

Prohibition, Protests, and Politics

THE EDMONDSON ADMINISTRATION. Tulsa attorney J. Howard Edmondson was inaugurated as governor in January, 1959. At 33, he was the state's youngest governor in history. Edmondson's "prairie fire" and "Big Red E" campaigns (both named for his red hair) brought him from behind to defeat Midwest City builder W.P. "Bill" Atkinson in the Democratic primary. He then defeated Phil Ferguson in the general election by the largest majority ever given a gubernatorial candidate in the state.

Also in 1959, the youthful governor was named an honorary member of the Oklahoma Hall of Fame. He was honored as one of the nation's "Ten Most Outstanding Young Men."

Born in Muskogee in September, 1925, Edmondson obtained a law degree from the University of Oklahoma. He served a stint in the Air Force and was a Tulsa County Attorney before becoming governor.

One of Edmondson's promises was that he would either *enforce* or repeal prohibition, and he did both. He promised upon taking office that "every Oklahoman who votes *dry* will drink *dry*." He turned Attorney General Joe Cannon loose to *enforce* prohibition. Raids were made all across the state on bars and nightclubs which were illegally serving liquor. The state's bootleggers became fair game for law *enforcement* officials who had previously overlooked their violations of the law.

Perhaps for the first time since statehood, Oklahoma citizens knew what it meant to be "*dry*." People who were *accustomed* to having access to liquor despite prohibition and who consequently had never seriously considered the matter, found that true prohibition was more than a little *inconvenient*. Many former "dries" began to regard the actual *enforcement* of prohibition as too expensive. With prohibition *enforcement* in the daily news, on television and radio, and constantly on the front pages



Governor J. Howard Edmondson

of the newspapers, it appeared that most of the state's sheriffs and police departments were engaged in full-time "bar busting." Who was going after the "real" criminals? Many people who had favored prohibition to protect the state's young people were persuaded that *regulations* were better than prohibition. Under normal circumstances, prohibition could not be *enforced* adequately, and any teenager with the right information and enough money could buy liquor. With repeal of prohibition, it was reasonable to assume that the bootleggers would be out of business, and state *regulation* of bars and nightclubs would keep most young people away from "demon rum."

State leaders prepared a *referendum* proposal for repealing prohibition. It *established* an Alcoholic Beverage Control Board, which would be responsible for licensing liquor stores. On April 7, 1959, the question was given to the people in the form of an election. A large *dry* group still existed, but not large enough. The question carried 386,845 votes to 314,830 votes, and the 27th Amendment was added to the Oklahoma Constitution. The legislature passed the Liquor Control Act, and the first package (liquor) stores opened on September 1, 1959.

Edmondson's other accomplishments included establishing a Central Purchasing System for state agencies and a State Merit System whereby state employees could be hired and promoted according to their abilities as determined by tests. A state tax withholding system was also *established*, making it easier for the government to collect income taxes.

In 1960, the voters approved Question 391, establishing the Oklahoma Industrial Finance Authority. It was authorized to issue up to \$10 million in bonds for loans to local agencies for industrial development. Also approved was a \$35 million bond issue for state buildings.

The "winds of politics" changed directions midway through Governor Edmondson's term. Opposition to his programs began to increase both inside and outside the legislature. Because of the population shift from rural to urban areas, the governor asked for *reapportionment*, which would realign congressional districts to give urban areas a greater voice in the government. He asked for a constitutional highway commission — that is, a highway commission *established* by the State Constitution — which would administer highway funds and other matters usually handled by the county commissioners. The legislature balked at these proposals, so the governor once again took the question to the people. The voters turned down the proposals.

A *stalemate* (stand off) was reached between the governor and the

legislature, and the governor became less active. Changes were made by legislators that weakened the State Merit System and Central Purchasing System, but the programs survived. A federal court ordered *reapportionment* of the state.

When Senator Robert S. Kerr died in 1963, the Oklahoma governor had the power to appoint someone to finish the senator's term. J. Howard Edmondson resigned from the governor's office. Lt. Governor George Nigh, a bachelor who was serving his first term as lieutenant governor, succeeded to the governor's chair. As governor, Nigh appointed Edmondson to fulfill the senator's term of office.

Edmondson served approximately two years as a United States senator. When he ran for the office in 1964, he was defeated. He returned home to practice law and died of a heart attack on November 17, 1971.

ELECTION BATTLE. Political passions ran high in Oklahoma in the 1960s. At one point, a near-riot occurred in a *confrontation* between campaigning Democrats and Republicans. On November 5, 1962, Republicans marched through downtown Oklahoma City in a pre-election, torchlight parade. When they encountered a group of Democrats, both sides jeered at each other and then a push-and-shove melee ensued. The police reported 200 people involved.

A Democratic spokesman said, "The Republicans just got a little passionate," but he claimed the Republican torches were more like clubs. A Republican spokesman claimed that the Democrats' conduct was "close to being an un-American activity."

Three non-human participants which arrived in a van too late for the parade were unloaded in front of Democratic headquarters, which angered the Democrats and helped stir the battle. Police "arrested" the three elephants and held them in a local garage until they could be reclaimed by Clyde Brothers Circus.

LARGEST CITY. On October 31, 1961, Oklahoma City became the largest city in the United States. On that date, the City Council annexed 42.7 square miles of land, making Oklahoma City the city with the larg-



*Governor Henry
Bellmon*

est land area — 475.5 square miles. The second largest city, Los Angeles, California, was 457.9 square miles. Now Oklahoma City has 608.2 square miles, but it is no longer the largest city.

STATE'S FIRST REPUBLICAN GOVERNOR. Henry Bellmon accomplished what many people thought impossible in Oklahoma in 1962. He became the first Republican ever to be elected governor.

Born September 28, 1921, in Tonkawa, he grew up in the Billings area,

where he became a wheat farmer. Graduating from Oklahoma A&M College in Stillwater in 1942 with a degree in agronomy, Bellmon served in the Marines during World War II. Awarded the Legion of Merit and the Silver Star, Bellmon was Oklahoma's most-decorated governor.

During his campaign, Bellmon told a story about a farmer with a cow for sale. "The first man who looked at the cow wanted to know about her pedigree," he said. "The next fellow inquired about the butterfat content of her milk, and another one asked about her annual milk production. 'All I can tell you,' said the farmer, 'Is that she's an honest, hard-working old cow, and she'll give you all the milk she's got.'" Bellmon promised to be like the cow — honest and hard-working.

He had served one term in the state legislature after the war but had no other experience as an elected office holder. He had served as a precinct committeeman, Noble County Chairman, and State Chairman of the Republican Party.

The Democratic primary had boasted several candidates, including former Governor Raymond Gary. Gary was defeated by W.P. "Bill" Atkinson, who became the Democratic candidate and who advocated a one-cent increase in sales tax. Bellmon preached no new taxes. Bellmon was elected.

On January 14, 1963, when Bellmon was inaugurated, he was younger than all but one previous Oklahoma governor, J. Howard Edmondson. Despite the new state liquor laws, Bellmon announced that he had served no liquor in his home and none would be served in the governor's mansion — nor at the Inaugural Ball. He also affirmed that he would wear no



Governor George Nigh

“cockeyed tux” to the ball.

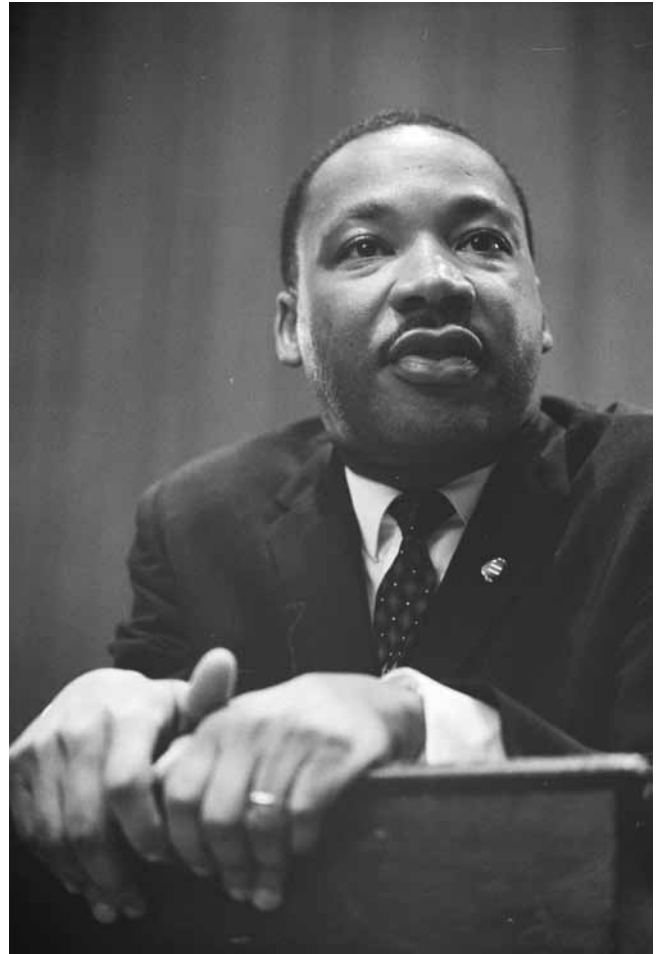
Bellmon proved to be a hard-working governor. Even though he served with a Democratic legislature, more bills were passed during his administration than during any of the three previous administrations. Despite pressure from many places, Bellmon kept his word about no general tax increases.

A public housing bill was passed, and the cigarette tax was increased as a fund-raiser for education. After the legislature refused to grant the \$1,000 wage increase for Oklahoma teachers *demand*ed by the Oklahoma Education Association (OEA), the OEA called for an investigation of Oklahoma schools by the National Education Association (NEA). After studying conditions in the state, the NEA placed Oklahoma on a national blacklist and imposed professional sanctions, claiming that working conditions were “sub-minimal.” The report pointed out that Oklahoma was 40th among the states in *expenditures* per child and 37th in salaries for teachers.

The legal field saw many changes as a result of the work of the 30th legislature. A new district attorney system replaced the old county attorney system. The state was divided into 27 districts, each of which had a district attorney. Under the old system, each of the 77 counties had a county attorney.

The State Supreme Court was well-shaken when Vice-Chief Justice Nelson Corn was convicted in federal court of income tax evasion. While in prison, Corn gave evidence indicating that other justices were guilty of accepting bribes. Justice Earl Welch resigned from office just days before impeachment proceedings were to begin. He was later convicted in federal court. Justice N.B. Johnson was impeached, convicted, and removed from office.

Legislative *reapportionment* (the division of congressional districts) was an inherited problem for Bellmon. He and the legislature tried to work out a solution. They passed a law in 1963, but a three-judge panel ruled that the plan was unfair. The judges then reapportioned the state, and elections were held for legislators under the new plan in September, 1964.



Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

After leaving office in 1967 and spending a short time at his farm, Bellmon became the second governor elected to the U.S. Senate. He defeated long-standing incumbent Mike Monroney. He left the Senate in 1982, returning to the farm. Public service called him away later the same year. Governor George Nigh asked him to serve as acting director of the Department of Human Services (DHS) upon the retirement of Director Lloyd E. Rader. Because of problems within the system, Bellmon resigned from that position within a few months. Later he served as *interim* director of the Cowboy Hall of Fame and Western Heritage Center in Oklahoma City.



Mike Monroney

DESEGREGATION. The most controversial issue of the day during Bellmon's administration was civil rights. John F. Kennedy, who had been elected President of the United States during Edmondson's term of office and who had a hand in the appointment of Edmondson to the Senate, fostered a bill granting equality of citizenship and rights to African-Americans. Kennedy was assassinated in November, 1963, but Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 shortly after his death.

A young African-American minister named Martin Luther King, Jr., was urging his people to nonviolent protest as a means of claiming their rights. King led groups of protestors who might visibly ride in the front of a bus or "sit in" at a lunch counter where African-Americans were not allowed. Some whites who had enjoyed the luxury of an advantageous position in life were not about to give it up. Some African-Americans who had been forced to live at a disadvantage were not willing to do so any longer.

The protest movement in Oklahoma City became active on August 19, 1958, when a group of teenagers led by their advisor, Mrs. Clara Luper, staged a sit-in at the lunch counter of the downtown Katz Drug Store. For 18 months prior to that date, the young people involved had studied nonviolent protest. They were determined to handle the matter non-violently. Within two days, Katz opened the lunch counters in its outlets in three states to people of all races, colors, and creeds.

Other obstacles weren't so easy to overcome. Many who participated in the sit-in demonstrations received threatening letters and telephone calls. At one point, a man was arrested who had threatened to bomb Luper's house. And always there were the hostile whites who spat on the demonstrators, tried to start fights with them, poured coffee on them, and generally harassed them.

The group of demonstrators grew, and many whites joined. In May, 1961, a prominent visitor came to the state to help demonstrate. Movie actor Charlton Heston wore a sandwich sign which said, “ ‘All Men Are Created Equal’ — Jefferson.” The last downtown area restaurant to give in was Bishop’s Restaurant. After a long siege of sit-ins, the management finally agreed on June 4, 1963, to *negotiate* for integration.

GOVERNOR DEWEY BARTLETT. Dewey Bartlett became the second Republican governor of Oklahoma in 1967. Born in Marietta, Ohio, in March, 1919, Bartlett received a degree in geological engineering from Princeton University. He served as a Marine combat dive bomber during World War II and received the Air Medal.

The legislature’s response to the State Supreme Court scandal during Bellmon’s administration was a court reform proposal. Soon after Bartlett took office in January, 1967, the proposal was submitted to the people for a decision. On July 11, 1967, the measure passed, eliminating the justice-of-the-peace system in Oklahoma and providing for nonpartisan election of members of the judiciary.

Bartlett’s administration was one of investigation. Several officials were investigated on charges of conflict of interest, including State Corporation Commissioners.

Bartlett vetoed bills for increased salaries for state officials and for a statewide kindergarten system, although the OEA had specifically *demand*ed the kindergarten system. They also asked for increased funds for a special education program, for improved school library facilities, and for smaller teacher-student ratios. Professional sanctions were again voted against Oklahoma schools by the Oklahoma Education Association because of what was, in their opinion, a disinterested legislature. Bartlett and several legislative leaders were later able to see a program passed for improvement of the schools, including a \$1,300 annual salary increase for teachers.

Many campus protests were occurring around the nation because of the American involvement in Vietnam. Fearing such disorder on Oklahoma campuses, the state legislature and the governor passed a “speaker



*Governor Dewey
Bartlett*

ban” statute. It was designed to keep “outside agitators” off Oklahoma campuses. In 1969, the statute was questioned in court, and in 1970, Attorney General G.T. Blankenship declared it unconstitutional because it attempted to limit free speech. Elected in 1966, Blankenship was the state’s first Republican attorney general.



Carl Albert

MR. SPEAKER. On the national scene, U.S. Representative Carl Albert from Bugtussle, Oklahoma, achieved the highest office ever attained by an Oklahoman. Albert became Speaker of the United States House of Representatives.

Born May 10, 1908, Albert experienced success early, going to Oxford, England, as a Rhodes Scholar after graduation from the University of Oklahoma in 1931. He earned his LL.D. in 1934 and was admitted to the Bar in 1935. He was awarded the Bronze Star in World War II.

First elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1946, he was Democratic Whip 1955-1962 and Majority Leader 1962-1971. He became Speaker of the House in 1971. A short time later, Vice-President Spiro Agnew was forced to resign and President Richard Nixon appointed Gerald R. Ford to complete Agnew’s term. Until Ford was approved by the Senate, Albert was next in line for the presidency. He retired from Congress in 1972.

A man of small stature, Albert wielded great power. He was known affectionately as “the Little Giant from Little Dixie.” He retired to his home area of McAlester, where he was regarded as an elder statesman. He continued to be influential in Oklahoma political circles until his death February 5, 2000.

RUNNING FOR A SECOND TERM. The voters approved a constitutional amendment allowing Oklahoma governors to succeed themselves in office, and Bartlett became the first to try. He was defeated by a mere 2,190 votes. A recount confirmed that David Hall was the winner of the election.

Bartlett went on to win a seat in the U.S. Senate, where he served alongside Henry Bellmon, his Republican gubernatorial predecessor. He

resigned from the Senate because of health problems and died of cancer on March 1, 1979.

MIKE MONRONEY. When Henry Bellmon was elected to the U.S. Senate, he defeated Mike Monroney, a long-time senator from Oklahoma's 5th District. Born in Oklahoma City on March 2, 1902, Almer Stilwell "Mike" Monroney graduated from the University of Oklahoma in 1932 and married Mary Ellen Mellon on July 3 of the same year. Elected to the Senate in 1950, he served from 1951 through 1968. Prior to that time, he served in the U.S. House of Representatives. He received *Collier's* Award for Distinguished Congressional Service in 1945.



Monroney had a great personal interest in aviation and was responsible for legislation to protect and further the industry. He received the Wright Brothers Trophy in 1961. The Mike Monroney Aeronautical Center of the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) in Oklahoma City is named in his honor.

Civil rights leaders, including Martin Luther King, Jr. and Dr. Benjamin Spock, are surrounded by crowds carrying signs in 1963.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What were the major accomplishments of J. Howard Edmondson's term as governor?
2. Describe the working relationships between Oklahoma's Republican governors and their Democratic legislatures and tell what the accomplishments were of each administration.
3. How was Oklahoma significant in the Civil Rights movement?
4. Considering Oklahoma's Democratic background, explain the changes leading to the election of two Republican governors in the 1970s.
5. Explain why Carl Albert was close to the Presidency of the United States.