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Michael Dowling was a pioneer in disability rights in Minnesota

by [Luther Granquist](#) // February 10th, 2010

The 1880 census report for Wergeland Township in Yellow Medicine County gave 14-year-old Mike Dowling's occupation as "herding cattle." Although he was listed with the Isaac Anderson family who farmed just northeast of the town of Porter, Dowling worked for himself, as he had done since his mother died when he was 10. At that time, Dowling moved with his father from Massachusetts to St. Louis and Chicago. Then on his own he went to work as a cook in a lumber camp in Wisconsin, on steamboats between St. Paul and St. Louis, as a water carrier on a farm in Cottage Grove and as a "kid cowboy" on a ranch in Wyoming.



Michael Dowling, shown lower left after his accident and above right with his prosthetic legs and arm.

During the summer of 1880 he collected a herd of more than 500 head of cattle from farmers in the Canbyarea by agreeing to care for them on theopen range and to deliver them back to their owners on Oct. 15 for \$1.50 a head. He did so successfully despite a sleet and ice storm that struck on Oct. 14 and killed cattle in other herds in the area.

Dowling was not so lucky on Dec. 4, 1880. He hitched a ride with two farmers on the back of a lumber wagon to go from Canby to the farm where he kept his pony. They encountered a sudden blizzard, and the horses veered into a plowed field. Dowling was thrown from the wagon, which continued on in the howling storm. After the blizzard cleared the next morning, Dowling struggled to a farm house on frozen legs and with frozen arms. Sixteen days later three doctors amputated both of his legs and one arm. Three years later he convinced the Yellow Medicine County commissioners that they should provide him two terms at Carlton College rather than pay a local farmer \$2 per week to take care of him. The youthful cook, cowboy, and cattle herder became a school teacher, a school superintendent, a member of the Minnesota Legislature, a newspaper publisher and the president of a bank. In 1921 he spearheaded a successful effort by Rotarians to add "crippled children" to the law providing state aid for school districts which chose to serve children with disabilities. Dowling School in Minneapolis was named for him.