

'GARDEN OF CRANKS': OKLAHOMA'S COLORFUL CHARACTERS

State's early leaders an odd and interesting lot

By RANDY KREHBIEL

World Staff Writer

The first quarter-century of Oklahoma politics begins and ends, quite literally, with William Henry Murray.

"Alfalfa Bill," as he came to be known, presided over the 1906 state constitutional convention that then-Vice President William Howard Taft called "a zoological garden of cranks." Murray, as the chief "crank," was principal author of the ponderous 100,000-word document the convention produced and first speaker of the state House of Representatives.

Twenty-five years later, Murray was in the middle of his uproarious single term as governor and mounting a Quixotic campaign for the presidency.

But Murray was not the only local color in the politics of the era.

During these years, Oklahoma sent to Congress a man who thought he was Jesus Christ and elected a governor whose advisers included a psychic and some canaries. It set a record for impeachments and led the nation in Socialists and blind U.S. senators.

The National Guard was called out to keep the Legislature from meeting. The state's chief justice ordered a Tulsa oilman to jail for questioning the court's honesty.

A woman who did not believe women should vote won a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Murray towered above them all, in influence and eccentricity. Foul-tempered, willful and uncouth, Murray nevertheless struck a populist chord with rural Oklahomans distrustful of high-falutin politicians and big business.

Through Oklahoma's constitution, Murray limited the power of the administrative branch and tried to shackle railroads and other moneyed interests through an elected corporation commission. He championed the "long ballot," which subjected every state office from governor to assistant mine inspector to a vote of the people.

He also managed to get two counties named for himself: Murray and Alfalfa.

A virulent racist, Murray's reign as speaker featured the passage of stringent "Jim Crow" segregation laws.



Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society

Gov. "Alfalfa Bill" Murray (center) called out the Oklahoma National Guard to prevent Texas from opening a toll bridge across the Red River.

But some of the ideas he and his colleagues approved in that first Legislature were quite progressive. These included a state bank deposit insurance fund — later repealed — decades before similar federal guarantees, a graduated income tax and the nation's first system of publicly financed employment offices.

Other Murray proposals, including a law requiring top bed sheets in hotels to be no less than 9½ feet long, met with considerably less enthusiasm.

Murray later served in the U.S. House of Representatives, twice ran unsuccessfully for governor and led a failed agricultural commune in Bolivia. He returned to Oklahoma broke and discredited, but launched a "cheese-and-crackers" campaign for governor that won over rural and working-class voters.

As governor, he feuded with the state's oilmen and, most famously, called out the National

Guard to prevent Texas from opening a toll bridge across the Red River. He launched a presidential campaign in 1932 and allowed indigent people to plant potatoes on the lawn of the governor's mansion.

His answer to overcrowded prisons was to issue pardons to convicts who promised to leave the state.

For all his rustic peculiarities and outright unpleasantness, Murray developed some sound and even revolutionary ideas, particularly in the areas of tax reform and oil and gas regulation.

Revolutionary might not be the right word for U.S. Rep. Manuel Herrick's plan to find a suitable mate by conducting a beauty contest.

Herrick was elected to Congress in 1920 when the incumbent dropped dead on the last day of the filing period. A perennial candidate, Herrick was the only other Republican to file in

the GOP-dominated 8th District.

Raised by a religious fanatic mother to believe he was Jesus Christ, the mentally impaired Herrick served one mortifying term and spent most of the rest of his life institutionalized.

Other colorful office-holders of the era included sharp-tongued Alice Robertson, elected to Congress in 1920; Thomas P. Gore, the nation's first blind U.S. senator and grandfather of writer Gore Vidal; Gov. Jack Walton, who tried — unsuccessfully — to avoid impeachment by ordering the National Guard to keep the Legislature from meeting; and Gov. Henry S. Johnston, whose reliance on mysticism contributed to his removal from office in 1928.

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DIVIDING LINES: WHITE VS. BLACK, INDIAN, MEXICAN

Discrimination ran rampant through the Sooner State

By RANDY KREHBIEL

World Staff Writer

Few issues were more divisive than race in Oklahoma's early years.

Oklahoma began, in fact, as a place where Indians could live separately from whites. Later, its all-black towns offered refuge from post-Reconstruction discrimination.

The first bill enacted by the new state government created some of the nation's most stringent segregation laws.

By 1910, Oklahoma had in place voting restrictions that disenfranchised tens of thousands of black voters.

That year, Oklahomans approved a voter literacy test measure that exempted virtually all whites through a "grandfather clause" that waived the tests for all those eligible to vote before 1866 and their descendants. The constitutional amendment passed with the help of an unusual provision that counted blank ballots as "yes" votes.

The measure stemmed from the election of a black man, A.C. Hamlin of Guthrie, to the Legislature in 1908, and of three Republican congressmen from districts with large black populations. Blacks tended to vote Republican in those days.

The grandfather clause was soon overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court, but whites in general and the Democratic Party in particular continued efforts to limit black votes. In 1922, a band of masked men kidnapped black Tulsa law officer John Smitherman and cut off his ear because



Beryl Ford Collection

Ku Klux Klan members parade through downtown Tulsa on April 1, 1922.

he had been urging blacks to register to vote in an upcoming Democratic primary.

Smitherman had also been a central figure in Tulsa's 1921 race riot. Among the bloodiest and most destructive of the many racial disturbances of that era, the Tulsa riot erupted around dusk on the night of May 31 and continued until noon the next day.

Smitherman, a deputy sheriff at the time, was jailed for more than a month after the riot. According to courtroom testimony, Smitherman had encouraged armed black men to go to the Tulsa County Courthouse to protect a prisoner Smitherman believed was in danger of being lynched.

A grand jury blamed lax en-

forcement of segregation for the riot. More than 80 people were indicted, but few were taken into custody and fewer still seem to have been prosecuted.

A few months later the Ku Klux Klan made its first public appearance in Tulsa. Within a year it controlled city and county government and had undertaken a vigilante crusade that caused Gov. Jack Walton to declare martial law in Tulsa in the late summer of 1923.

Local Klan violence was visited more on "undesirables" — immigrants, suspected drug dealers, adulterers and petty criminals — than blacks and other racial minorities. But, on the same day martial law was declared in Tulsa, five whites were charged with beating up Mexican smelter

workers at Collinsville.

"The trouble," the World reported, "has been brewing for some weeks because the foreman at the smelter is charged with favoring foreign laborers and keeping them at work while dozens of white laborers ... are idle."

Hispanics had made up a small but visible part of Tulsa since its earliest days, often working in the coal mines in the vicinity of what is now Expo Square and the Dawson neighborhood.

Indians, of course, were a much larger minority. Despite their numbers, they often were virtually ignored. Many were cheated out of their land, and those who persisted in traditional ways were treated with disdain.

In the early 1920s, though, two Creek women — Mary Partridge and Rachel Perryman — stunned white Tulsans by suing for the return of their allotments, which they said had been taken from them illegally shortly after statehood. Both allotments had been turned into early Tulsa housing developments.

Surprise turned into near-panic when a local district court ruled in Partridge's favor. The decision was eventually overturned, but the case highlighted the tactics used in obtaining allotments.

A decade later, in 1934, Congress passed the Indian Reorganization Act, which created trusts to protect the remaining Indian land and led to the re-establishment of tribal governments.

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Early statehood quiz

By WAYNE GREENE

World City Editor

Test your knowledge of the first 25 years of Oklahoma history:

1. Who was Oklahoma's first governor after statehood?

- A) William Murray
B) Charles Haskell
C) George Washington Steele
D) Henry Bellmon

2. What is a "wildcatter"?

3. Which was a factor in the impeachment of Gov. Henry Johnston?

- A) Johnston's support of Democratic presidential candidate Al Smith
B) Johnston's peculiar private secretary and her use of mystics
C) Johnston's competence
D) All of the above

4. What nearby oil field turned Tulsa into the Oil Capital of the World?

5. Put these four cities in order from largest population to smallest in 1930: Tulsa, Oklahoma City, Broken Arrow, Muskogee.

6. Who made famous the saying, "I never met a man I didn't like"?

7. When Jim Thorpe won the 1912 Olympic decathlon and pentathlon, Swedish King Gustav V told him: "Sir, you are the greatest athlete in the world." What is Thorpe's reputed response?

- A) "Thanks, King."
B) "And you are the greatest king."
C) "Thank you, your highness."
D) "OK."

8. What do Oklahoma Govs. Henry Johnston and Jack Walton have in common with former Presidents Bill Clinton and Andrew Johnson?

9. What was Oklahoma's first radio station?

- A) KVOO in Tulsa
B) KBIX in Muskogee
C) KNID in Enid
D) WKY in Oklahoma City

10. V.L. Parrington was a radical historian who won a Pulitzer Prize in 1928. What else is he known for?

11. As governor, William "Alfalfa Bill" Murray called out the National Guard 27 times and declared martial law 34 times. Which of the follow was NOT a reason for Murray to declare martial law?

- A) To protect Oklahoma's property rights to the Red River when a toll bridge was built there
B) To enforce oilfield production limitation
C) To prevent a horse race scheduled to take place in Tulsa
D) All were reasons Murray declared martial law

12. When was Prohibition repealed in Oklahoma?

13. Who was Oklahoma's first female member of Congress?

14. Whose arrest set in motions the events that led to the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot?

15. Who is the Sequoyah County town of Gore named after?

- A) U.S. Sen. Thomas Gore
B) U.S. Sen. Albert Gore Sr.
C) U.S. Sen. Al Gore
D) Gore Vidal

16. In 1931, Oklahoma playwright Lynn Riggs wrote "Green Grow the Lilacs." How did the play become better known?

17. Which landmark doesn't trace its history back to Waite Phillips?

- A) Woolaroc
B) Philbrook
C) Philtower
D) Southern Hills Country Club

18. Manuel Herrick served as a member of the U.S. House of Representatives from 1921 to 1923, but he thought he was a little more exalted than a mere Congressman. How so?

19. Who were the Wobblies?

20. On Sept. 16, 2006, Luciano Pavarotti sang one of his last concerts before retirement in Tulsa. Another great tenor, also thought to be the greatest of his time, sang one of his final concerts at Tulsa's Municipal Theater (now the Brady Theater) on Oct. 17, 1920. Who?

Answers

1. B) Charles Haskell
2. A wildcatter is an independent oilman who drills in an undeveloped area in hopes of being the first to find oil.
3. D
4. The Glenn Pool
5. Oklahoma City (185,389), Tulsa (141,258), Muskogee (32,026), Broken Arrow (1,964)

6. Will Rogers
7. A) "Thanks, King."
8. They were all impeached. Walton and Johnston were convicted and removed from office. Clinton and Johnson were not.
9. D) WKY
10. He was the second football coach of the University of Oklahoma. The north half of the school's main campus in Norman is named in his honor.

11. C) It was Gov. Lee Cruce who called out National Guard troops to stop the Tulsa horse race. Horse race organizers defied the governor and had the race anyway. Guardsmen opened fire on the horses, but no horses or jockeys were injured. Strikeout won the race by three lengths.
12. 1959
13. Alice Robertson, she served 1921-23.
14. Dick Rowland
15. A) He was one of Oklahoma's first two senators. The two Al Gores of Tennessee are distant relatives, as is author Gore Vidal.

16. It was the basis for the musical "Oklahoma!"
17. A) Woolaroc was once the hunting lodge of Phillips' brother, Frank.
18. Herrick, who was elected in a fluke, was delusional and believed that he was the reincarnation of Jesus.
19. The members of the International Workers of the World, a socialist union, were called "wobblies." In 1917 16 suspected wobblies were arrested in Tulsa. An armed and hooded vigilante mob kidnapped the men from police and took them to a secluded area, where the wobblies were beaten, whipped, tarred and feathered.
20. Enrico Caruso. He not only sang his concert, but added seven encores for the appreciative crowd. Less than two months later Caruso fell ill and died a few months later.

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Oklahoma Centennial special sections

During the year leading up to Oklahoma's 100th birthday, the Tulsa World is publishing five special sections:

- Territory Days (pre-statehood) Nov. 5, 2006
Red Dirt and Black Gold (1907-32) Jan. 28, 2007
Depression, Dust and War (1933-57) March 25, 2007
Bust and Boom (1958-82) July 15, 2007
Sin and Sacrifice (1983-07) Nov. 11, 2007

Online

Read the 1907 edition of the Tulsa World that celebrated statehood and all of the centennial features appearing in the paper.
www.tulsaworld.com/centennial.asp

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