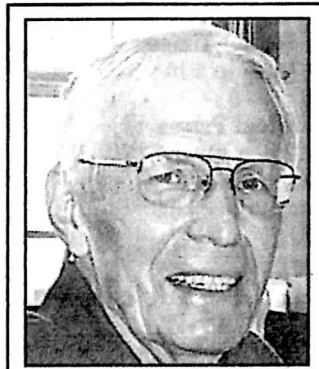


# The People's Government—Part 1

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During the Great War Washburn city government enjoyed an embarrassment of riches, but with the near collapse of the city's economic base, when the war ended in November 1918, government finances were once again in perilous condition. In 1920 no one wanted the job of mayor, for as late as three weeks before the election there were no candidates for the position. Finally, Hubert H. Peavey, captain of Washburn's volunteer Company D during the Great War, agreed to be a candidate and was elected in the early April local elections. The mayor and council made severe cuts in the city budget in an effort to solve the financial crisis. For example, an already stringent school budget was reduced from \$52,495 to \$41,438. Routine expenses such as worker wages and teacher salaries were paid with difficulty or not at all. Even half of the street lights on the "white way," so proudly built in 1916, were turned off, symbolizing Washburn's change of fortune from the prosperous wartime years.

Peavey was re-elected in April 1922 but resigned in March 1923, the council electing Edwin O. Bryan, president of the council, as interim mayor. Matters did not improve under Bryan's leadership, an audit by the State Tax Commission as of December 31 1923 revealing that the city's liabilities



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exceeded its assets by \$67,000. For the April 1924 elections, the mayoral candidates were Bryan, the interim mayor, and Paul Ungrodt, the son of Ben Ungrodt, pioneer Washburn hardware man. Bryan represented the old political system, whose members rotated in and out of office, while Ungrodt, 23 years old and a graduate of Lawrence College in Appleton, had no political connections or experience. While he claimed that he became a candidate only because of "insistent requests from all parts of the city," Ungrodt made himself open to that "insistence" in a "spicy article" in the Times, in January. He called for more and better publicity for Washburn, urged people to "Talk up the town, don't talk it down," and generally rehashed all of the time-worn platitudes about how to build-up and sell Washburn. But he was young, enthusiastic and educated, and a political neophyte, all of which

must have appealed to many people for he won the election by 531 to 291 votes.

Among the first actions of the new mayor and council was to have all of the street lights on the "white way" turned back on, signaling the new era in city government. Drastic measures were immediately adopted to reduce city expenditures, by combining certain positions—for example, the three positions of fire chief, police chief, and street commissioner were combined into one—and by reducing or eliminating the salaries of other positions, while the mayor and council agreed to serve without compensation. These cost cutting measures were so effective that city expenses were reduced from \$33,195 in 1923 to \$17,373 in 1924, saving \$15,821. The city's financial situation continued to improve gradually, with people responding favorably to pleas from the mayor and council to pay their taxes promptly. With a high level of tax payments and strict control of expenditures, the council was able to reduce the tax rate slightly, prompting praise from the Times. But there were apparently no financial resources in reserve, for the October 1927 the council was obliged to authorize a loan of \$7,500 "for the purpose of carrying the city until the next tax-paying time

As the 1926 local elec-

tion approached an interesting incident of Washburn dirty politics occurred. John Page, a former alderman, who had been defeated by an Ungrodt supporter in the 1924 election, published a letter in the Madison Capital Times, attacking the Ungrodt administration. His charges were subsequently shown to be false and he admitted that the letter he had signed had actually been written by Hubert H. Peavey, the former mayor. Despite charges against his administration that although proven to be false were probably believed by some people, Ungrodt was re-elected without opposition in the April 1926 election. In the general election that November he was elected to the state assembly, again without opposition. On July 30 1927 he resigned as mayor to accept a position with the chamber of commerce in Beaver Dam. He was honored with a picnic at Memorial Park, "attended by a large number of local citizens" and was presented with a watch, a "gift of the townspeople . . . given in recognition and appreciation of the great things he has accomplished for this city." C.O. Westcott, president of the council, was elected by the council to serve as interim mayor until the April 1928 elections, when Harry L. Robinson began his administration, which lasted until 1934.