

Reagan's conservatism forged during years with GE

U.S. President Ronald Reagan was no stranger to Bloomington-Normal, though most of his visits occurred decades before he reached the White House to become one of the defining political figures of the 20th century.

“Dutch” Reagan, as he was known during his school years, attended nearby Eureka College from 1928 until his graduation in 1932. As a member of the football team he competed in home and away games against both Illinois State Normal University and Illinois Wesleyan.

After Eureka, the Illinois native embarked on a radio career and, through a combination of luck, pluck and good looks, became a second-tier silver screen star, appearing in the likes of “Knut Rockne All American” and “Bedtime for Bonzo.”

Reagan then returned to the Twin Cities in October 1955 and January 1961, serving on both occasions as a celebrity spokesperson for the postwar corporate behemoth General Electric. Reagan's years with GE are often overlooked, though they were crucial to his evolution from a Franklin Roosevelt New Deal Democrat to an unapologetic conservative bent on realigning the Republican Party along the lines of right-wing ideologue Barry Goldwater.

Back in the fall of 1954, with his movie career on the wane and middle class America embracing television as the entertainment medium of the future, Reagan became the host of “General Electric Theater,” a new anthology series airing Sunday nights on CBS. By the 1956-1957 season, it was the third highest rated program in all TV land, trailing only fellow CBS offerings “The Ed Sullivan Show” and “I Love Lucy.”

Along with his TV hosting duties—a gig he would hold for eight years—Reagan also served as GE's “traveling ambassador.” As the public face of one of the largest and most powerful corporations in the postwar era, Reagan spent upwards of twelve weeks a year crisscrossing the country to make extended public relations stops at GE research and manufacturing plants. All told, he visited 139 facilities in 40 states, including the plant in Bloomington, which opened in 1955. It's believed that during those eight years on the road he met or addressed most of GE's 250,000 employees.

Reagan honed his formidable skills as the “Great Communicator” by spending hundreds of hours chatting with GE factory hands and management, signing autographs, telling and retelling stories of Hollywood glamour and fame, and speaking on the “mashed potatoes circuit” to community groups and clubs on the threats of communism abroad and “creeping socialism” at home.

“This transformative, eight-year period in his life remains underexamined,” argued political journalist Jacob Weisberg in his 2016 study of Reagan’s presidency. For his part, Reagan came to view his time with GE as a “post-graduate education in political science,” adding that “it wasn’t a bad apprenticeship for someone who’d someday enter public life.”

Reagan first came to Bloomington as GE’s “traveling ambassador” on October 19, 1955. General Electric was one of the first employers to locate along what was then known as the Route 66 “beltline” (today’s Veterans Parkway). In Bloomington, GE engineers and those on the shop floor designed and manufactured all types of electrical switches and controls. At the time of Reagan’s visit, the newly opened plant employed 1,600 men and women, with the latter comprising about 40 percent of the workforce.

During their stay, the former Hollywood B-lister and his second wife Nancy Davis spent two nights at the Prairie Traveler Motel, located across the beltline from the GE plant. The whirlwind stopover included a private dinner with GE management and local business and community leaders, a cocktail party at Bloomington Country Club, an interview with local TV station WBLN, and a breakfast talk at the Rogers Hotel, among a half-dozen other commitments.

Reagan spent his first morning in the Twin Cities with the plant’s first shift, playing the role of the “celluloid idol” all the while telling employees that he was “hired help” just like them. He left the factory to speak at a Rotary Club luncheon, where he talked about battling communism in Hollywood as president of the Screen Actors Guild (what Reagan didn’t say—and what nobody in the audience would’ve known—was that during his Hollywood years he was also an informer for the FBI.)

After addressing the local Rotarians, the seemingly tireless Reagan returned to the GE plant to meet and greet the second shift. “The Hollywood star and TV actor could pass for a young business executive,” noted Helen Rorabach, *The Pantagraph*’s social editor who traveled with him as he made the rounds. “He is friendly, intelligent and smart enough to show an interest in others. He has a keen sense of humor which shows itself in the Irish twinkle in his eyes.”

The television host and GE spokesperson returned to Central Illinois periodically in the latter half of the 1950s and into the 1960s. On June 9, 1957, for example, a 46-year-old Reagan delivered the keynote address at Eureka College’s commencement. “One of the strongest defense points against the trends to more government is the small liberal arts college,” he declared. “Here, without fear of political reprisal, can be kept alive the principles of individuality, enterprise and courage we have inherited.”

For Reagan, there was no greater threat to personal liberty than the federal leviathan and its bureaucratic and regulatory stranglehold over a free people and the free enterprise system. “We

must remember that there is not a single service or security provided by the government that does not have to be paid for in loss of certain personal freedoms,” he said.

Reagan was back in the Twin Cities in January 1961 to deliver a fiery defense of laissez-faire capitalism before the 60th annual banquet of the Association of Commerce (now the Mclean County Chamber of Commerce.)

The Eureka College graduate couldn't help but open his A of C address with nostalgic nod to the past. “Being here reminds me of some bruises I absorbed on the football fields of Normal and Wesleyan,” he joked. Yet the Reagan of neighborly, Midwestern charm soon gave way to one full of doom-and-gloom and under siege. His “grin turned grim,” is how Pantagraph reporter Tim Gumbrell described the transformation

The nation, Reagan warned, faced an existential threat from fellow citizens—many working within the federal government—who sought to undermine American capitalism and exceptionalism. “We're not at peace, we're at war, and it's a war we might lose because we don't know we're in it,” he threatened menacingly. “Freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction. We must save it now or spend our sunset years telling our children and our children's children what it was like when men were free.”

Reagan would go on to serve as California governor from 1967 to 1975. In October 1980, one month before winning the presidential election, he returned to the Twin Cities to participate in ISU's homecoming parade.