



Formal acceptance of Wendell Willkie's presidential nomination took place on August 17 in his hometown of Elwood. He was greeted by a crowd estimated at 250,000 and spoke from a platform in a field where he once herded cows for 75 cents a week (Photo courtesy of Library of Congress).

# PARTY CRASHERS

## Trump's Emergence Brings Memories of Willkie

By Matt Ottinger

The materialization of the Donald Trump phenomenon and his solidification as Republican nominee for President of the United States may stoke memories for Hoosiers of another businessman turned politician. Several national publications have already noted comparisons to Elwood native Wendell Willkie, who surpassed expectations and surprised many by capturing the GOP nomination in 1940.

And while there are similarities, stark contrasts must also be considered as well.

Stephen T. Jackson, Madison County's official historian, credits Willkie's charisma for ultimately defeating favorites Sen. Robert Taft and Thomas Dewey en route to the nomination.

"He just had an ability to be able to speak to people in a way that drew them to him," Jackson relays. "Clearly, that was demonstrated by the numbers of people who

flocked to hear him speak as he made his way campaigning across the country."

### All about business

A notable similarity to Donald Trump is that both he and Willkie were known for their business acumen, as Willkie led the large electric utility company, Commonwealth & Southern Corp. In fact,

one of Willkie's main campaign points was challenging President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), a New Deal program that posed a threat to Commonwealth & Southern.

"Willkie endeared a lot of people to him because he challenged Roosevelt's TVA program, and of course he was trying to protect his own utility company," Jackson



At least in part due to his status as a political outsider, Donald Trump's message has resonated with a broad swath of disenchanted Americans.

Willkie was cheered on by many, whether via Willkie Clubs or as he campaigned from the back of a train. He also captivated thousands of Hoosiers as he spoke on Indianapolis' Monument Circle (Photos courtesy of Indiana Historical Society, P0569; Bass Photo Co. Collection; Indiana Historical Society).



offers. “But in the process, he made a lot of headlines and personal converts due to his outspokenness. That stimulated what were called Willkie Clubs. Hundreds of them sprang up throughout the country because of their support for him.”

And while Trump is often criticized by some for once being sympathetic to candidates and ideas of the Democratic Party, Willkie too was a convert – a Democrat until 1939.

“He was getting so much encouragement by his supporters to run for the presidency because of his charisma,” Jackson states. “And he had advisors, and they realized that in order to run for President, if he ran as a Democrat he’d have to go through the Democrat primary, and they didn’t feel like he’d be a strong enough candidate to defeat Roosevelt. So he elected to change politics and become a Republican.”

## Opposition

Trump and Willkie are hardly peas in the same political pod, however. Where Willkie parlayed his charm into gaining acceptance, Trump has traveled gleefully down an antagonistic path during his campaign.

“Obviously, Trump is more, how shall I say it, caustic,” Jackson points out. “Willkie was smooth. Trump speaks his mind, and Willkie

was more guarded in his speech. He didn’t want to ruffle feathers, and Trump doesn’t give a second thought to ruffling feathers.”

Another difference is their respective paths to the nomination. While Trump effectively secured the nomination with consistently strong showings in early primaries and caucuses, Willkie never formally entered any and his success came at the GOP convention amid a rigorous process of surviving multiple ballots.

“Willkie came in further down the ladder (than Trump),” Jackson notes. “But you know, he predicted correctly that he would be nominated on the sixth ballot. I don’t know if that was a good guess or if he actually had a good feel for it, but he correctly predicted that when the convention started.”

Willkie ultimately won just 10 states (including Indiana) and lost the Electoral College count to Roosevelt (449-82), who then began his third term in office.

Willkie, however, is still remembered and honored with Willkie Day festivities and parades in both Madison and Rush counties. (He headquartered his presidential campaign out of Rushville – his wife’s hometown – and his running mate was Sen. Charles L. McNary of Oregon.)

**RESOURCES:** Stephen T. Jackson, Madison County historian | Indiana Historical Society, at [www.indianahistory.org](http://www.indianahistory.org)

## See what others are saying about Willkie and his comparison to Trump in these excerpts:

### The Last Time an Outsider Like Trump Crashed the GOP? 1940

*The Ohio State University Professor David Stebenne, in Newsweek and TheConversation.com*

“... Like Willkie, Trump has run as an insurgent populist, challenging the elitist wing of the GOP that has long dominated the nominating process.

And like Willkie, Trump will find winning enthusiastic support from Republicans who supported establishment candidates very difficult, because they denounced him as an unqualified interloper during the primaries and caucuses.

Neither the Willkie nor the Trump candidacies has destroyed the GOP, but both disrupted it. The consequences were lasting 76 years ago, and I would predict they will be so this time around also.

In Willkie’s case, his nomination helped reorient the GOP away from a strongly anti-New Deal position to one that accommodated the most popular New Deal stands on matters foreign and domestic, such as support for Social Security and aid to Britain during World War II.

Trump appears to be doing something similar, in the sense that his nomination will likely push the GOP to do more to improve life for working- and lower-middle-class Americans, who have seen their quality of life decline in important ways over the past generation. ...”

### Before Trump or Fiorina, There Was Wendell Willkie

*Historian Michael Beschloss, in “The Upshot,” a blog by The New York Times*

“... Willkie, who resided in an apartment on Fifth Avenue in New York, sought to make himself more voter friendly by returning to Elwood for his formal acceptance speech. He also patched things up – at least for the campaign’s duration – with his wife, Edith, from whom he had grown distant. Of her smiling public appearances with her newly-nominated husband, Mrs. Willkie reputedly noted in private that “politics makes strange bedfellows.” In the Oval Office, Roosevelt accidentally recorded himself asking operatives to publicize what would now be called

“opposition research” on Willkie’s secret paramour, Irita Van Doren, who was the *New York Herald Tribune’s* book editor.

Willkie would have preferred to fight the 1940 campaign over the president’s managerial deficiencies and what he argued was the failure of New Deal economics, noting that more than a decade after the start of the Great Depression unemployment stood at almost 15%. But by September 1940, the Germans were bombing London. Willkie was, therefore, forced to argue that he would make a better commander in chief than Roosevelt during a time of possible global war.

Willkie issued no public objection to the president’s controversial decisions to seek a peacetime military draft and provide destroyers to Winston Churchill’s wartime government. But aghast at his sagging poll numbers, Willkie then decided to do what it might take to win: He began feigning a strong streak of isolationism. ...”

### Wendell Willkie’s 1940 Nomination: When Party Establishments Mattered

*George Will in The Washington Post*

“... The Republican establishment had power and the will to exercise it. As the convention drew near, ‘Willkie Clubs’ suddenly sprouted like dandelions, but not spontaneously. Their growth was fertilized by Oren Root, a lawyer with the Manhattan law firm of Davis, Polk, Wardwell, Gardner & Reed, whose clients included the J.P. Morgan banking empire. Root began seeking support for Willkie with a mailing to Princeton’s class of 1924 and Yale’s class of 1925. Another close Willkie adviser was Thomas Lamont, chairman of the board of J.P. Morgan & Co. Root’s uncle Elihu had been a U.S. senator and Theodore Roosevelt’s secretary of war. By opposing his friend TR’s bid to defeat President William Howard Taft for the 1912 Republican nomination, Elihu Root helped to rescue the country from having both parties devoted to progressivism. ...”

Willkie, ‘the barefoot boy from Wall Street,’ cultivated an Indiana aura but had become a Manhattan fixture. By 1937 his criticism of the New Deal had *Fortune* applauding his ‘presidential stature,’ and the letters column of the *New York Herald Tribune*, the Republican establishment’s house organ, concurred. In May, the *Atlantic Monthly* carried a Willkie essay; in June it was the *Saturday Evening Post’s* turn. In July, *Time* featured a celebratory cover story on him. Madison Avenue titans of advertising – Bruce Barton of BBDO and John Young of Young and Rubicam – joined the effort. Root would have a meeting for Willkie, ‘under the clock at the Biltmore,’ followed by another at the University Club or Century Club. Between May 8 and June 21, Willkie’s support rose from 3% to 29%.

Willkie also was lucky: In May, the Taft man in charge of tickets to the convention had a stroke and was replaced by a Willkie man who would pack the gallery with raucous Willkie supporters, including a Yale law student named Gerald Ford. *The Herald Tribune* endorsed Willkie in its first front-page editorial and tens of thousands of pro-Willkie telegrams inundated delegates in one day. Delegates heard from their hometown bankers, who had heard pro-Willkie instructions from New York bankers. He won on the sixth ballot. ...”



Willkie traveled the country and parlayed his charisma, transitioning from a longshot candidate to the GOP’s nominee for president (Photo courtesy Indiana Historical Society, P0569).