

# Mr. Stern Goes To Augusta

## *Biddeford's champion against social injustice*

by Jeff Stern

**G**rowing up, I didn't have much in common with Benjamin S. Stern, my grandfather. He had an odd, old world air about him. His unfamiliar ways were out of sync with the suburban America in which I was raised.

I vaguely remember that when I was really young, he lived with us for a few years after my grandmother died. And he loved to fish, I know that much. A simple bamboo pole with your basic hook, line, sinker and worm was his preferred gear. Not just any old crawler, though. Papa placed a premium on quality worms, which he pronounced "vor-ums" in his thick accent.

Now, of course, I wish I'd sat down with him and a tape recorder (with extra batteries) when I had the chance. What amazing stories he could tell! Fleeing the repression of his native Lithuania as a



teen, Ben Stern arrived in Boston, able to speak only a few words of broken English. Eventually, Papa settled in Biddeford. He raised a family, ran a property maintenance business, and represented the York County mill town for two terms in the Maine Legislature.

Lithuania in the late 1800s was a frightful place for Jews. The tiny Baltic nation was, at the time, ruled by Russia. Bands of Cossack cavalry, the Czar's semi-autonomous imperial guard, swept through the country like a tornado, terrorizing the Jewish populace. This was the harsh world into which Benjamin Stern was born in 1885. His people were crammed into a squalid ghetto on the outskirts of Kovna, a city in central Lithuania.

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Details about Ben's youth are as ephemeral as the swirling mist that hovers over the dank forests of northern Europe. Even so fundamental a marker of personal identity as his original surname has been lost. He adopted the name Stern when he arrived in the West.

By age 15, Ben faced a bleak choice. One option was conscription in the Czar's army, where, because of his heritage, he was sure to be persecuted mercilessly, perhaps to the point of death. Or, Ben could enter an exhausting life on the lam from the police. The penalty, if he was caught, would have been his wasting away in a barbarous prison.

Papa chose a third way. In 1900 he left his native land and stayed with an uncle in London for several months, where he learned a few English phrases and was introduced to the ways of the West. But he sensed America held greater promise, so he pushed on. Ben landed in Boston. He must have been a sight stepping off the boat, a scruffy teenager with a shock of red hair.

Through a series of jobs, first as a

traveling linoleum peddler, and then as a partner in a Lawrence, Massachusetts, company, he learned the ins and outs of American enterprise. Ben met Rose Wolftraub, herself an immigrant from Odessa, Russia, in Boston. They married in 1909.

By 1920 he'd gained enough confidence to go his own way in business. Ben and Rose moved to Biddeford, Maine. The humming mill town on the banks of the Saco River, he felt, offered fertile ground for his startup property maintenance company. Plus, he was enchanted by the thinly populated, unspoiled Maine countryside and the multitude of fishing opportunities it provided.

The Sterns raised four children: Arthur, Celia, Saul and Samson. Samson, the youngest, was born in 1917. He is my father.

During the 1920s America rode a wave of prosperity, a financial high, stoked in large part by legions of people who toiled in misery. Children as young as 10 years old attended to factory lines. Men and women labored upwards of 80 hours a week under appalling conditions.

When the stock market crashed in October 1929, the United States careened into the deepest economic depression in its history. Millions were thrown out of work. Banks closed at a dizzying pace. Industrial production plummeted.

The Great Depression exposed the social inequities that were swept under the rug during the roaring '20s. Maybe what Ben Stern experienced in Lithuania imbued him with a special empathy for the downtrodden. He watched, horrified, the rising tide of human misery.

The plight of the destitute elderly was of particular concern. People who had worked hard all their lives to bolster Maine's economy found themselves, by cruel circumstance and through no fault of their own, cast aside, penniless, in old age. Of no use to society anymore, many were secreted away in nightmarish poorhouses, also known as almshouses, where they wasted away. To Papa, this was unacceptable.

Ben ran for the Maine State House of Representatives. Biddeford, at that time,

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was predominantly French-Canadian. He earned the backing of the town's Catholic priests because they appreciated his advocacy of pensions for the elderly, restrictions on child labor and limits on maximum work hours. Ben won the election as an Independent. He was 45.

That first winter in the legislature in Augusta, 1931, must have seemed baffling to an immigrant who didn't speak fluent English, and who was not familiar with the intricacies of lawmaking. He introduced an act to provide for old age pensions, H.P. 899. In deference to his integrity and intellect, facets of Ben's personality legislative leaders soon discovered in the rookie from Biddeford, he was honored with an appointment to the Joint House/Senate Committee on Federal Relations.

Near the end of the session, Ben's old age pension bill, which had languished in committee, was debated on the floor of the House. Speaker after speaker rose to say how his or her constituents supported the bill. They spoke of the inhumane treatment of the elder-

ly in the state's poorhouses, how "people were treated worse than dogs" in those institutions, and argued that passage of the bill was necessary to uphold Maine's "reputation and character" among the states.

Ultimately, fiscal timidity kept the bill from being enacted. Where would the money come from to pay for pensions? This was no small worry in a poor state like Maine. Seeing that a compromise was necessary to keep his dream alive, Ben Stern spoke on behalf of H.P. 899.

"There should be no party when it comes to a bill like this," he said, "and I ask all the friends of that bill to vote to accept the majority report and let the Recess Committee do its duty, and perhaps in two years we may have an old age pension law in this state." The House voted 133-0 in favor of doing so.

Back then, the legislature met every other year. During the off year of 1932, while the Recess Committee studied the issue, Ben did his own homework, rallied support from across the state in the form of petition drives, and examined other states' pension programs. He ran for

another term, winning handily. As the Great Depression worsened, his business kept the family afloat. The Sterns weren't rich, but at least they had food on the table. Less fortunate cousins from Massachusetts moved in.

In 1933 national unemployment spiked at 12.8 million people, or 24.9 percent of the civilian workforce. The economy bottomed out, and the nation was in chaos. Against this backdrop, the 86<sup>th</sup> Maine Legislature convened. In his opening remarks, Speaker of the House Franz U. Burkett alluded to the grim reality, saying, "[This is] one of the worst financial situations that has confronted the state."

No longer a novice, Ben Stern moved confidently. He fired off missives to the federal government urging it to start a federal unemployment insurance program, and to regulate the hours of labor. He introduced bills to do the same at the state level, as well as another version of his old age pension act, this time tagged H.P. 1698, with modifications drawn from the Recess Committee. He also cared for the home folks, supporting

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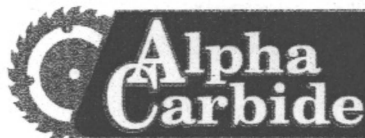
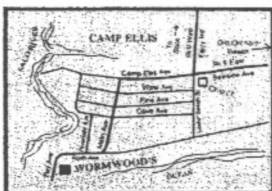
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various acts that concerned the betterment of Biddeford. Later in the session, he withdrew his bills on work hours and unemployment insurance because President Franklin Delano Roosevelt pledged to address the issues nationwide.

On March 28, Ben rose from his legislative chair. "Mr. Speaker and ladies and gentlemen: I move the acceptance of the report of the committee." He'd barely returned to his seat when Mr. Plouff of Dexter attempted to block the bill by making a motion to postpone indefinitely. The man from Dexter thought the cost would be prohibitive.

All along, grandfather hoped it wouldn't come to this, that he wouldn't have to speak in defense of his bill. But he was a realist, too. He knew conservatives dominated the Legislature. He had prepared for just such an ambush. It was now or never...

Weary, Ben stood again. His mop of red hair blazed in the sunlight that streamed through the window. His booming voice filled the chamber.

First, he reminded his fellow legisla-



*Road to Old Orchard Beach, Saco*

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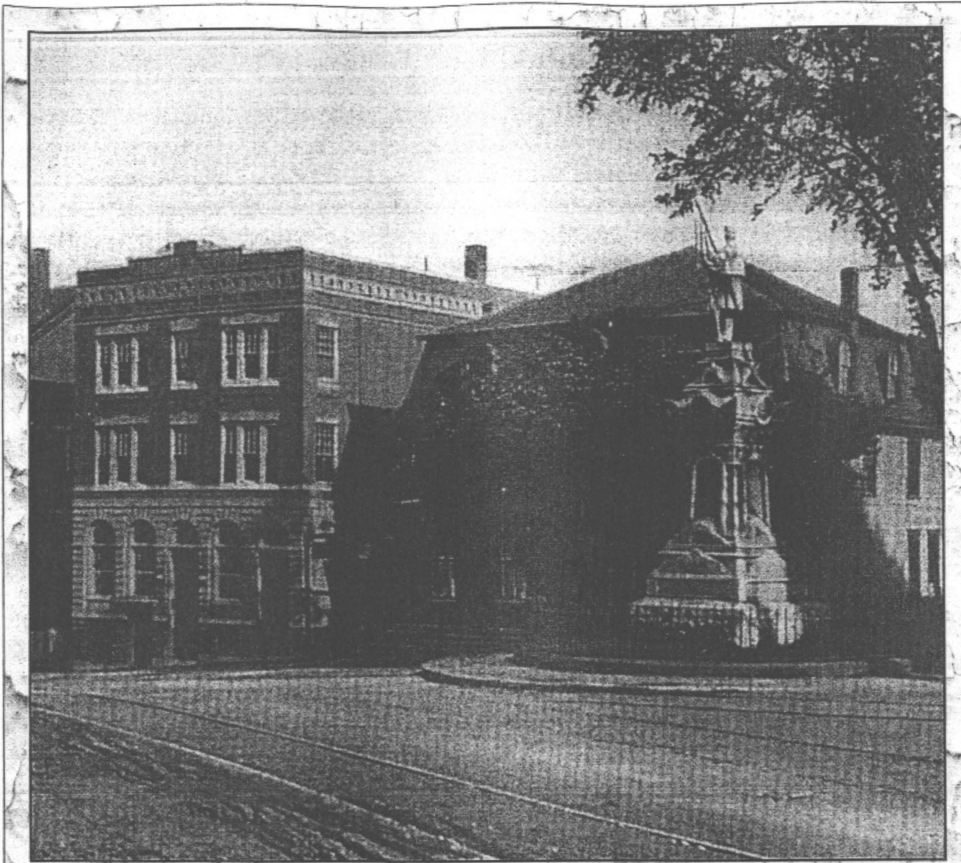


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*Soldiers Monument in City Square, Biddeford*

tors of the history of the bill, how two years earlier the bill wasn't passed, because of fiscal concerns, despite overwhelming support. Then, he changed course and poked fun at his own stunted English.

"Not long ago when I landed in this country, a friend of mine gave me a piece of paper. I had to read the law in the English language on my own, without any help. I remember I came to a shoe shop and I was in the same position as an Italian who had a brother who was only a couple of weeks in this country, and he

told him, 'Tony, I have to go into the market, and you attend to the stand.' Tony said, 'I can't speak any English.' 'But,' he says, 'that is nothing, if anybody comes in and wants to buy some bananas, tell him they are two for a nickel, and if he argues, tell him they are three for a nickel, and if he don't buy them, tell him somebody else will.' A big fellow comes up and says, 'Tony, what time is it?' Tony says, 'Two for a nickel.' And the big fellow says, 'What are you talking about?' And the Italian says, 'Three for a nickel.' He says, 'You keep quiet or I will give you

a punch in the jaw.' And the Italian says, 'If you don't, somebody else will.'"

Laughter rang through the hall. The warm response gratified Ben because it broke the tension, but he stayed on message. "I know that I am not really the man to get up and hope to speak, but if I have to, I will do the best I can."

He then talked economics. His research showed every one of the 19 states that had enacted old age pension laws had saved money. The cost of maintaining poorhouses, those state-run institutions where the elderly often were left to die in filth and neglect, and of which Maine had 100 in the early 1930s, was greater than an old age pension program. Why? Corruption and abuses in poorhouse operation were the principal reasons, according to a 1925 U.S. Department of Labor study.

Ben Stern said, "What I am trying to prove to you, members of the house, is that it is a pure saving of the state's money, saving of the people's money."

"I will not say anything about the moral and ethical side of it. I think you know what is right and what is wrong, but I wish no harm to anybody and I do not wish anybody to reach old age when everything is against him and he has no place to live. I hope none of you will ever have to make the almshouse your home.

"Sometimes when I stop to think of Edgar Allen Poe's poem *The Raven*, I think perhaps he meant those people there on the poor farm and had them in mind in his line 'Never, nevermore.' My friends, I appeal to you from a business point of view and from a humane point of view. I hope that you will accept the

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report of the committee." He sat down to a thunderous ovation.

Mr. Goudy of South Portland said, "I have great admiration for Mr. Stern and I feel that the citizens of the City of Biddeford should be proud to send a man of Mr. Stern's character to this Legislature." Again, there was great applause. Several representatives voiced support for the bill. Others commended Ben for his determination. And still, there was more applause.

The financial argument against the bill deftly yanked from beneath him, Mr. Plouff withdrew his motion to postpone. On March 31, the House and Senate passed the old age pension bill. Governor Louis J. Brann signed it into law that afternoon.

His work in Augusta done, Papa returned to Biddeford to concentrate on family and business. He declined to run for re-election. Two terms were enough, he felt. Besides, he had accomplished what he set out to do. The child labor, working hour, and workers' rights and safety initiatives he so passionately sup-



*Later picture of Ben Stern*

ported became national law under Roosevelt's New Deal. He remained active in Biddeford politics, workers' groups and served on the board of Holy Cross Hospital.

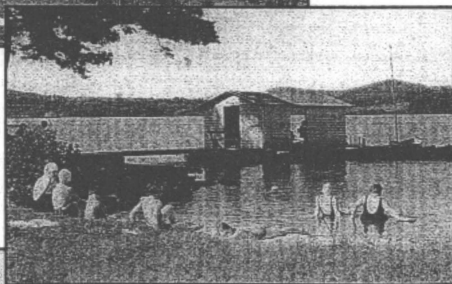
To this day, there hangs a plaque in the Biddeford Town Office dedicated to Ben Stern. Beneath his photograph, it reads, "In memory of Benjamin S. Stern, who loyally served the citizens of

Biddeford in the Maine Legislature. He consistently worked to advance the causes of working men and the poor, and struggled for the passage of social legislation. He will be long remembered for his courage, independence and integrity."

In 1975, my sophomore year in college, Papa lost his battle with cancer. He was still in many ways a stranger to me. But now I think there's more of a common thread than I realized back then.

Like my grandfather, I'm concerned with issues of social justice. Like Papa, I struck out for unknown territory to find my way. My journey didn't take me to another country. But, for a child of the Maryland suburbs, the rural Rocky Mountain West, where I lived two decades before moving to Maine in 2000, was almost as foreign.

And I share Papa's appreciation for nature. To me, a great day is one in which I hike to the top of a secluded mountain. My grandfather might have joined me, if there was a lake or river nearby into which he could dangle a "vor-um" off his trusty bamboo pole, trying to raise a fish. 🐟



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