

## **J. Hugo Aronson: From Poor Immigrant to Governor of Montana**

For most of us in Billings, the name Aronson means a through street in the Heights. But that street was named for Montana's 13<sup>th</sup> governor, who served two terms in office from 1953-1961.

J. Hugo Aronson was born in 1891 in Gallstad, Sweden to a large tenant-farming family. The land was beautiful, but his family was quite poor. Young Hugo daydreamed about crossing the Atlantic to the United States. By the age of 18, he had already been working away from home for four years, and thought more seriously about that daydream. He saved every penny until he could make the trip.



*J. Hugo Aronson*

Arriving in Boston in October, 1911, Aronson had nothing but the \$25 required to enter the country and the clothes he wore. The first useful English phrase he learned was "ham and eggs", which allowed him to order food in a restaurant. A friend convinced Aronson to join him in heading west. He hopped freight trains, jumped off, found work until he had a little money, and then started over again. His travelling ended abruptly in 1914, when a brakeman kicked him off a train in Columbus, Montana.

Aronson went to work for farmer Frank Young. His reputation for working hard and fast got him the nickname of "the Galloping Swede." He decided to put down roots. In 1915, he filed a claim in Elk Basin along the Wyoming border. He also worked hauling freight in the region to oil-drilling operations. When the US entered World War I, Aronson enlisted in the Army and was sent to France. There he met and married Matilda Langane, and brought her home. He started building oil rigs.

Four years later, they moved north to the Sunburst area, where he and another rig builder started a company in those oilfields. Aronson noted the time and expense involved in building rigs for prospective wells only to take them down to rebuild in another location. He figured out a way to put them on wheels and move them along to the next site, saving money and manpower. He also agreed to be partially paid in shares by cash-poor drillers. Some proved worthless, but some paid off nicely. His need to move materials around inspired him to start his own trucking company. This expanded in five states and into the Canadian oil fields as well. His interests grew to include banking, ranching and more.

In 1934, friends suggested he run for the City Council in Cut Bank. He won the election, and his political career began. Sadly, Matilda fell ill with lung cancer. Aronson took her home to France one last time, and she died there in March of 1936. In 1938, he ran for the state legislature, a Republican in a largely Democratic district, and won handily.

Aronson remarried in 1944, to Rose McClure, who was the Glacier County Superintendent of Schools. He was running for the state Senate, and joked that if he married a Democrat, he might be able to get her vote. Their daughter Rika was born a year later. After the war, he sold out of most of his businesses, ready to try something new. He bought 4000 acres of untouched land west of Cut Bank, and built up a farm.

But politics was now important to him, too. Aronson was still in the state Senate, and travelled the state fundraising for his party. With some trepidation about his limited education, he agreed to run for Governor in 1952. His campaign style was unique; Aronson made no promises to anyone, not wanting to be beholden, and while he met all the people he could in person, he avoided radio and television appearances. On election night, he and his supporters were in Billings to await the news – by some 5000 votes, this one-time penniless immigrant would be the next Governor. He wanted to build on his accomplishments, and successfully ran for re-election in 1956.

In 1959, Aronson was invited back to Sweden to meet King Gustav Adolf. He was presented with the Grand Cross of the Royal Order of the North Star, a high honor. Aronson was startled to be mobbed by reporters when he landed back in New York, and surprised anew in Helena, where the high school band and hundreds of supporters were there to greet him. Aronson chose not to run for re-election that year, and retired from office. He kept active in Republican politics long afterward. Aronson passed away February 25, 1978.

#### **Sources:**

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