

The John Birch Society

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William Grede

Born in 1897 and raised in Milwaukee, Bill Grede went to work at his father's carriage shop during summers when he was 14. He later worked at Uncle Art's tire store. The experiences he gained at both taught him two very important lessons: 1) always provide quality products and service; and 2) there is profit to be made in integrity.

During Bill's early years, the Milwaukee area was a hotbed of socialism. But the Grede family never got caught up in it. He spent only two years at the University of Wisconsin, where he profited greatly from reading an assigned work entitled *The Responsibility of Freedom*. Asked frequently where he developed his philosophy of freedom and his belief that he was required to maintain and promote it, he would always point to that book. During the summer break after his first year, Bill also learned a lot about marketing by selling pots and pans door to door and at church suppers, where he demonstrated the value of his products by cooking the meal using them.

In 1917, family friend Albert Wagner purchased a small foundry in Decatur, Illinois, and lured Bill to be his assistant at the then-generous salary of \$150 a month. Bill learned a lot about the foundry business, but his patriotic instincts overcame his business pursuits. In September 1918, after several unsuccessful attempts to enlist in the military, Bill won acceptance for army officer training and went off to Georgia. He won his commission just as World War I ended and was promptly discharged. Soon, with a little money he'd accumulated plus some help from willing investors, he purchased Liberty Foundry in the Milwaukee suburb of Wauwatosa. On August 13, 1920, at the ripe old age of 23, Bill Grede was the sole proprietor of a company with 40 employees. Liberty Foundry's fortunes improved markedly from that day forward.

Careful study and experimentation with workmen's output convinced Bill that the nine-and-a-half-hour workday and six-day work week weren't needed to maintain productivity. In phases, he shortened the day schedule to eight hours and then eliminated Saturdays. In 1924, Liberty bought group life insurance for employees. In 1926, Grede inaugurated paid vacations for workers. And in 1927, he added accident and health insurance for all. He later developed a pension plan for his employees. These were years when the term "fringe benefits" hadn't even been coined. Each of these innovations was unique in the manufacturing industry, but Grede accepted no accolades for what others termed his "humanitarian gestures." He said he was merely acting in self-interest knowing that he would retain his best employees, all would produce at high levels, and the company would earn a profit.

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The Great Depression forced them to retrench slightly, but they not only survived, they added Milwaukee Steel Foundry to their holdings in 1932. In 1940, the three Grede-owned foundries were united as Grede Foundries Incorporated. Before long, three other foundries, one each in Michigan, Kansas, and Wisconsin, were added. From 40 employees in 1920, Grede Foundries was now employing 2,000.

Bill Grede's belief that each person is an individual who should be treated like an individual formed the basis of his opposition to labor unions. He battled with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and won. He battled with the United Auto Workers (UAW) and won. Whenever the National Labor Relations Board intervened on behalf of the unions to force an election where his employees would vote on whether they wanted union representation, the employees voted it down. Bill Grede's reputation as a better-than-fair employer, and his strong belief that every employee had the right to represent himself, triumphed again and again.

In 1926, Bill received a request to send a donation to the local Young Men's Christian Organization (YMCA). He responded with \$10. His token contribution prompted the organization's state secretary to tell Bill rather bluntly that he should not only give more, but he should also serve on the Y's fundraising committee. Bill accepted both challenges, and there began a lifelong commitment to the YMCA that saw him raise millions for its efforts, not only in Wisconsin and other parts of the United States, but in South America, Africa, and Europe.

The year 1952 saw Bill Grede deliver 250 speeches in the United States, plus dozens of press conferences, media appearances, and testimony before Congress. In that year alone, he logged more than 85,000 miles. Other years found him doing almost as much speaking and traveling. Asked if he ever gave the same speech to differing audiences, he smiled and admitted, "It's easier to get a new audience than to write a new speech." The year 1952 also happened to be when he met and got to know Robert Welch, the founder of The John Birch Society. Bill quickly became involved, and his activity with JBS rankled some. At a special National Association of Manufacturers meeting held in early 1962 (Bill was on the board), approximately 150 of its leading members questioned Bill Grede's Society membership. With him in attendance, the discussion proceeded in such a way as to suggest that it might be a good idea, in view of his many connections to NAM, if Bill would leave the Society. Grede's response was not what some of those men hoped to hear. They should have known better. He calmly and forthrightly told them: "If my membership in the Society is a problem, then I'll be glad to resign from all connections to the NAM. The one thing I will not do is resign from The John Birch Society." That ended the discussion and the NAM leaders took no action. Bill Grede continued to defend Robert Welch and the Society, and he steered many others into the organization.