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ABOUT WISCONSIN



GOING GLOBAL

Wisconsin's Sister States

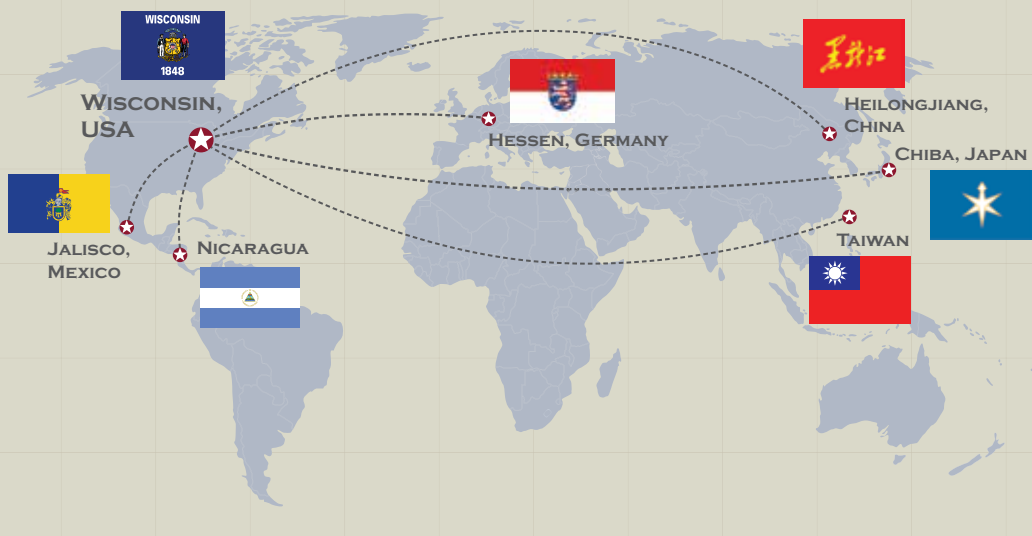
by Jillian Slaughter and Isaac Lee

Until the Cold War, the role of governors in international affairs was “generally insignificant.” In Wisconsin, a governor’s term lasted a mere two years; Governor Phil Fox La Follette (1931–33 and 1935–39) lamented that factoring in six months for the next campaign, “a Wisconsin governor can bank absolutely on only eighteen months as an effective leader.” This time limitation frustrated any gubernatorial aspiration to forge relationships beyond American borders, even if such relationships stood to benefit the state. Wisconsin was not alone in this respect.

But in the late 1950s, governors’ terms—and powers—started to expand, and as the Cold War unfolded, governors began to pursue their own international outreach. In 1959, North Carolina Governor Luther Hodges led a trade mission to various European countries to solicit foreign investment in his state; the same year, a group of 10 governors toured the Soviet Union, and Arizona Governor Paul Fannin initiated a partnership with his counterpart in the Mexican state of Sonora. To formalize these ties, governors established sister-state relationships with foreign countries and their states and provinces.

The U.S. Constitution limits the power of states to engage in foreign relations, requiring Congress to consent to any agreement with a foreign power, but in practice, Congress has not impeded or interfered in sister-state relationships. U.S. presidents have generally treated such relationships as beneficial to American

Dancers in the capitol rotunda accompany the *sawara bayashi*, a form of festival music from Chiba, Japan. The October 2024 performance celebrated the sister-state relationship between Wisconsin and Chiba during the visit of a delegation from Chiba.



President John F. Kennedy promoted sister-state relationships as a way to push back against communism in Latin America. As part of this effort, Wisconsin forged its first partnership with Nicaragua in 1964. Over the next 30 years, the state formed five more sister-state relationships.

diplomatic relations—especially during the Cold War, when sister-state relationships were seen as a way to win hearts and minds abroad.

This article describes Wisconsin governors’ efforts to establish sister-state relationships with Nicaragua; Hessen, Germany; Heilongjiang, People’s Republic of China; Taiwan; Chiba, Japan; and Jalisco, Mexico. There was no road map for this type of arrangement, which has never been defined or regulated under state law. Consequently, governors have exercised a free hand in deciding whether and how to seek out such partnerships, which are usually formalized through the signing of a proclamation rather than an act requiring legislative approval. This freedom has both benefits and drawbacks, as the article illustrates. On one hand, governors could quickly form relationships with foreign governments at strategically important moments in time. On the other hand, such relationships could—and often did—fall into obscurity when a new governor with differing priorities took office. Nevertheless, Wisconsin’s experience underscores the great potential of sister-state relationships to create goodwill abroad in a way that transcends politics.



Nicaragua



In early 1964, guests meeting with Governor John Reynolds (1963–65) about rural electric cooperatives suggested forming a sister-state relationship with Nicaragua. Reynolds noted in a subsequent memorandum that he was “interested in it,” but raised several questions. Were the Nicaraguans interested, or would they think it “beneath their dignity to be dealing with a state government”? What type of government controlled Nicaragua—a “leftist commie type” or “one that we can deal with”? Would federal law permit the arrangement? The governor seemed to hesitate further after typing out the memo. He jotted in blue ink: “If we could have our druthers, we could do better with Norway or Sweden. Climate [and] economics are similar. . . . Also ethnic ties are strong.”

Despite this seemingly lukewarm reaction, the governor directed one of his attorneys, Andrew C. Damon, to meet with the U.S. State Department to discuss the idea. Before the meeting, Damon admitted, “I couldn’t understand where there was much in common with ourselves and Nicaragua.” But at the meeting, the official explained that Wisconsin had already developed relationships there when rural electrification groups donated electric power transformers for use in the country. Furthermore, several other states had already formed sister-state

Nicaragua, with no apparent connection to Wisconsin, seemed at first like an odd choice of sister state. But the U.S. State Department lobbied for the relationship as part of a broader Cold War geopolitical strategy.



relationships with Latin American countries, including Utah (with Bolivia) and Texas (with Peru).

The U.S. State Department not only endorsed but encouraged these ties, which served a larger national strategic purpose: pushing back against communism in the region. Fidel Castro had risen to power in Cuba just a few years earlier, in 1959. In response, President John F. Kennedy sought to wield economic and social development to block other leftist uprisings. To this end, he launched the Alliance for Progress, an ambitious aid program that would channel over \$20 billion to Latin America over the course of the 1960s. Kennedy explained that this money would “be used to combat illiteracy, improve the productivity and use of their land, wipe out disease . . . [and] make the benefits of increasing abundance available to all.” However, the program also emphasized “self help activity”—the notion that Latin Americans could improve their own living conditions using skills and expertise imparted by their North American neighbors. The official explained to Damon, “You don’t fight Castro’s kind of propaganda by a simple outpouring of [federal] dollars. If they see people from Wisconsin are interested and are helping and participating in their economic development we are being far more effective.”

Nicaragua was particularly fertile ground for Alliance for Progress programs based on the U.S. State Department’s assessment of its government’s stability and its friendliness toward U.S. intervention. In the 1930s, the United States had supported the military coup of Anastasio Somoza García, whose family continued to control the country—directly or indirectly—through the mid-1960s. The Somozas rigged elections, ignored widespread poverty, and repressed political opposition, but they steadfastly supported U.S. policies in Latin America. This loyalty won them millions of dollars in military aid through successive presidential administrations.

With the U.S. State Department’s blessing, Governor Reynolds extended a formal invitation to President René Schick Gutiérrez, a Somoza ally, on June 23, 1964, inviting Nicaragua and Wisconsin to “become Partners in Progress.” Although the letter did not include the term “sister state,” a press release from the governor’s office announced “the development of a sister state relationship” and briefed Wisconsinites on some basic details about the country, such as its cultivation of cotton and coffee. The press release also touted the ideological benefits of the arrangement: “Nicaragua represents a bastion of Western democracy and freedom facing Castro and Communism. I know of no better way to directly demonstrate our support, and at the same time counterattack hostile infiltrations, than by this kind of people-to-people exchange.” President Gutiérrez formally accepted the partnership offer in August 1964.



A vendor sells fruit at an open-air market in the Nicaraguan city of León.

The governor's office began assembling a team of experts to visit Nicaragua before the new year. The U.S. State Department chose which fields of expertise should be represented by the team—these included rural electrification, public health, and industrial development—then let the governor's office select individual team members. The team's departure was ultimately delayed until late 1965, by which time Governor Reynolds had lost his reelection bid to Republican Warren Knowles. The change in administrations could have left the project in limbo, but Governor

Knowles took up his predecessor's work, publicizing and supporting the new relationship ahead of the visit. However, the new governor's office handed over official leadership of sister-state activities to a private nonprofit, the Wisconsin/Nicaragua Partners, to keep assistance projects consistent over time instead of fluctuating with the priorities of different gubernatorial administrations.

The trip finally began on November 18, 1965, and lasted twelve days. Philip Falk, a retired Madison superintendent of schools, highlighted the "striking contrasts" on display: "Vehicles on highways range from huge high powered trucks to ox teams with solid wooden wheeled carts. Homes are from lavish mansions to filthy hovels. Wealth is from millionaires to half starved, diseased children with bloated bellies." To Falk, these disparities were "fertile soil in which radicalism spawns." High illiteracy rates meant Nicaraguans spent their leisure time glued to transistor radios, listening to everything from baseball to the "siren songs of radical demagogues." Observations like these, imbued with Cold War politics, influenced team members' suggestions for potential assistance. Falk suggested various "self-help" projects that Wisconsinites could support in the area of education, such as teacher scholarships, student exchanges, and donations of school supplies. Such efforts, he implied, could deter communism in the country.

Within months after the visit, the team amassed a broad range of supplies—from pencils and books to X-ray units and operating tables—at Truax Field for transport to Nicaragua. This rapid mobilization reflected the generosity of groups

such as the Wisconsin Hospital Association, which donated nearly \$40,000 in out-of-date but usable equipment over the next two years. While the Wisconsin/Nicaragua Partners welcomed donations, the organization also emphasized the concept of “self-help,” as Nicaraguans communicated that they valued American expertise as much as American money. As one Nicaraguan correspondent noted, “Constant teaching is the answer—not barrels of food.” Specifically, she urged the Partners to send nurses, social workers, and dietitians. The organization responded by facilitating donations of time and expertise, like that of a Wisconsin surgeon who spent his month-long vacation volunteering at a hospital in Nicaragua.

Even after the Wisconsin/Nicaragua Partners took the helm, Wisconsin governors played visible roles in promoting Wisconsin’s sister-state relationship with Nicaragua. In November 1969, Governor Knowles briefly visited Nicaragua as part of a Latin American trade delegation, dining with President Anastasio “Tachito” Somoza Debayle and presenting him with a Parker fountain pen as an emblem of Wisconsin’s manufacturing prowess. Months later, after a fire ravaged the coastal city of Bluefields, Knowles telegrammed Somoza Debayle to offer support and condolences. Governor Patrick Lucey (1971–77) likewise urged Wisconsinites to come to the aid of their sister state after an earthquake devastated the city of Managua on December 23, 1972. Lucey worked with Nicaraguan officials to coordinate the delivery of medical supplies and equipment. Because state laws prohibited Lucey from donating surplus property, his administration sold it to the Nicaraguan government for token prices.

In this way, successive Wisconsin governors actively supported programs that improved the lives of ordinary Nicaraguans. However, these programs operated within a tenuous (and potentially volatile) political system. At the time, the guiding theory of U.S. foreign policy in Latin America was that improving economic conditions would foster democratic political institutions and prevent violent revolution. But the ruling Somoza family often used U.S. funding and resources to enrich itself and its allies at the expense of the poor. Accordingly, some Wisconsinites looked skeptically on sister-state activities as a way of artificially propping up a dictatorial regime destined to fall. As one detractor put it, “[O]ur largesse will be insufficient to abolish poverty, and so it will only delay the revolution.” In retrospect, historians have argued that foreign aid in the wake of the 1972 earthquake may have helped accelerate the revolution: the misappropriation of aid gave rise to opposition among both rich and poor Nicaraguans. Either way, sister-state activities could be viewed as pawns in a broader geopolitical chess match between the United States and its Cold War rivals.



When Wisconsinites visited Nicaragua in 1965, they saw oxen like these sharing the roads with cars. Some believed that the country's stark economic disparities made it more susceptible to communism.

But the relationships that Wisconsinites forged with Nicaraguans began to transcend U.S. foreign policy interests. This initial sister-state relationship resulted in a proliferation of sister-city relationships across Wisconsin, which in turn fostered meaningful personal connections. As one example, a Waukesha Spanish teacher named Betty Bone nurtured that city's sister-city relationship with Granada, which she documented in a newsletter called *Partnergram*. In June 1977, Betty and her husband David hosted Mayor and Mrs. Álvaro Chamorro on a brief visit; the itinerary included cocktails at the Holiday Inn, a meeting with the Waukesha mayor,

and a tailgate party and Brewers game. As the next edition of *Partnergram* noted, Chamorro had a “keen interest” in baseball and was even president of Granada’s local team, the Tiburones (Sharks). Bone was not naïve to her visitor’s politics: Chamorro opposed the Somoza regime. However, she struck comments referring to the regime’s “harshly repressive tactics” in a draft edition of *Partnergram* as potentially “a little too strong.” Like many others involved in the Wisconsin/Nicaragua Partners, Bone was reluctant to play up politics—something that other Nicaraguan visitors appreciated. As Dr. José Antonio Cantón remarked of his visit to Wisconsin, Bone and her colleagues “made clear . . . that the Partners organization is a Program of People to People and so Government and Politics should not be involved.”

This neutrality protected the relationship between Wisconsinites and Nicaraguans when civil war broke out in Nicaragua. Although popular discontent had steadily risen over the 1970s, massive protests erupted in the wake of President Somoza’s assassination of a prominent political rival in January 1978. By late 1979, Somoza had fled the country, which fell under the control of the revolutionary Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN). The outcome President Kennedy most feared when launching the Alliance for Progress—leftist uprising—had come to pass.

Remarkably, however, sister-state activities continued throughout 1979 and into the 1980s, despite new barriers. Although the Sandinistas never formally allied with Cuba, President Ronald Reagan viewed the removal of the FSLN government as essential to defeating communism in Latin America. Support in Wisconsin for aid efforts in Nicaragua consequently suffered from the perception that “Nicaragua is Communist,” which frustrated those involved in the Wisconsin/Nicaragua Partners. As one volunteer wrote in exasperation, “[Nicaraguans] were not Somozan in 1964 when the Wisconsin-Nicaragua partnership started! [They] are not Communist simply because the FSLN has taken control of the Federal Government.”

Making matters worse, Sandinista antipathy toward foreign intervention meant that Wisconsinites who visited Nicaragua following the revolution were met with suspicion, asked whether Wisconsin was a “haven” for exiled allies of the Somoza regime, and pressed to confirm their commitment to dealing with the revolutionary government. Sometimes distrust rose to the level of outright opposition: the government ordered a radio station sponsored by the Partners to go off the air in early 1980, briefly frustrating the educational program of which it was the cornerstone. On a 1984 visit, longtime Partners member Dr. Henry Peters noted a “gringo go home” sign posted prominently.

Still, Nicaraguan citizens appeared to appreciate the programs and petitioned for their continuation. In the case of the radio station ordered off the air, townspeople organized meetings (at which local Sandinista leaders were “shouted down”) and a protest in support of the station. Eventually, the local leaders asked the station’s operators to “please go back on the air” and promised to accept the responsibility for any fallout. The station resumed operations. As the station engineer reported back to the Partners office in Wisconsin: “All in all, it was an exciting ten days.”

On the Wisconsin side, the challenges of providing assistance during the revolution only strengthened the resolve of those involved in the Partners. Father Denis Read and Dr. James Van Beckum visited Nicaragua in early 1980 and returned to paint a despairing portrait of the revolution, especially the purported involvement of Cuban communists. However, they hoped that Wisconsin organizations’ activities in the country could “tip the scales in favor of the forces of democracy within the revolution.” This sentiment motivated them to continue developing plans to assist Nicaraguan farmers and their communities through soil testing programs, a dairy exchange program, and the delivery of medical supplies.

By the mid-1980s, President Reagan had imposed a trade embargo against

Local linkages

The concept of a sister *state*, when proposed to Governor Reynolds in 1964, was a novel one: more familiar were sister *cities*. Since the late 1950s, when President Dwight Eisenhower began promoting the idea of sister cities, over 300 American cities in 42 states had already “twinned” with cities abroad to promote cross-cultural exchange. After Wisconsin and Nicaragua formed their partnership, Wisconsin municipalities followed suit. Mayors in cities such as Racine and Waukesha hosted formal receptions for visiting counterparts from cities in Nicaragua, such as Bluefields and Granada, and facilitated exchanges of teachers and students. Over time, activities increasingly centered around aid efforts led by volunteers with the support of the nonprofit Wisconsin Coordinating Council on Nicaragua. Among other projects, Richland Center sent medicine and medical supplies to Santa Teresa; Wisconsin Rapids raised funds to broaden knowledge of medicinal plants in Rio Blanco; and Platteville solicited book donations for a mobile library in Mateare. These efforts helped sustain the sister-state relationship between Wisconsin and Nicaragua on a personal level.

Nicaragua and was secretly funding antigovernment military actions (*contras*) in the region. These actions effectively barred any official government actions in support of Wisconsin's sister-state relationship with Nicaragua. Still, prominent Wisconsin politicians visited Nicaragua in an unofficial capacity as private citizens. Speaker Tom Loftus, State Senator John Norquist, and former Governor Patrick Lucey toured the country in May 1984. There, they toured a sewing class



In the 1980s, revolution in Nicaragua complicated its sister-state relationship with Wisconsin. But volunteers persisted in their efforts to assist Nicaraguans, especially in meeting basic needs such as accessing potable water.

where students sat before machines provided by Wisconsinites and a medical dispensary with supplies sent from Wisconsin. They also met with key figures associated with both the FSLN and its opposition, who spoke candidly with their Wisconsin visitors about “the good and bad of our revolution,” as poet Ernest Cardenal put it.

In many ways, this trip exemplified the remarkable achievement of the relationship formed twenty years earlier. Although born of Cold War politics—and ultimately threatened by those politics—this relationship outgrew its political origins. Wisconsinites involved in sister-state activities were not seeking to impose any particular form of government in Nicaragua but rather to improve daily life for Nicaraguans. As anticipated, the fact that a private nonprofit took the helm of such sister-state activities seemed to shield these activities from the changing tides of partisan politics at the state level. Through the Partners, Wisconsinites' presence in Nicaragua has persisted in the intervening years despite changes in government. In 1990, the Partners sent a team of Wisconsinites to observe the first “free and open” elections that marked a transition toward democratic institutions. Today, Partners continue to coordinate the donation and shipment of supplies—ranging from sewing machines to firefighting hoses—to Nicaragua. In the experience of former Speaker Tom Loftus, “Despite what the relationship with Nicaragua is with the federal government or with each administration, you do have this relationship which is nonpolitical: it continues.”

Hessen, Germany



In August 1975, Governor Patrick Lucey found himself seated before a microphone for a somewhat unusual purpose: an interview for an upcoming program on the American bicentennial for broadcast in Frankfurt, Germany. For the German interviewer, the visit was a homecoming of sorts. As a teenager in the early 1950s, Klaus Scheunemann had spent a year as an exchange student in Wisconsin, attending Wauwatosa High School and staying with a local family. This year had a “formative influence” on Scheunemann, who waged a “one-man campaign” to boost Wisconsin as a travel destination among Germans. Now, returning to Wisconsin as a successful journalist, Scheunemann took steps to formalize this campaign. His timing was fortuitous. West Germany had undergone an “economic miracle” in the 1950s and 1960s, with household income quadrupling between 1950 and 1970. By the 1970s, Germans increasingly spent money on consumer goods and leisure activities, including tourism beyond German borders.

During his visit, Scheunemann arranged meetings with high-level state officials to put out “informal feelers” about a potential sister-state relationship between Wisconsin and the German state of Hesse. These officials included

Germany experienced rapid economic recovery after World War II, enabling Germans to buy foreign goods and travel overseas.

William Kidd, Lucey’s secretary of the Department of Business Development, which oversaw the Division of Tourism. As Scheunemann imagined it, the relationship would not be top-down but rather a people-to-people program involving “a continuous exchange of students, teachers, police officers, hospital staff, agricultural experts and tourists.”

The response was favorable. Secretary Kidd recognized how beneficial a sister-state relationship could be to attracting foreign tourism and investment. West Germany had emerged from the rubble of World War II as a “modern, fast-moving society” with burgeoning



electronics and technology industries. Wisconsin had already acknowledged its promise by establishing a foreign trade office in Hessen in late 1973. This office—located in the city of Frankfurt—was tasked with encouraging European companies to consider Wisconsin as a site for manufacturing facilities and pursuing opportunities for Wisconsin businesses in European markets. Even if Wisconsinites did not have a special connection to Hessen specifically, many traced their ancestry to Germany, and some had served in the country as part of the U.S. Army’s post-war military presence. For these reasons, Kidd endorsed Scheunemann’s idea in an October 1975 letter to Governor Lucey.

Lucey appeared convinced. In January 1976, he authorized Kidd and Scheunemann to work together “to arrange the details of ‘pairing’ Hessen and Wisconsin.” In short order, Scheunemann (who modestly described himself as “an ordinary citizen with some good contacts”) convinced Minister-President Albert Osswald to move ahead with a sister-state arrangement. By late March, Lucey received a letter from Osswald confirming his interest, and Lucey subsequently invited Osswald to Madison that September: “Should sister-statehood arrangements be complete at that time, a formal relationship could be commemorated at an appropriate ceremony.”

There was one potential problem: as these discussions took place, representatives from *another* German state had been quietly pursuing the possibility of a sister-state relationship with Wisconsin. In preparing to open Old World Wisconsin—an open-air museum

State officials ultimately pursued a sister-state relationship with Hessen, where Wisconsin had already opened a foreign trade office.

—an open-air museum featuring historic, immigrant-built homesteads—the State Historical Society had established ties with Schleswig-Holstein, the birthplace of many of Wisconsin’s German immigrants. Not long after Kidd broached the idea of a sister-state relationship with Hessen, the Minister-President of Schleswig-Holstein wrote to Lucey to share the news that he would lead a delegation of government



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COURTESY OF SHEBOYGAN MAYOR RYAN SORENSON

Hessen became Wisconsin's second sister state despite existing connections elsewhere in Germany. For example, Sheboygan formed a sister-city relationship with Esslingen, in the state of Baden-Württemberg, in 1967.

officials to Wisconsin for the opening of Old World Wisconsin. An intermediary informed Lucey that this delegation would broach the possibility of a sister-state relationship. The governor faced the awkward prospect of advancing with two potential sister states simultaneously—and potentially jeopardizing both.

It's unclear what tipped the scales in favor of Hessen, but in the summer of 1976, Governor Lucey and Secretary Kidd proceeded with plans to formalize an agreement with Minister-President Osswald that September. The signing ceremony itself was a somewhat hastily concluded affair. For reasons not yet shared with the governor's office, Minister-President Osswald cut short his trip to Wisconsin and stayed for less than 24 hours. On the morning of September 20, Osswald and Lucey, on behalf of their respective states, signed a proclamation "[agreeing] to establish a Partnership as a symbol of their existing friendly relations." Following the signing ceremony, Governor Lucey, Secretary Kidd, Minister-President Osswald and his wife, and a few other guests enjoyed an early lunch at the Madison Club. Then Osswald and his entourage left for the airport.

The ink on the proclamation was barely dry when one of its key proponents left office. On October 3, Osswald abruptly resigned, revealing that he was being investigated for fraud. In subsequent days, Osswald assured Governor Lucey that his successor would be "just as interested and active in promoting a good and

productive cooperation between our states.” However, the incoming Minister-President did not confirm his cooperation until January 1977; in the meantime, Kidd retired as secretary of the Department of Business Development. Almost immediately, enthusiasm for the relationship within the state agency took a sharp dive. (One administrator likened answering letters of interest about Hessen to “corporal punishment.”) In this sudden vacuum of interest, Don Burdon, the state’s trade representative in Frankfurt, found himself acting as the arrangement’s de facto advocate. But Burdon was wary of assuming this role on a long-term basis, noting, “I am not over here to be Wisconsin’s ‘Ambassador to Hessen.’”

The teetering sister-state relationship was further destabilized by Governor Lucey’s resignation on July 6, 1977, to become Ambassador to Mexico. Some advocates for the enterprise were optimistic that the German heritage of Acting Governor Martin Schreiber (1977–79) would inspire him to advance the partnership, but by all accounts, this was not so. A Department of Business Development administrator reported in October 1977, “We have discussed this partnership with Governor Schreiber, and I would gauge his interest as nil.” Little appeared to change over the remainder of Schreiber’s term.

The partnership’s remaining advocates tried their best to gain the support of the incoming governor, Lee Sherman Dreyfus (1979–83). They were rebuffed. As Dreyfus said dryly, “The partnership has been carried out on an informal basis for purposes of cultural visits the last few years. There is no reason why that should not continue.” Later in his term, Dreyfus appeared to reconsider, but an economic downturn had resulted in budget cuts that sharply circumscribed the administration’s ability to entertain foreign guests. As an internal memorandum explained: “While it is easy to enter into new arrangements with countries that also would like to have closer ties, our limited ability to follow through makes a strong relationship very improbable.”

Wisconsin’s second sister-state relationship began as the first had, with a visitor to the capitol planting the seeds of the idea. However, this second relationship stumbled almost immediately, as its supports in government left office in short succession. In the absence of either a forceful advocate or a private nonprofit like the Wisconsin/Nicaragua partners, the relationship did not immediately flourish, but in the ensuing years, a diverse range of people-to-people partnerships has taken shape. As one example, the University of Wisconsin System has facilitated educational exchanges between Wisconsin and Hessen. In addition to spending semesters abroad in Germany to pursue coursework or internships, students are also able to pursue virtual coursework without leaving the country. Sister-state



Governor Thompson promotes Wisconsin businesses during a trade mission to Germany.

contacts have also created opportunities for UW students to participate in hands-on career training in Hessen alongside their German peers. For example, in August 2024, students from the UW–Platteville School of Business traveled to Wiesbaden for a program hosted by the Rhein-Main University of Applied Sciences and Seibert Media that challenged them to devise a media strategy oriented to certain types of consumers. A faculty member on the trip reflected that the students gained “broader worldview” and “exposure to diverse solutions,” which could in turn foster opportunities and innovations back in Wisconsin.

In recent years, economic developments have refocused the sister-state relationship around trade and technological innovation. Both Wisconsin and Hessen are home to biotech companies producing medical devices, biopharmaceuticals, and medical software, as well as to universities leading the research underlying these products. Moreover, Germany is a top export destination for Wisconsin products generally and biotech products specifically. Given these commonalities, the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation has led frequent trade ventures to Germany, with recent visits timed to coincide with major trade shows in this field. Hessen government and business leaders have also visited Wisconsin to explore opportunities for collaboration in science and technology. The itinerary of one recent visit illustrates the relationships being formed in these fields: the schedule contained meetings at Epic Systems and tours of virtual reality teaching centers at Madison College, as well as visits to MilliporeSigma, a subsidiary of the Hessen-based Merck Group with facilities in Verona and Sheboygan that support its manufacture of a broad range of diagnostic tests.

In some respects, the trajectory of Wisconsin’s relationship with Hessen underscores how sister-state relationships can be unpredictable at times. During Governor Dreyfus’s administration, economic concerns foreclosed official attempts to follow through the relationship, but under more recent governors, economic interests instead reanimated and strengthened the relationship. Although not exactly what Klaus Scheunemann had initially envisioned, the partnership has evolved in ways that support the two states’ common strengths and create opportunities for exchange.

Heilongjiang, People's Republic of China



If Governor Dreyfus did not enthusiastically pursue Wisconsin's partnership with Hessen, it might have been because his sights were set to the East. Despite just one term in office, the Dreyfus administration made significant advances in establishing economic and diplomatic ties between Wisconsin and the People's Republic of China (PRC). In 1982, Dreyfus secured Wisconsin's third sister-state partnership by overseeing an agreement between the Badger State and the Chinese province of Heilongjiang.

Cold War politics foreclosed the possibility of such an agreement prior to the 1970s. In 1949, when Chinese Communist Party forces defeated the Government of the Republic of China (ROC), the United States shuttered its embassy in Beijing and cut off official diplomatic relations with the PRC. Trade relations between the United States and the PRC all but ceased until the 1970s. In 1971, the United States lifted its trade embargo on China, and in 1972, President Richard Nixon made a surprise trip to China to meet with Chairman Mao Zedong. Nixon's diplomacy, and President Jimmy Carter's subsequent formal recognition of the PRC in January 1979, opened the door to state-level engagement with the PRC.

Upon attaining the governorship, Dreyfus embraced the possibilities of state-level relations with the PRC. At a time when competition between states for international attention was rapidly expanding, Dreyfus brought unique experience to the task of engaging the Chinese. He had first visited China while serving in the Navy during World War II, and later, while president of UW–Stevens Point, traveled to China as part of a delegation of American college and university officials. Dreyfus spoke frequently of these visits, emphasizing the need for mutual

A bookseller sits beneath a portrait of Mao Zedong, chairman of the People's Republic of China from 1949 until 1976.



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President Nixon and Governor Dreyfus both traveled to China as the United States entered a new era of friendlier diplomatic relations with the PRC.

understanding and cooperation even across ideological lines. Perhaps predictably, the governor was enthusiastic when China's Ministry of Agriculture extended a personal invitation to visit in November 1981. In his acceptance, Dreyfus remarked that he looked forward to "renewing old acquaintances and establishing firm social and economic ties between the People's Republic of China and Wisconsin."

The governor insisted that his itinerary include a stop in Heilongjiang, China's northernmost province; like Wisconsin, it is known for its cold winters and

agricultural character. Given these commonalities, the province was an especially suitable destination for a mission intended to showcase Wisconsin's agricultural products—everything from "genetic engineering, seed grains, bovine semen and dairy cattle to soybeans, cultivated ginseng and fertilizer processing equipment." Simultaneously, the governor's office was in talks with provincial officials about establishing a sister-state relationship. As with Nicaragua and Hessen, the discussion began somewhat by chance. In the spring of 1981, a Wisconsinite traveling through Heilongjiang found himself overwhelmed by its similarities with his native state, which he then reported to the U.S. embassy in Beijing. An embassy official relayed this information to Heilongjiang officials, who then contacted their Wisconsin counterparts to request more information on the state. In their request, the officials floated the idea of a sister-state partnership. Still, no plans were set as mission members disembarked for China, and U.S. State Department officials cautioned Dreyfus against getting his hopes up.

On November 30, 1981, the visitors arrived in Beijing. There, Governor Dreyfus and Assembly Majority Leader Tom Loftus found themselves in guest rooms once occupied by President Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. At official state dinners, they dined on Chinese delicacies, including bear paw, moose nose, snake soup, and broiled sparrow. Such lavish reception prompted concern



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Governor Dreyfus's delegation presented ginseng root to their Chinese hosts. Ginseng production—seen here in late 1930s Wausau—has served as an important point of connection with China.

among the delegation that the beer and cheese they had brought as gifts might fail to impress their hosts; Wisconsin ginseng exporter Paul Hsu saved the day by presenting a massive ginseng root he had brought along, to the delight of Chinese officials present.

Following obligatory visits to the Great Wall and the Forbidden City,

Dreyfus and his delegation traveled to Heilongjiang. After a 17-hour train ride, they arrived in Harbin, the provincial capital, where Dreyfus and Heilongjiang officials drafted and signed a statement of intent, charging both parties to pursue a formal sister-state relationship. Dreyfus and his entourage finished their trip with visits to Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. At every stop on his itinerary, Dreyfus's charm was on full display as he bantered with top officials about the meaning of his name in Chinese (plum or plum tree) and introduced himself to children using the word for grandfather (pronounced "yay yay"). By all accounts, Dreyfus impressed his Chinese hosts with his knowledge of their history, his previous visits to their country, and his sincerity in seeking to improve relations between China and Wisconsin. A member of Dreyfus's trade mission reflected upon his return that "[the mission] experienced remarkably little political or party-line dogma. They were quite honest in explaining to us their problems, hopes and needs for the future. They admire our technical achievements and want our help in providing this to China."

Following the success of Dreyfus's mission, Heilongjiang Governor Chen Lei traveled to Madison, with party officials and agricultural experts in tow, for an official signing ceremony on October 18, 1982. Unlike prior sister-state agreements, this document included lines for witness signatures, and signatories like Loftus testified to the agreement's broad support within Wisconsin government. Following the signing ceremony, Dreyfus announced a long list of initiatives reflective of the new sister states' shared agricultural interests. Included were plans to collaborate on ginseng cultivation, livestock insemination, a study of plant diseases, and mutual animal health standards to determine which animals could be shipped back and

forth. Wisconsin would assist Heilongjiang in potato processing and waste water treatment efforts, and the Chinese, in turn, would help Wisconsin with solar winter growing technology.

Governor Dreyfus's decision not to seek reelection could have presented an obstacle to the sister-state relationship. As with the relationships Wisconsin formed with Nicaragua and Hessen, the burden of maintaining any partnership would fall to the next administration. Fortunately, policymakers increasingly recognized the need for a more robust set of state-level institutions to manage international relations. To this end, Dreyfus's successor, Governor Tony Earl (1983–87), created the Wisconsin-Heilongjiang Coordinating Committee in early 1984. In its first meeting, the committee considered a wide range of possible actions: launching a newspaper exchange, trading Wisconsin cattle for Chinese pandas, inviting the Chinese to the World Dairy Expo in Madison, and developing the agenda for Governor Earl's trip to China later that year.

In subsequent years, Wisconsin and Heilongjiang forged a relationship predicated on a shared commitment to agriculture, and practical concerns continued to take precedence over political ideologies. In particular, Heilongjiang began to look to Wisconsin for expertise and resources in dairying. When Dreyfus first travelled to China in 1981, dairy products were rarities in the region. As a Chinese guide remarked to Dreyfus at the end of the trip, "You know, I tried your cheese and I liked the taste! I believe someday dairy products will become a regular feature in our diet, only please be patient." The guide was right: Chinese demand for products such as milk and cheese rose sharply in the 1990s, then tripled between 1996 and 2006. Today, China imports more dairy products and dairy cows than any other country in the world. Meanwhile, its own dairy production has expanded significantly, particularly in northern provinces such as Heilongjiang, which now contains even more cows than Wisconsin.

Thanks to the sister-state relationship, Wisconsin farmers and agribusinesses were well-positioned to take advantage of this shift. In the 2010s, Wisconsin's Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer

Recent trade shows in China have highlighted Wisconsin and Heilongjiang's shared interest in dairying.



Protection (DATCP) maintained a consistent presence at the China World Dairy Expo hosted in Heilongjiang. In 2015, DATCP Secretary Ben Brancel led a delegation to attend the expo, meet with the provincial governor, and tour dairy operations. In turn, the team promoted Wisconsin dairy products, including by providing samples of ice cream: a new ice cream flavor, “24 karat ruby,” incorporated Wisconsin cream, cranberries, and ginseng, and was specially developed by UW–River Falls for the event. In 2016, a new delegation to Heilongjiang highlighted the work of Wisconsin cheesemakers by bringing 417 varieties of Wisconsin cheese, which helped break a Guinness World Record for “Largest Display of Cheese Varieties.” The next year, a DATCP delegation included carver Troy Landwehr, who created a cheese sculpture to commemorate the thirty-fifth anniversary of the sister-state partnership.

These consistent in-person interactions created a general feeling of “reciprocal goodwill” between the American state and the Chinese province. On the basis of that friendship, the governor of Heilongjiang sent a large supply of masks and other personal protective equipment to Governor Tony Evers after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. This generous gift demonstrates one of the distinct advantages of sister-state relationships: while official U.S. foreign policy toward a country like the PRC is often “freighted with ideological baggage and policy antagonisms,” sister-state relationships are established and maintained on the basis of practical interests that motivate signatories to work together constructively.

Taiwan



On April 28, 1985, members of a Taiwanese trade delegation stepped down from a bus to see a wide expanse of cornfields on the outskirts of Janesville. Seven-year-old David Hodge led an informal tour of his family’s farm before the group tucked into a pig roast with corn, apple pie, and other quintessentially American fare. This visit was the second time in just two years that Hodge Bros. Farms had welcomed high-level business executives from Taiwan. One member of the Taiwanese delegation remarked while standing in the cornfields, “In Taiwan, we have 19 million people, and only one-sixth of your space. Look how far you can see.” Delegation members purchased a total of \$21 million dollars in agricultural products from Wisconsin farmers and businesses.



Despite its small size and precarious political position, Taiwan became an appealing economic partner for American states in the 1970s and '80s.

“a bastion against the inroads of communism.” Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, governors demonstrated their anticommunist credentials by visiting the island or welcoming Taiwanese delegations to their states.

The prospect of mutual economic benefits also motivated American governors to seek out relations with Taiwan. Despite its size, Taiwan had become one of the fastest growing economies in the world by the 1970s. A significant trade imbalance formed: in 1973, the United States imported \$724 million more in goods than it sold to Taiwan. In an effort to balance trade and maintain a strong friendship with the United States, Taiwan launched a “Buy American” campaign designed to encourage Taiwanese trade groups to purchase U.S. goods. A central component of this strategy was the use of trade missions to the United States, which frequently resulted in multimillion-dollar purchasing deals. Conversely, American policymakers participated in trade missions to Taiwan to seek markets for state exports. By the late 1970s, various Wisconsin legislators had toured Taiwan, including State Senators Tim Cullen and William Bablitch and State Representatives Edward Jackamonis

Taiwan is a small island—around one-fifth the size of Wisconsin—located approximately 100 miles off the coast of mainland China. However, as a symbolic bulwark against communism, Taiwan assumed outsized strategic significance in the Cold War. When Chinese Communist Party forces prevailed in the Chinese Civil War and established the PRC in 1949, the government of the ROC fled mainland China for Taiwan. U.S. presidents recognized the ROC—rather than the PRC—as China’s legitimate government and pledged to support Taiwan against any PRC attempt to reclaim it by force. State-level officials like Hawaiian Lieutenant Governor James Kealoha supported the ROC as

and James Wahner. Among other things, these legislators sought to ensure that future Taiwanese missions included Wisconsin on their itineraries.

For the Taiwanese, these burgeoning relationships with state-level American policymakers became more important as the Cold War thawed. Following President Nixon's 1972 visit to mainland China, where he met with PRC Chairman Mao Zedong, U.S. policy with respect to the PRC and ROC rapidly reversed course. On January 1, 1979, the United States officially acknowledged the PRC as the "sole legal Government of China" and established the policy that "Taiwan is part of China." Afterwards, the United States adopted what became known as the "One China" policy and only engaged in unofficial—rather than official—relations with the ROC. This led ROC officials in Taiwan to more aggressively seek relationships with individual states. The government's "dynamic campaign" included efforts to establish sister-state relationships with as many states as possible.

State-level interactions with Taiwan were ideologically complicated both before and after the federal government adopted the "One China" policy. Trade missions that were "ostensibly economic in nature . . . carried a political dimension as well," note scholars Czeslaw Tubilewicz and Natalie Omond. For example, Governor Warren Knowles' trade mission to Taiwan in 1967—during which Wisconsin First Lady Dorothy Guidry shared tea and smoked cigarettes with the wife of ROC President Chiang Kai-shek—could have been considered a clear rebuke of the PRC. Conversely, some felt that Governor Patrick Lucey's 1977 visit to the PRC, which was followed by another visit from State Senator Henry Reuss, had soured Taiwan's opinion of the Badger State. As State Senator Timothy Cullen described, "The simple fact that Lucey led a mission to Red China made Taiwan feel Wisconsin was not a friendly state." Relationships in East Asia could be complex, and even seemingly positive developments could have unforeseen negative consequences.

Rather than shy away from these complications, Wisconsin policymakers sought stronger ties in both Taiwan and mainland China into the 1980s. As a case in point, Speaker Tom Loftus, who had traveled to the PRC with Governor Dreyfus in 1981, subsequently traveled to Taiwan in August 1983. And while Loftus had served as a signatory of Wisconsin's sister-state relationship with Heilongjiang, he would also pursue a sister-state relationship with Taiwan. In Loftus's view, Wisconsin generally needed to "look east" because "Wisconsin businesses, including farmers, produce what Taiwan needs." Loftus was well aware that lucrative purchasing deals often followed positive diplomatic exchanges with Taiwan, such as the signing of sister-state agreements. This pattern was also understood by Jimmy Wang, a Taiwanese businessman who met with Loftus during his visit. Early in his career,



WHS IMAGE

Jimmy Wang, a Taiwanese businessman with longstanding links to Wisconsin, encouraged the formation of a sister-state relationship. As the founding chairman of the Taiwan Refrigeration and Air Conditioning Engineering Association, Wang is celebrated today as one of the pioneers of those industries in Taiwan.

Wang had helped manage exports for various Wisconsin companies, eventually becoming an honorary commercial attaché of the state of Wisconsin. Now, he and Loftus discussed the possibility of negotiating a sister-state relationship. After several months of correspondence with Loftus and Lieutenant Governor James Flynn, Wang ultimately presented a formal sister-state proposal to Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the provincial government.

Before plans were finalized for a jointly signed agreement, Speaker Loftus broke the precedent set by earlier Wisconsin sister-state relationships by deciding to pursue the relationship legislatively. On April 19, 1985, Speaker Loftus introduced 1985 Assembly Joint Resolution 31 with co-author Representative Louise Tesmer. The resolution risked opposition. In other states, legislators had questioned the state legislature's authority to wade into diplomatic affairs. As one

West Virginia legislator put it in 1979, "Whatever competency this Legislature possesses certainly is not in the area of foreign relations." Legislators often debated semantic choices—such as making direct reference to the "Republic of China"—that they worried could carry unintended (and disastrous) consequences. A Minnesota resolution that referred twice to the Republic of China prompted harsh criticism of state officials for their "amateurism, if not outright ignorance, regarding Beijing's sensitivity on the Taiwan issue." Likewise, during Oregon Governor Victor Atiyeh's 1984 visit to mainland China, the PRC premier interrogated the governor over his intentions with respect to Taiwan and strongly cautioned him against using the phrase "Republic of China" in the text of any sister-state agreement. (Atiyeh did ultimately sign a sister-state agreement with Taiwan, but the text of this agreement made no mention of the Republic of China.) Consequently, when the Wisconsin State Senate considered the resolution, State Senator Mordecai Lee proposed amending the resolution to remove the term "Republic of China" and refer only to "Taiwan." However, legislators declined to make Senator Lee's suggested change and ultimately adopted the resolution.

Following the adoption of Assembly Joint Resolution 31, officials began

planning an official signing ceremony, but scheduling proved challenging. The Taiwanese government extended formal invitations to Governor Earl, Senate President Fred Risser, and Speaker Loftus to attend a celebration of Restoration Day, a holiday commemorating the end of Japanese rule, in October 1985. Governors and legislative leaders from other midwestern states, such as Indiana and Minnesota, were slated to attend, but none of the Wisconsin invitees were available. This represented a major problem for Jimmy Wang: as he confided to Loftus, “It is my belief that the appearance of the Lt. Governor (with all due respect) without the presence of the Governor will not lend as much assurance for the negotiation of a trade contract with Wisconsin.” Governor Earl missing the signing was in fact unusual; none of the governors of the twenty-seven states that had previously established sister-state relations with Taiwan had missed presiding over the signing ceremony. But ultimately, Wang’s entreaties fell on deaf ears, and Lieutenant Governor Flynn was the official signatory of the sister-state agreement alongside Chiu Chuang-Huan, the governor of the province of Taiwan. And despite his qualms, the agreement appeared to bear fruit. Four months following the signing ceremony, Lieutenant Governor Flynn welcomed members of Taiwan’s twelfth procurement mission to Wisconsin and presided over the ceremonial signing of a \$13.5 million purchasing agreement for corn.

Since then, the sister-state relationship has not resulted in the same degree of people-to-people activity as other relationships, but the relationship has retained symbolic significance within the state. Members of the Wisconsin State Legislature have perennially introduced joint resolutions affirming their support for the relationship specifically and the ROC generally: for example, State Senator Tom Tiffany authored 2019 Senate Resolution 3, which touted the ROC’s ideological commonalities with the state of Wisconsin, including “values of freedom, democracy, human rights, the rule of law, peace, and prosperity,” and advocated for “strengthening and expanding sister-state ties between Wisconsin and Taiwan.”

Although largely symbolic, legislative resolutions are useful political signals. 2019 Senate Resolution 3 aligns with Tiffany’s stated views of the PRC, whom he called “a bully. . . . They have basically taken over Hong Kong, which was once a free city. They have designs on taking over Taiwan, which is a democratically run country.” Scholars Tubilewicz and Omond note that PRC officials “[disapprove] of such resolutions precisely because of their symbolic affirmations of Taiwan’s sovereignty, praises of its political system and support of its diplomatic objectives.” The PRC has even used resolutions as bargaining chips; rumors circulated in 2018 that the PRC had insisted that West Virginia House leaders table such a resolution before

signing a state-level trade agreement. Resolutions like these can command the attention of PRC officials and communicate critiques of their leadership. Accordingly, these resolutions support, at least in part, the vision of sister-state ties as initially conceived by President Kennedy's administration—that is, as a means to push back against communism. But Taiwan's complicated international position makes it challenging to strengthen people-to-people ties, setting this sister-state relationship apart from others.

Chiba, Japan



Throughout his tenure, Governor Tommy Thompson (1987–2001) prioritized promoting Wisconsin internationally. His ambitious agenda included various trade missions to Japan. This was hardly unusual, as Japan was the destination of more than a third of all trips taken by U.S. governors in the late 1980s. The Japanese

economy grew by leaps and bounds after World War II, and American governors were eager to offer their states as sites for manufacturing facilities; Kentucky, for example, successfully landed a contract after its governor's visit to Toyota's Tokyo office.

Governor Thompson chose his approach based on a widespread perception that Asian business practices differed markedly from their American counterparts in requiring longstanding friendship as prerequisites to business deals. Briefing materials circulated within the governor's office consistently stressed personal relationships: "Business activities and trading are done preferentially between friends," one memorandum generalized, adding, "the sooner the friendship process is initiated, the sooner time begins to run for establishing the trust and understanding which create old friends." After his first Asian trade mission, in November 1987, the governor

Governor Thompson sought out meaningful relationships with leaders throughout Asia, such as Governor Takeshi Numata of Chiba Prefecture, Japan, seen here with Thompson in the state capitol.



echoed these ideas: “The full results of this Mission will be achieved only if we . . . are persistent and follow up and return again and again to the region to sell Wisconsin.” He repeated these sentiments in 1988 after his second trade mission to Asia: “Asian business practice is based on long-term personal relationships and trust; and trust is built only by being in the region.” His own hands-on involvement in these meetings was intended to assure potential business partners that Wisconsin welcomed their business.

Personal connections, albeit ones established decades before Thompson became governor, proved instrumental in establishing the Japanese sister-state relationship. In 1967, Governor Knowles led a trade mission to Japan, where he met executives at Kikkoman, a Japanese soy sauce company. Just a few years later, Kikkoman selected Walworth County as the site of its first American factory. Then–Vice President (and later CEO) Yuzaburo Mogi attributed the company’s decision to the area’s promising workforce and its proximity to soy and wheat, but Knowles’s presence in Japan may have tipped the scales in Wisconsin’s favor. Knowles’s successor, Patrick Lucey, continued this courtship of Japanese investment: when local opposition threatened to derail construction of the Walworth County facility, Lucey attended a town board meeting to testify in its support. After the factory began operations in 1973, opposition all but evaporated. As one former employee put it, “The work was good, the pay was good, and the managers from Japan were great.” The Walworth facility came to represent “a rare example

Performers fill the capitol rotunda with sounds of the *sawara bayashi* during the visit of a delegation from Chiba in October 2024.



TAYLOR WOLFRAM, LEGISLATIVE PHOTOGRAPHER

of overseas expansion without friction.” But Mogi described a more ambitious goal than economic expansion alone: “to achieve coexistence and co-prosperity with the people of Wisconsin and the United States.” To this end, the company sponsored scholarships for local high school students to live and study in Japan, and Kikkoman’s American legal counsel, Milton Neshek, urged Governor Lucey to establish a sister-state relationship with Japan. But Neshek missed his opportunity when Lucey resigned to become Ambassador to Mexico, and he failed to convince subsequent governors.

The effort met with more success under Governor Thompson. Thompson actively involved Kikkoman executives in his efforts to drum up foreign interest in Wisconsin, as Kikkoman’s facility in Walworth County was precisely the type of investment Thompson hoped to repeat. For their part, Mogi and Neshek “went above and beyond the call of duty” in welcoming Thompson and others to Japan during the back-to-back trade missions in 1987 and 1988. In recognition, Thompson named Mogi an honorary ambassador to Japan and used his political clout as governor to argue against restrictive trade policies that barred imports of Kikkoman into that country.

Separately, State Superintendent Herbert Grover involved Kikkoman in his effort to encourage Japanese language and cultural education in Wisconsin. In May 1986, Grover charged an Advisory Council for Japanese Language and Culture with exploring how educational policies might help boost the state’s economy. The council—whose membership included Neshek—made various recommendations intended to make Wisconsin seem more “hospitable” to Japanese investors. One recommendation was the expansion of Japanese language instruction in Wisconsin public schools. Only three school districts provided such instruction at the time the committee convened; expansion, Mogi testified before the council, would facilitate clearer communication at Japanese-owned companies like Kikkoman and help integrate Japanese families into their Wisconsin communities. The council also recommended establishing a sister-state relationship in order to establish “a solid personal trust relationship” with prospective Japanese investors in Wisconsin.

Yukio Itoh, a council member who was a Spanish and Japanese language teacher at Franklin High School in Milwaukee County, not only supported establishing a sister-state relationship but also pursued this goal long after the council disbanded. Writing to Governor Thompson in March 1987, Itoh requested an official letter of intent before he began *nemawashi*, a Japanese word for “laying out the groundwork and arrangements.” Then, with Thompson’s approval, Itoh reached out to various Japanese contacts and tasked his students with performing a detailed

computer analysis comparing the relative merits of various Japanese prefectures. This analysis took into account population, per capita income, annual operating budget, local tax revenue, and various other factors to generate a ranking based on a 100-point system.

Included on Itoh's shortlist was Thompson's eventual choice, Chiba prefecture; close to Tokyo, it was also home to a major international airport, Disneyland of Japan, various high-tech industries, and seaside resorts. Chiba also happened to be the center of soy sauce brewing in Japan from the mid-seventeenth century onward, due to the region's cultivation of soy and wheat and its access to markets via the Tone and Edo rivers. There, in the city of Noda, Kikkoman was established in 1917 as a merger of several family companies. Although Itoh himself had no personal contacts in Chiba, he noted that "if Kikkoman Co. and Mr. Mogi render their help, we may be able to carry out our project."

Indeed, Yuzaburo Mogi proved instrumental in establishing the partnership. Mogi formally presented Governor Thompson's proposal to Chiba Governor Takeshi Numata in April 1988. Governor Numata appeared "very cautious" at first,

A trailblazing teacher

Pivotal to the sister-state relationship with Japan was Yukio Itoh, an "orphaned shoe-shine boy" who happened to befriend U.S. Army Colonel Woodrow V. Nold. The colonel helped Itoh secure a scholarship to Lawrence University in Appleton. He graduated in 1961 and became a beloved Spanish teacher at Franklin High School. When he planned to leave Franklin in the fall of 1965 because immigration quotas barred his wife, Katsuko, from joining him in Wisconsin, the students sprang into action. "We didn't want to lose him," one explained. "He's a real fine teacher." The students launched a letter-writing campaign to Wisconsin's congressional representatives, coordinated a car parade, and organized an "Asian Night" program. Fortuitously, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which abolished race-based immigration quotas, paved the way for Katsuko's arrival. The school held a special assembly to welcome Katsuko, with students raising a banner that read "Welcome Mrs. Itoh." The couple's reunion allowed Mr. Itoh to remain at Franklin High School for more than 30 years. He continued to teach Spanish and, after playing an instrumental role in helping expand Japanese-language instruction in Wisconsin, also taught Japanese. For Mr. Itoh, teaching was one way to "return favors to America" for welcoming him so warmly.

tempering Mogi's hopes. Numata's exact reservations are unclear, but they must have been alleviated by early 1990, when Thompson publicly announced plans to form a sister-state relationship. On May 21, 1990, the governors signed a sister-state agreement in the capitol rotunda in Madison following remarks by Yuzaburo Mogi and others. Both governors then participated in *kagami biraki*, a cask breaking ceremony signifying "new beginnings" that is often performed on important personal and professional occasions.

Following the signing ceremony, Thompson used his office to sustain the sister-state relationship in ways that prior governors had not. He developed an ongoing rapport with Governor Numata, exchanging frequent letters and meeting in person throughout the 1990s, and appeared to jump at any opportunity to welcome Japanese officials stateside or travel to Japan on behalf of the state. As an example, one well-timed trade mission to Japan happened to coincide with the Wisconsin Badgers' 1993 triumph over Michigan State at the Tokyo Dome.

Likewise, Yukio Itoh sustained the sister-state arrangement by helping to expand Japanese language education programs. Between 1989 and 1993, Itoh helped coordinate an internship program under the Department of Public Instruction that brought more than 100 Japanese interns to work in public school districts across the state. These interns introduced Wisconsin pupils of all ages to Japanese language and culture while gaining first-hand experience of "real English." Over the same period, the number of schools offering in-person Japanese language instruction rose dramatically, from single digits in the mid-1980s to over 50 in 1993. Although those programs declined in subsequent years, they sparked an interest in Japan among the generation of Wisconsinites growing up in the 1990s.

Yuzaburo Mogi also continued to invest his personal and professional energies in strengthening ties between Wisconsin and Chiba. Back in Japan, Mogi was active in the Chiba-Wisconsin Association, created to support educational and cultural exchanges. Among other activities, the Chiba-Wisconsin Association organizes welcome events for participants in the Chiba ALT Program, through which the Chiba Board of Education hires Wisconsinites as assistant English language teachers. In Wisconsin, Mogi oversaw the continuation of substantial economic investments in the state, such as donations to fund important research initiatives within the University of Wisconsin System. Most recently, Kikkoman broke ground on another manufacturing facility in Jefferson, Wisconsin, with former Governor Thompson and Governor Tony Evers (2019–present) in attendance. As Mogi told the assembled guests, "I'm always delighted to come back to Wisconsin. I considered it my second home."

Jalisco, Mexico



Wisconsin's sister-state relationship with Japan was the product of years of negotiations, nurtured by Japanese intermediaries with deep roots in Wisconsin. By comparison, the second sister-state relationship that Governor Thompson orchestrated was a whirlwind affair. The speed and enthusiasm with which Wisconsin partnered with the state of Jalisco reflected the rapid pace of changes in the Mexican government—and consequently its relationship with foreign trading partners—at the time.

In the late 1980s, a wave of changes within the Mexican government would eventually pave the way for the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Thompson noticed these developments and noted, "Mexico is the future, and . . . represents tremendous trade opportunities as Mexico's economic structure continues to stabilize." For decades, protectionist government policies favored domestic manufacturers and producers. These restrictive trade policies—such as tariffs, import licenses, and limitations on foreign ownership—discouraged American imports and investment. However, beginning in the mid-1980s, the Mexican government abandoned these policies in the face of a devastating debt crisis. Mexico joined various free trade agreements, such as the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, which lowered tariffs and eliminated various permits required for foreign imports. These changes meant Wisconsin businesses increasingly looked to Mexico as an export market.

Envisioning himself as the state's "number one salesman," Thompson planned a trade mission to Mexico in November 1989, with the aim of connecting Wisconsin business leaders to Mexican buyers. The state's dairy industry, among others, seemed particularly well poised to increase its exports. At the time, Wisconsin was already a major exporter of dairy cattle, accounting for about 10,000 of 40,000 head transported from the United States to Mexico annually. Wisconsin also led in exports of cattle semen and embryos, with Mexico as its largest purchaser. Still, the state faced stiff competition from cattle exporters in Canada and Australia, and industry leaders sought to increase their presence in Mexico. In addition to increasing exports, Thompson advocated on behalf of free trade generally. To this end, former Governor Patrick Lucey—who participated in the mission—wielded his influence as former U.S. Ambassador to Mexico to secure Thompson a one-on-one meeting with Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari.

With these goals in mind, the delegation spent several days in the state of Jalisco; importantly, Wisconsin and Jalisco shared various commonalities, including the role of dairy within their respective economies. These similarities may have been on Thompson's mind when he met with Governor Guillermo Cosío Vidaurri, and—with seemingly little forethought—broached the possibility of establishing a sister-state relationship. The governor initially demurred, explaining that “Mexican states do not traditionally form sister-state relationships.” But Thompson so convincingly argued the benefits of the relationship that, by the conclusion of the governors' meeting, Cosío Vidaurri had dictated a proposal to the state's legislative body for formal approval.

The swiftness with which Thompson pursued this new relationship may have reflected his disappointment that, earlier in the 1980s, Wisconsin had lagged behind its midwestern peers in pursuing stronger ties in Asia. In forging boldly ahead with Mexico, Thompson remarked, “I frankly am thrilled to have Wisconsin in a leadership position, breaking new ground as opposed to following after others.” The mission's remaining itinerary showcased Thompson's enthusiasm. While in Mexico City, Thompson met with President Salinas, sharing his belief that “free and fair trade and open markets are the force of the future around the world” and that “trade means jobs for all of our people.” Later, Secretary of the Department of Development Rolf Wegenke and State Senator Fred Risser led the others on a

Dairy is economically important in both Wisconsin and its Mexican sister state, Jalisco—although Wisconsin cows do not get to enjoy the view of an active volcano like the Volcán de Colima.





UW DIGITAL COLLECTIONS

Like other sister states, Jalisco—with its lush mountain reserve and sandy beaches—seemed on the surface to differ substantially from Wisconsin. But late twentieth-century governors increasingly recognized similarities with people abroad and the value of forming cultural and economic partnerships.

tour of a Ford Motor Company factory in Toluca. Rather than decry the plant as representing the threat of American manufacturers moving their operations overseas, Thompson presented it as a boon to Wisconsinites, arguing that it actually created jobs in Wisconsin by buying parts from companies like Penda Corporation of Portage, whose CEO participated in the mission. Mission participants shared Thompson’s excitement, with one even comparing Thompson’s efforts in opening doors to Mexican markets to “the opening of the Berlin Wall.”

Less than a year later, in October 1990, Governor Cosío Vidaurri traveled to Wisconsin to attend the World Dairy Expo in Madison. There, on October 4, he and Thompson appeared together on a panel about opportunities in the dairy industry presented by the Mexican government’s efforts to promote free trade. Following the panel, the governors decamped for the capitol to formalize the sister-state relationship. At the signing ceremony, both highlighted the relationship’s potential effects on trade—Thompson declared it “another important step to enhance [Wisconsin’s] competitiveness in the global economy”—and also gestured to the development of other collaborations, such as a UW–Madison research project and a collaborative school for teachers there.


Over time, the ongoing transformation in U.S.–Mexico trade relations dictated the economic focus of the sister-state relationship. By the time Thompson returned

to Mexico in late 1992, President George H. W. Bush was poised to sign NAFTA. The free trade agreement would go into effect on January 1, 1994, further dismantling tariffs and other barriers to trade between Mexico and the United States. Until that point, exporting American agricultural products to Mexico entailed substantial cost barriers, so interest in trade missions to Mexico spiked in anticipation of the dismantling of such barriers.

Against this backdrop, trade took center stage in the sister-state relationship, with subsequent governors highlighting Mexico's importance as a top destination for Wisconsin's agricultural products generally and dairy products specifically. For example, Governor Scott Walker attended the International Conference on Dairy Cattle trade show in Guadalajara, the capital of Jalisco, in 2016. In addition to showcasing the state's dairy products at a formal cheese reception, Walker's delegation emphasized Wisconsin's exports in technology and expertise. These assets could enrich dairying in Jalisco, which faced challenges due to limited water supplies and reliance on hand milking rather than automated milking systems.

Walker's presence exemplified the long arc of sister-state relationships in Wisconsin. As initially proposed in the 1960s, these relationships embodied the hope that economic development would steer certain populations away from Communism. With the end of the Cold War, the threat of Communism had dissipated. However, Wisconsin governors held fast to the notion that cooperation across borders could, as John F. Kennedy put it, "make the benefits of increasing abundance available to all."



AS CONCEIVED, Wisconsin's sister-state relationships were top-down affairs. Governors, agency secretaries, state legislators, and high-level federal officials collaborated to pursue formal connections that would enrich the state and the country. But in practice, ordinary people were the lifeblood of these relationships. Volunteers from Wisconsin sustained relief efforts in Nicaragua during years of political turbulence; a German journalist made it his mission to expose other Germans to the natural beauty of the Midwest; and a high school language teacher devoted his career to expanding the cultural connections between Japan and his adopted state. All of these individuals believed that Wisconsin and its people offered something uniquely positive. Their efforts cultivated a special affection between Wisconsinites and the world at large. 

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