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Joseph A. Labadie

Biographical Sketch

Anonymous

Joseph A. Labadie was born on April 18, 1850 in Paw Paw, Michigan, the descendant of 17th century French immigrants. His boyhood was a frontier existence among Pottawatomi tribes in southern Michigan, where his father served as interpreter between the Jesuit missionaries and the Indians. His only schooling was a few months in a parochial school.

At the age of 17 he began roaming the country as a “tramp” printer. In 1872 he put down roots in Detroit, working as a printer at the *Detroit Post and Tribune*. In 1877, Labadie, an agnostic, married his cousin, Sophie Elizabeth Archambeau, a devout Catholic. During their long and happy life together, neither tried to change the other’s religious outlook.

Labadie joined the newly formed Socialist Labor party in 1877, one of the first two non-German-born Detroiters to do so. The other was Judson Grenell, Labadie’s collaborator in publishing their first paper, the *Detroit Socialist*. As the Socialistic Tract Association, they printed cheap pamphlets explaining socialism, some of which they handed out free on street corners.

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In 1878, Labadie, who called himself “Jo”, was chosen by Knights of Labor official Charles Litchman to organize Detroit’s first assembly, L.A. 901. It was camouflaged as the Washington Literary Society in line with the organization’s secrecy. Labadie also joined the Greenback financial reform movement, ran an unsuccessful campaign for mayor on the Greenback-Labor ticket, and served as delegate to the divisive 1880 Greenback-Labor convention in Chicago.

That year he also was instrumental in organizing the Detroit Trades Council, a city-wide assembly of trades unions, and served as its president while continuing as an official of the Knights of Labor and Socialist Labor Party. With Grenell, Labadie continued issuing a succession of labor papers, including the nationally influential *Advance and Labor Leaf*, and was a widely-published columnist for the labor press, recognized for his forthright style and originality of thought.

In 1883, Labadie abandoned socialism and embraced individualist anarchism. He became a close associate of Benjamin Tucker and a frequent contributor to the latter’s *Liberty*. Despite Labadie’s outspoken opposition to government, he was appointed clerk at Michigan’s new Bureau of Labor in Lansing, and served there a year.

After the 1886 Haymarket bombing in Chicago triggered an anti-anarchist hysteria, which was echoed by Knights of Labor leader Terence Powderly, Labadie became Powderly’s enemy. He condemned the Knights’ leaders for a series of blunders and accused them of corruption. He visited the imprisoned Haymarket anarchists in Chicago on his way to the 1887 Knights of Labor convention in Minneapolis as delegate from Detroit. After Powderly opposed a clemency resolution for the Haymarket defendants, Labadie delivered a scathing indictment of Powderly and his ring.

Disillusioned with the Knights of Labor, Labadie in 1888 organized with Sam Goldwater the Michigan Federation of Labor, became its first president, and forged an alliance with Samuel Gompers.

In 1894, Labadie, who attributed his ill health to bad air in printing plants, went to work for the city waterworks. He founded several discussion clubs, lectured frequently on anarchism, and helped arrange appearances for anarchist Emma Goldman.

At the age of 50, he began writing verse and publishing artistic hand-crafted booklets.

In 1908, the city postal inspector banned his mail because it bore stickers with anarchist quotations. A month later, the water board dismissed him for expressing anarchist sentiments. In both cases, the officials were forced to back down in the face of massive public support for one of Detroit’s most popular figures.

Beginning in the early 1900s, Labadie’s extensive collection of labor literature was sought for their institutions by professors in the growing field of labor scholarship. Labadie chose the University of Michigan, where it formed the nucleus of the renowned present-day Labadie Collection.

The Labadies had three children: Laura, Charlotte, and Laurance. Jo Labadie died in Detroit on October 7, 1933.