

IOWA HISTORY



Courtesy US Senate
Senator Smith Brookhart of Iowa

Senator Prefers Overalls and Cowhide Boots

“He represents the backbone of genuine men of Iowa; we are people who raise corn that makes hogs. I’m surprised the senator doesn’t go to Washington with overalls and cowhide boots,” Burton Sweet, a Republican congressman from Iowa, said about his colleague Republican Senator Smith Brookhart in 1923.

Brookhart represented Iowa in the U.S. Senate, and he wasn’t intimidated by the social norms of Washington. He owned a regular business suit that he thought was good enough for Iowa and certainly just fine for the nation’s capital. Still, when the senator attended a reception at the home of Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace in a business suit rather than the more elegant dress suit and high hat, some of the women saw it as a “horrendous sin,” according to the *Davenport Daily Times* in January 1923.

In March a *Quad-City Times*’ columnist named Bob Feeney started a fundraising campaign to buy an appropriate suit for the senator. “Help Buy Brookhart a Dress Suit” the

headline read. Feeney reported he had already received donations for the cause in amounts ranging from two to seven cents. A “special train of local Republicans” planned to travel to Washington to deliver the funds to Brookhart.

While some people were fidgeting over the Iowa senator’s clothing habits, Brookhart was busy with legislative business and couldn’t be bothered with the discussion about his suit. He attended a meeting of the “lakes to the gulf waters” committee in Chicago at the Drake Hotel (not wearing a dress suit according to a news report). The group planned to travel down the Mississippi River to New Orleans as part of their meeting agenda.

In April Brookhart gave a fiery speech to the Disabled War Veterans at their two-day convention in Davenport. He railed against businessmen who had made huge profits from World War I, while veterans had not received the bonus money they had been promised. “War profiteers must pay the cost of rehabilitation for wounded veterans,” Brookhart said.

“Words are inadequate to describe my feelings on an occasion of this kind,” Brookhart said to the crowd of veterans. “The least of you has done more for your country than I could possibly do.”

The veterans in the room probably weren’t concerned with the suit the senator wore. They knew he was on their side when he said, “The men who made the most money out of the war, held onto it tightest, and they are still making the greatest returns on war profits.”

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Sources

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