



The Farmington Historical Museum on Grand River, the Governor Warner Mansion, is the former residence of Fred Warner, Michigan governor from 1904-11.

RANDY BORST/staff photographer

## Favorite son

### Monitoring the career of an entrepreneur turned governor

**H**E WAS a hometown boy. He was a successful businessman. Most importantly, he was a Republican.

His hometown newspaper, the Farmington Enterprise, threw itself wholeheartedly into supporting Fred W. Warner's career as governor from 1904-11.

It was the type of continued enthusiasm that, by modern standards of journalism, would be contained on the editorial page. It was an era in which the line between editorializing and reporting was blurred. It was an era that blended sensationalism and sentimentality.

Readers savored stories about heroic women desperately trying to save their babies from burning homes by flinging them from second-story windows. Inevitably, the reports managed to include that all the while, flames licked at the mother's long skirts. An inexhaustible supply of such stories appeared weekly on Page 2.

Just as inevitably, Page 3 of the Enterprise during the Warner years in Lansing carried a serialized novella. Usually, the heroine was a poor but virtuous lass who won the heart and fidelity of a millionaire. It was even better if the rich suitor made the transition from rake to respected member of society in trying to win her hand.

**DURING THESE** years, the Enterprise made no bones about telling the town that Warner, a former state senator and Secretary of State, was its biggest hero and its only governor, whose family home lives on as the Farmington Historical Museum.

It describes in glowing terms that evening in July 1904 when Warner, 39, recent recipient of the Republican nomination for governor in Grand Rapids, returned home in a literal blaze of glory. "Hundreds of torches were carried and an inexhaustible supply of Roman candles kept the line a veritable blaze of glory . . ." enthused the Enterprise on Friday, July 9, 1904.

Throughout Warner's career in Lansing, he could rely upon the paper describing his governorship in

equally warm and friendly terms.

"His splendid showing," trumpets a front-page headline on Friday, Oct. 22, 1908. "Governor Warner's effective defense of Republican management and Republican legislation," the second line continues.

In one headline, the paper manages to promote the town's first citizen and the political party that its movers and shakers supported.

"It was well noted that if those who are finding fault with state expenditures would look for a moment on the other side of the state ledger, they would realize that congratulations rather than criticism are due to the recent Republican administration of our state . . ." the story continues.

**BY LATE** 1908, barely one month from Election Day, it appeared that Warner was in danger of losing his third bid for the statehouse. The Enterprise's editorial page rallied to his side on Oct. 22, 1908.

"It's funny to see how eager some of the newspapers of the state that fought Gov. Warner's nomination for this third term are to climb into the Republican bandwagon. Some that were loudest are not warmly advocating Mr. Warner's election, and go so far as to say his election is certain. In that they are correct. Gov. Fred M. Warner of Farmington will be elected for the third term."

Warner rallied enough votes to barely slide into a third term, but the Enterprise overlooked that fact. On Friday, Nov. 6, 1908, the paper ran a large photo of Warner on its front page. "To be elected the governor of a great and populous state like Michigan three times in succession is certainly a remarkable record and one of which any man might feel proud. . . . In this, his hometown, where he is so well and so favorably known, the result is received with joy."

In the last weeks of that year, the paper carried a fleeting glimpse of a more workaday side of Warner. Between Dec. 4-18, 1908, the paper's tiny section devoted to classified ads, "Want Lines," featured this message: "For sale — 3 well-bred Jersey cows; sow and 10 pigs — Fred M. Warner."



Louise Okrutsky  
staff writer



photo courtesy Farmington Community Library

Gov. Fred Warner, also one of Farmington's early entrepreneurs, thanks to his business acumen, is shown in his Lansing office between 1904-11.

**WHILE THE** paper continued to follow his exploits as third-term governor, it also chronicled his gradual preparation for a return as one of the town's leading lights.

It continued avid support for his statewide policies. On Friday, Jan. 8, 1909, the second page ran, word for word, Warner's third annual address to the state Legislature. "The Governor explains some things to the law makers," the headline

blares. Readers immediately knew which side was lagging in its responsibility.

Warner regained a spot on the front page on Friday, March 5, 1909, with the headline: "Gov. Warner heads list. To Senate and House of Representatives of the U.S. favoring woman suffrage."

Along with 100,000 others from Michigan, Warner signed a petition advocating giving women the right to vote. Passers of the national petition were determined to present to Congress with 1 million names favoring the cause.

In July 1909, the paper changed hands. Calvin D. Goss handed over the reins to Frank E. Van Black and C.D. Potter. Goss moved to Ohio, where he started his own newspaper.

**IN THE** Friday, July 9, 1909 edition, four months from the next election, it appears Warner's public persona was slipping back into that of prosperous leading citizen.

He made the front page again, but this time it was connected with a strictly local issue. "John Power, the county treasurer, and Fred M. Warner, our three-time governor, are the school trustees whose terms expire this month."

The following week, Warner was re-elected to the school board, gaining 31 of 33 votes cast. At the annual school board meeting, he makes the motion that the board should acquire property in town. The motion carries.

While Warner returned as a public force in local affairs, the state voted for its next governor. On Nov. 11, 1910, Chase Osborn, a Democrat, gained office.

Farmington voters remained true to the Grand Old Party and cast 190 votes for the Republican opponent Lawton Hemons. Osborn gained 117 votes in Farmington.

**AS HE** swung into private life, the Enterprise began to cover Warner's local business activities.

On Nov. 18, 1910, it reported that "the Governor wants two plots in the village of Farmington vacated. The property has been platted since 1901 but none of the plots have been sold and their owner believes they could

bring a more ready sale in acreage."

After divesting himself of property, the former governor took on a new business, the Fred M. Warner Cheese Co. Short bulletins on the construction of the concern's offices appear in the paper throughout early 1911.

By Friday, March 10, 1911, the paper's "Here and There" column announced: "Fred M. Warner Cheese Co.'s now nicely located in their new home on Grand River Ave."

Throughout that year, Warner is seen in the paper as a power in the community, doing his best to improve its life in various ways.

On May 19, 1911, the front-page story shows Warner giving a helping hand at a meeting of the Ladies Literacy Club.

Ex-governor Fred M. Warner, who acted as chairman, introduced Congressman Sam Smith to the audience. Being in the neighborhood, Mr. Warner had urged Mr. Smith to be present and address a few words to the congressman's old friends on the subject of his recent visit to the Panama Canal.

**OBVIOUSLY, THE** adopted son of Farmington village's first president, F.D. Warner couldn't do much wrong in the official eyes of his community. Detractors may have privately said the town could just as well be called Warnerville. But publicly, Warner, born in Nottinghamshire, England, remained Farmington's favorite son.

When his mother, Mrs. F.D. Warner, died, the Friday, Aug. 18, 1911 issue of the Enterprise paid her final respects on the front page. But even the occasion of his mother's death turned into an opportunity to hold up Warner as a shining example.

Governor Warner's solicitous care of his parents in their extreme infirmity of their old age has been the illustration of the finest moral worth," the Enterprise praised.

Farmington was a small farming village. Warner's political success was the biggest thing to hit the town's sensibilities. And the Enterprise made sure everyone knew it.