt would visit Congress the following day was announced. That Congress would accept the challenge was not doubted for a moment. All Sunday night, Washington was aroused as the radio kept its people as well as those of the nation advised of events. Probably half of the adult population was awake all night. People thronged the streets and lingered by thousands about the White House. When morning came, the crowds gathered in the Capitol plaza. Hours before the opening of Congress at noon, people milled about the ground but only at some distance from the Capitol, as cordons of police and barriers barred closer approach. Only those who had business in the building and those who had passes could enter. Each congressman and Senator was permitted only one gallery pass, and the demand for them kept their phones and office forces busy all afternoon by those who wanted to witness the historic event which would mark the opening of the

session. When the House convened at 12 o'clock every member and every senator who was in town was ready for the visit of the President and his message.

The House chamber was crowded from floor to galleries. The Senate marched over, and later came the Supreme Court, the Cabinet, ranking Army and Navy officers, and the ambassadors of other nations (excepting Japan). Though closely guarded, fully a score of people, including several women, rushed the doors, and scattered about the House floor. They had capitol passes, gaining entrance to the corridors, but their entrance upon the floor was contrary to all rules and regulations. Some of the members were thus crowded out of chairs intended for them, but the President and his party were waiting, and to avoid confusion, the rushers were permitted to remain until the reading of the message. Then, they were escorted out by capitol police.

The President was greeted with loud applause as he entered and as he left the chamber. He appeared tired and careworn. In fact, he had been up all night and came to the Capitol with no sleep since the previous peaceful morning before his war message was even contemplated. He and his advisors prepared a paper of about 1500 words by 10 o'clock on Monday morning. By noon it had been reduced to less than 500 by careful editing. It was one of the briefest messages he had presented. It set forth the attack upon our country clearly, and was one of the most forceful of his state papers. He asked not that Congress should declare war upon Japan, but that it pass a resolution "declaring that a state of war existed between Japan and our country," but the effect was the same as the usual declaration. Even before his message, war upon us had been declared by Japan. The big chamber was strangely silent as he read his address, so quiet that without the loud-speaker apparatus it could have been heard by everyone in the big audience. The microphones of all the large broadcasting systems were on the desks in front of him, and millions were listening in. He was given an ovation by those on the floor and in the galleries as he retired from the House, and another by the thousands who were along his route from the capitol grounds. Promptly upon the retirement of the senators and other guests, both Senate and House acted upon the resolution declaring a state of war to exist between our country and Japan. Not a vote was opposed in the Senate, 82 voting for it. In the House the vote was 388 for and only one against, the latter by Congresswoman Jeannette Rankin of Montana. Miss Rankin was in Congress when war was declared on Germany in 1917, then voting against war. After an absence from Congress since 1919, she was again elected in 1940, only to be again called to vote for or against war.

The declaration of war upon us by Hitler and Mussolini on Thursday was not unexpected, following the action of Japan. President Roosevelt had anticipated such declarations in his speech to the country. On Thursday, he sent his message to the House and Senate without appearing in person. It sought the same form of declaration as that against Japan. The resolution passed the House by a vote of 393 within 20 minutes after the message was read. Miss Rankin voted "present" instead of "no." The Senate also voted unanimously in its favor.

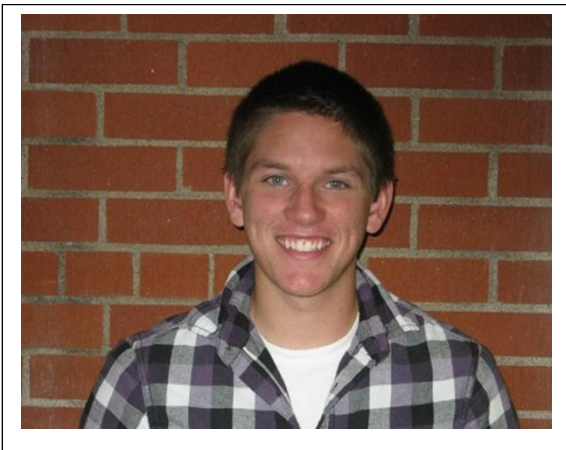
We now are at war with Japan, Germany and Italy. It may be a long war. There were many in Congress and millions in the country who hoped that our country might remain out of such a world conflict. The murderous, treacherous assault by Japan ended such hope. It united our nation and solidified us as one in the determination that the war can and must end only in victory over the aggressors, a victory thorough and complete. Regardless of all else, our safety as a nation now and for generations to come must be protected and assured. Our country has won victory in every war that has been thrust upon us. It shall win this conflict."

--Merlin Hull

## Commentary by Paul Rykken on this letter:

The second letter comes ten days after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Hull clearly had been opposed to the idea of getting involved in a war with Japan or interjecting ourselves into the European situation up to the attack on Pearl Harbor. This quasi-isolationist position was consistent with the Progressive politicians of that period. It is important to remember, for example, that Robert LaFollette had been an outspoken critic of the US entry into war in April of 1917. His speech concerning “free speech during wartime” is considered a classic by historians on the importance of dissent in a democracy. Hull perhaps reflected that sentiment in the 1930s. It is also important to note that Hull was critical of those in the country that had profited from war. The Nye Investigation of the late 1930s presented powerful evidence that indicted corporate interests that benefitted from US military involvement and millions of Americans were leery of potential US involvement in a second war.

Those sentiments, of course, were washed away after the attack on Pearl Harbor in December of 1941. Hull clearly reflects the abrupt change in mood in his letter of December 17<sup>th</sup>. As a historian, it is interesting to note Hull’s use of dramatic description throughout the letter. He starts by roundly condemning the Japanese government in harsh language that reminds me of official statements by our government after the 9-11 attacks of 2001. He then provides a vivid description of Franklin Roosevelt’s speech of December 8<sup>th</sup>, including an explanation of how the declaration of war finally was arrived at by the Congress. It is interesting to note his commentary on Jeannette Rankin’s very famous vote in opposition to the war; she also had voted in opposition to the nation’s entry into World War I in 1917. The conclusion of the letter is certainly sobering and my sense is that the citizens of Black River Falls largely shared his analysis.



Josh Hanson served as the 12<sup>th</sup> Falls History Project Intern. Josh distinguished himself throughout his high school career in a number of areas. As an avid student of politics and history, Josh was drawn to the story of Merlin Hull. Josh plans to study Political Science at Edgewood College in Madison beginning in the fall of 2012.