

CLASS, RACE, AND JACK WALTON'S MAYORALTY OF OKLAHOMA CITY



*By Quincy R. Lehr**

This essay, unusual for a study of Oklahoman politics in the World War I and interwar eras, looks at Oklahoma City, where the American Indian population was politically and demographically insignificant, where Populism had not been particularly strong (its stronghold had been in the north of the state and not in the urban areas), and where Socialism had only sporadic influence. But Oklahoma City politics, which generally remained firmly within the two-party system (and particularly the Democrats), saw the articulation of class grievances occur in a different way than in the countryside.¹

The Democratic mayor of Oklahoma City from 1919 to early 1923, John Calloway “Jack” Walton, was perhaps the most significant figure in Oklahoma politics in the early 1920s. A handsome man with blond

hair and a fiery rhetorical style, Walton had charisma. Walton is best remembered now for his fight with the Ku Klux Klan that ended in his impeachment in 1923, but he won the governorship on the basis of the reputation of being a friend of labor earned as Oklahoma City's mayor.

Walton's rise was meteoric. He won a position on Oklahoma City's City Commission in 1917. In 1919 he became the mayor. Then in 1922 he was elected Oklahoma's governor. Walton is, unsurprisingly, remembered in the main for his months in the state capitol, but he made his reputation and developed his own particular style of leadership in Oklahoma City.²

Walton was not a radical, and one of his closest associates Ernest T. Bynum described him as not so much hostile to socialist ideas as uninterested in them. In other times Walton might have become a simple machine politician, and perhaps not an especially successful one, but in the turbulent post-World War I era a politician actively allied with the trade unions could take on a coloration far more radical than his actual political beliefs.³

Oklahoma City was the largest city in the state. As the state capital it was the hub of government and, along with Tulsa (the effective center of the state's oil industry), of Oklahoma's business. The city at the time covered eighteen square miles. There were forty-two schools for its children and sixty-seven churches for its faithful. In addition to the state government Oklahoma City was home to five major train lines, 390 manufacturing companies, as well as such service industries as telephone, telegraph, and insurance companies. Many sectors of the economy were organized, as shown by the thirty-five unions in the city as of May 1920.⁴

The city was small by the standards of many older cities, with a population of a bit less than one hundred thousand in 1920, but Oklahoma was a state of small towns in those days. City officials were confident that there was sufficient farmland within the city limits to produce fifteen hundred bushels of oats and between two thousand and three thousand bales of alfalfa in 1920. But Oklahoma City was growing.⁵

The population was native born and white in its great majority, with 86,493 born in the United States and 9,295 African Americans in 1920 out of a total population of 91,258. This caused Edward K. Gaylord's conservative *Daily Oklahoman* to boast that: "With a population composed almost entirely of native-born Americans, and predominantly white persons, it is not surprising that Oklahoma City is growing so steadily and is progressing in all the things that make life worth while." The editorial's casual racism points toward a key tenet of Oklahoman urban boosterism: Anglo-Saxon virtue—and lineage—were inextrica-

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

bly linked with success, stability, and indeed “all the things that make life worth while.”⁶

Walton entered politics in a city already torn by factions. The two regimes previous to Walton’s, those of Ed Overholser (from one of the state’s wealthiest families) and Byron Shear, were aligned with the city’s middle-class moral crusaders. Overholser, a Republican who had run on the slogan, “a businessman for a businessman’s job,” had gained the support of such forces as the Women’s Christian Temperance Union and the church-based Central Hundred in his successful bid for the mayoralty in 1915. He installed W. B. Nichols, the frequently overzealous “fighting deacon” of the First Baptist Church, as chief of police. Shear, Overholser’s successor, kept Nichols on the job.⁷

The Oklahoma City police force under Nichols was noted for periodic brutality and racism. Two early firings from the force after Walton assumed the mayoralty reveal how far the city’s police force was willing to go at times. W. T. Fields was sacked for breaking a prisoner’s jaw, while J. E. Cates lost his job not only for shooting and killing a black man in a gun fight but also for failing to report it.⁸

Poster promoting J. C. Walton for Oklahoma City mayor, 1919 (John Dunning Political Collection 2006.16, drawer 3, poster 10, OHS Research Division Collection).

ELECT THESE MEN

NOMINEES FOR BOARD OF EDUCATION

Edgar S. Crites W. E. Frightmaster
Mrs. W. P. Lindsay E. Edgar Haddock
Treasurer: CHARLES W. GUNYER

THEY ARE

CLEAN AND CAPABLE
STAND FOR GOOD GOVERNMENT
AND A
GREATER OKLAHOMA CITY

MIKE DONNELLY
Commissioner of Accounting and Finance

JOE H. PATTERSON
Commissioner of Public Property

ALL DEMOCRATS AND THE BEST QUALIFIED MEN FOR THESE POSITIONS

DEMOCRATS
ARE NOW
CONDUCTING
THE AFFAIRS
OF THE NATION
IN A
SUCCESSFUL
MANNER

J. C. WALTON
Commissioner of Public Affairs (MAYOR)

YOU CAN
DEPEND
UPON THESE
MEN TO
GIVE ALL
THE PEOPLE
A FAIR AND
SQUARE DEAL

DON'T BE PREJUDICED

INVESTIGATE CAREFULLY the QUALIFICATIONS and INTEGRITY
OF THESE NOMINEES. YOU CAN'T MAKE A MISTAKE---VOTE FOR
THE ENTIRE DEMOCRATIC TICKET
ELECTION TUESDAY, APRIL FIRST, 1919.



The Overholser Mansion located at the corner of Fifteenth Street and Hudson in Oklahoma City, built in 1903. This photo was taken before 1911. The Overholser Mansion was built by Henry Overholser, father of Mayor Ed Overholser (Georgia Ray Drury Collection, OHS Research Division).

Byron D. Shear home located at 231 Northwest Tenth Street, 1907 (W. A. Josly Collection, OHS Research Division Collection).



THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

Democrat John H. Wright, 1907 (Howard Tucker Collection, OHS Research Division).



In addition, the police force under Nichols was hostile to organized labor. A 1917 case in which the police arrested an American Federation of Labor organizer E. E. Ball led to the city's unions accusing Nichols of disregarding the law, of prejudice in the execution of his duties, of behaving oppressively, and of reacting dismissively to charges of numerous abuses in the Ball case. Despite the unions' demands for Nichols's dismissal, Mayor Overholser stood by Nichols, and in a subsequent session of the Oklahoma City City Commission, Nichols was exonerated. Only Jack Walton voted no. His ally on the city commission, Commissioner of Public Safety Mark Kesler (a former chief of the fire department), who also had ties to the trade union movement, was not present.⁹

Most histories of Oklahoma City have sided with Walton's predecessors, seeing the city government under Overholser and Shear as perhaps overzealous but essentially virtuous. But for many Oklahoma City residents it was a brutal *status quo ante*. Walton's predecessors' moral authoritarianism, explicit antilabor leanings, and egregious racism had alienated large swathes of the citizenry. The more brutal tendencies of the Overholser and Shear regimes account at least in part for the fervor or at least grudging respect many in the city felt for Walton.¹⁰

Walton's initial political support lay on the one hand with the leadership of the Oklahoma City labor movement and on the other with a coterie of longtime Oklahoma City political operators, notably Charles H. Ruth and E. J. Giddings. Both were lawyers and habitual politicians. Ruth had served on the city council, while Giddings, who headed



Photograph of C. H. Russell taken from a composite photograph of the Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce officers and directors, 1913 (Edgar S. Vaught Collection, OHS Research Division).

the Oklahoma City Democratic Party Central Committee, was a noted labor lawyer and demagogic public speaker. The middleclass “reformers” who had backed Overholser regarded the Waltonites as a corrupt machine. The Waltonites, for their part, presented their opponents as aristocratic enemies of the people, with Walton calling Overholser “King Ed.”¹¹

The mayoral race Walton entered in 1919 was crowded. The influential *Daily Oklahoman* saw two candidates in the Democratic primary, U.S. Army Major Herbert Peck and John Wright, as promising, especially Peck. At the same time many of the forces behind the Central Hundred coalesced into the Voters’ League, a thousand-strong nonpartisan organization seeking to elect “the best people” to public office in opposition to the Waltonites. Meanwhile, Walton worked the unions and apparently even sat by while a *Daily Oklahoman* reporter was ejected from a speech at a local Teamsters meeting. The Oklahoma City Trades and Labor Council quickly denounced the Voters’ League in resolutions, as did many of its individually affiliated unions. The rank and file of the Voters’ League, by contrast, was largely composed of teachers and patrons club members who considered themselves professionals.¹²

Peck, who made his bid for the mayoralty while on leave from the U.S. Army General Staff in Washington, D.C., was the Voters’ League’s very model of the modern major. A former assistant county attorney in Oklahoma County with a reputation for severity toward bootleggers and gamblers, Peck had joined the army at the outbreak of hostilities during World War I. Peck was a successful professional and public

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

servant, a good speaker, and an obvious patriot. He proclaimed that he was running for mayor to protect Oklahoma City from “the bootleggers, the gamblers, the procurers, the solicitors of vice, and the favor seeking contractors.” Peck’s insinuations that Walton had connections to the criminal underworld would cling to Walton throughout his political career.¹³

Nonetheless, the Walton forces were successfully able to portray their opponents as, in the words of E. J. Giddings, “the tentacles of wealth squeezing Oklahoma City Democracy to death.” Walton went on in a mass meeting to claim that the business class’s domination of the city government had kept him “tied in a pocket.” The Waltonite counterattack worked, and he came out on top in the Democratic primary on March 18, beating Peck by 7,245 votes to 3,800.¹⁴

The anti-Walton *Daily Oklahoman* promptly endorsed the Republican candidate. Proclaiming itself “disappointed, but not discouraged with the result of the democratic primary,” the newspaper declared the Republican candidate, C. H. Russell, to be “a clean, straightforward, public spirited citizen who has given a large measure of his time to the public and has never sought office before.”¹⁵

The general election had a similar lineup to the first—only with around five thousand Republican votes in the mix and uncertainty as to how many Democrats who voted for Peck in the primary would swing behind Walton in the general election. The rhetoric of the respective sides remained much the same—the Walton forces accusing Russell, the owner of a local vinegar factory, of being in the pocket of big business and a Puritan to boot. The *Daily Oklahoman*, which generally described Walton as “Mr. Russell’s opponent” by the eve of the election, fired off a remarkable salvo against Walton on March 26, 1919, entitled “The Moral Bolsheviks.” It stated: “They don’t want law—they want lawlessness. They don’t want order—they want disorder. They don’t want a joyous city—they want a licentious city.” The *Daily Oklahoman* concluded: “Such persons are moral bolsheviks. Their day is gone.” The Waltonites, though, hit back. In the run-up to the election, for example, they publicized claims by Roy Milam, a former Russell employee, that Russell’s factory had cut its apple cider vinegar with acetic acid. Milam later foreswore this, saying he had lied because “I’m a democrat clear through.”¹⁶

When it came on April 1, the vote in the mayoral election was close. Walton edged out Russell by 1,089 votes out of 18,671—a close race in a city that usually leaned strongly towards the Democrats. Walton’s archenemies at the *Daily Oklahoman* called a truce, though the newspaper retracted none of its attacks:

The Oklahoman [*sic*] was absolutely sincere in its opposition to Mr. Walton and its opposition was based solely on the public welfare and not on any personal grounds. It has no apologies whatever to offer as to its attitude, but it will give Mr. Walton every opportunity to disprove The Oklahoman's [*sic*] estimate of his fitness for the office.

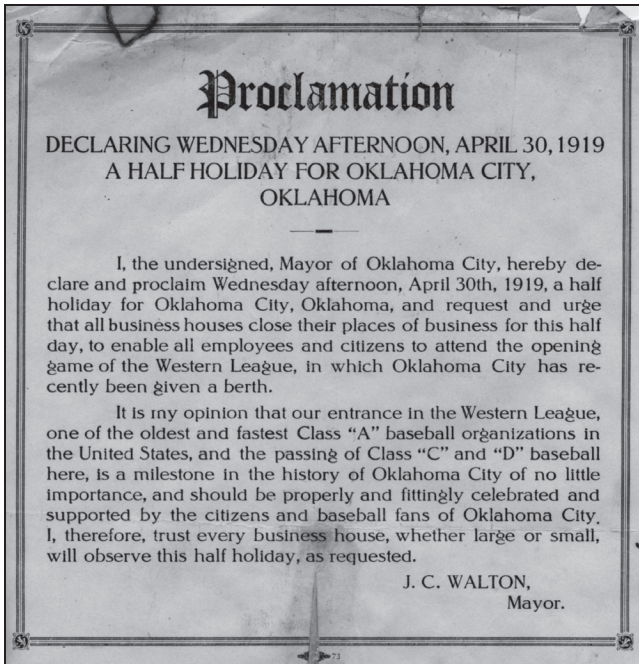
At the same time Roscoe Dunjee, editor of the *Black Dispatch*, was in jail, having been arrested on April 1 on charges of soliciting black votes within fifty feet of a polling place. Dunjee protested that he was only giving advice when asked, but Dunjee spent the night in jail, such being Oklahoma democracy in 1919.¹⁷

Upon assuming office Walton, who had a three-to-two majority on the city commission, took the initiative. The police department was first on his list. Nichols resigned from the police force to enter the oil business, and Walton began expanding the department in earnest. The department eventually had more than 150 policemen in 1921, and its annual budget more than tripled from its prewar figure to \$300,000. At times the additions were eccentric, such as the mounted unit Walton

Roscoe Dunjee, editor of the Black Dispatch, addressing a crowd on Northeast Second Street in Oklahoma City, 1942 (Barney Hillerman Collection, OHS Research Division).



THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA



A 1919 proclamation by Mayor Jack Walton urging citizens to support the Oklahoma City Western League baseball team (W. P. Campbell Collection 82.106, box 19, folder 71, OHS Research Division).

created in August 1919. Others, such as the traffic division created at roughly the same time, were more rational. The force also became more specialized, with a detective division, a bertillon department, and a motorcycle squad as well as the traffic and mounted units.¹⁸

Walton's tight control of the police department led to charges of corruption from political opponents, and the Gaylord papers noted juke joints and gambling houses that operated with impunity despite their illegality. There were even insinuations that Walton had some sort of deal with Orban Patterson's crime syndicate in which the city would crack down on Patterson's rivals while leaving Patterson himself alone. It would not have been particularly surprising. Prohibition, even spotily enforced, overworked the legal system, and an organized crime syndicate would at least be stable. Strict enforcement under Nichols had not stamped out the liquor trade, either. A tacit agreement with an underworld figure would not be farfetched under the circumstances—though there is no paper trail.¹⁹

JACK WALTON

The issuance of police “courtesy cards” to Walton supporters, though, was quite public. These exempted the mayor’s friends from arrest on misdemeanor charges and drew considerable criticism. When Walton lost control of the police department briefly after the 1921 city elections, some thirty-five hundred courtesy cards were revoked. The existence of the cards implied that at least some who were associated with the mayor’s regime were involved in activities of less than strict legality. For most, holding a courtesy card was probably more an acknowledgement of a privilege to drive fast, have an occasional belt of whiskey, and generally live a bit higher on the hog than those who did not enjoy similar favor from the mayor.²⁰

Despite the claims of his opponents to the contrary Walton frequently lined up firmly on the side of purity. A nondrinker himself, he ruthlessly brushed aside any idea of licensing vice, and soon after his election the Walton-controlled city commission passed an ordinance banning curtained booths in restaurants, hotels, and similar establishments. The police also rounded up “idlers” not suspected of any crime on at least one occasion. Meanwhile, liquor raids continued, as when

This building was home to the Oklahoma Leader, a newspaper focused on labor issues. The press was located at 17-23 Northwest Third Street in Oklahoma City (Barney Hillerman Collection, OHS Research Division).



THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

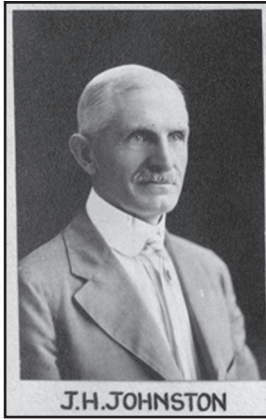
police seized \$2,500 worth of whiskey in a single swoop on May 12, 1919.²¹

Walton also used the police force to settle grudges, notably against the Gaylord newspapers. On June 25, 1919, reporters for the *Daily Oklahoman* and *Oklahoma City Times* found themselves excluded from the police headquarters on the explicit orders of the mayor. The mayor's action compromised the newspapers' ability to generate local copy, and they understandably complained. The courts quickly overturned the ban, but Walton would continue to react venomously to the *Daily Oklahoman* throughout his career.²²

Though the corruption of the Walton administration aroused the ire of his opponents, his attitude toward the labor movement infuriated them even more. Oklahoma City's business class got an early taste of Walton's commitment on that score during a telegraphers' strike in the summer of 1919, when the police, to the extent they intervened in the picket lines at all, did so against the strikebreakers. When an argument between F. S. Eddinger, a Western Union striker, and H. S. Cover, who had not walked out, escalated into fisticuffs, the police arrested Cover. A. L. James of Western Union lamented on June 15 that, "The Western Union offices have closed today because the police refuse to give the company protection against the strikers." The company eventually cracked down on the picketers by going over Walton's head and securing an antipicketing injunction from U.S. Attorney John Fain, as well as hiring discharged soldiers as guards to protect its nonstriking employees.²³

Walton clinched his reputation with the city's labor movement amid the hardfought meatpackers' strike during the winter of 1921-22. Unlike strikes of craft unions, this strike—which was part of a national work stoppage—involved an industrial union representing thousands of workers. Furthermore, the strike intersected with the question of the so-called open shop—a post-World War I drive against the union shop. In Oklahoma City, as in many other cities and towns in the state, the prime movers behind the open shop worked through the chamber of commerce. Walton neatly reversed the "outside agitator" charge and argued that it was the ideologically driven capitalist class that was causing all the trouble:

If the business men of Oklahoma City want to see the business prospects of this city wrecked by a certain class of anarchists they should continue to support the paid leaders of the open shop division, who have no other interest in the affairs of the city than the salary they are getting for stirring up the controversy between organized labor and the employers.



Photograph of J. H. Johnston taken from a composite board of photographs of the Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors from 1917-18 (Oklahoma Historical Society Photograph Collection, OHS Research Division).

Walton was anti-open shop, but hardly anticapitalist.²⁴

The strike occurred at the end of a heated battle in Oklahoma City politics. In 1921 there were elections for the Oklahoma City City Commission, as well as for other positions including Oklahoma County sheriff. Walton's allies mobilized for the elections, but so did his enemies. The *Daily Oklahoman*, of course, gave the election considerable coverage and backed the mayor's opponents, declaring the struggle in the city elections as a fight between Waltonism and "business administration." It also predicted that the open shop would be the largest issue in the campaign.²⁵

Walton's allies, Commissioner of Public Works Ollie Wilson and Commissioner of Public Safety Mark Kesler, managed to carry the Democratic primary on March 15, 1921, against anti-Walton opponents. The *Daily Oklahoman*, as in 1919, proceeded to back the Republican candidates, Warren E. Moore and Bob Parman, in the general election. The anti-Walton Democrats followed the *Daily Oklahoman's* example. J. H. Johnston, the Democrat whom Wilson had defeated in the primary for commissioner of public works, described Wilson as so "extravagant, inefficient and utterly incompetent" that a Republican would be preferable. The election ceased to be a matter of the usual parties fighting it out and became a referendum on Waltonism (whatever that was), and despite the heavy use of city employees in the campaign, especially the police force, the Walton forces lost. Walton went from having a three-to-two majority on the city commission to *being* the Walton faction on the city commission as Parman and Moore joined anti-Walton Democrats Joe Patterson and Mike Donnelly in a majority opposed to the mayor.²⁶

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

However, the *Oklahoma Leader*, a labor and Socialist daily newspaper backed by Oklahoma State Federation of Labor funds, abandoned the Socialist Party. By the time it swung behind Walton, the *Leader* was describing itself as “above all an independent, progressive labor paper” without any particular partisan affiliation but with a great deal of influence in the labor movement. This switch in allegiance, which was quite explicit by 1921, indicated a shift away from the Socialist Party not only by left-leaning voters but also by Dan Hogan and Oscar Ameringer, both of whom had been leaders in the region’s Socialist movement.²⁷

At any rate, political life became harder for Walton after the election. Most notably the commission stripped him of control of the police department and placed it under the control of Donnelly, who sought to reduce the size of the force to somewhere around one hundred men. The *Daily Oklahoman* thundered on May 5, 1921, that, “If the court should replace Mayor Walton in charge of the police department, recall petitions should be started immediately and a recall election held to select his successor.” Meanwhile, Walton’s enemies put forward a recall petition, charging that funds raised at a benefit for the police insurance fund had gone instead to the *Oklahoma Leader* and the campaigns of Walton allies. The case soon died for lack of evidence.²⁸

The police department soon showed signs of reverting to old patterns. On May 8, E. J. Giddings, the labor lawyer and Walton ally, filed a request for the removal of Donnelly’s chief of police, M. C. Binion, and several subordinates on behalf of C. W. Baumet. Giddings claimed that policemen tortured Baumet in order to extract a robbery confession. Though the police could be heavy-handed under Walton, the story had a gratuitous quality that evoked memories of the Nichols era, when strictness not infrequently bled over into wanton cruelty. Walton took the case to court, arguing that in stripping him of control of the police force, the commission was attempting to turn him into a figurehead. After Walton lost an initial case, the Oklahoma Supreme Court backed him on the appeal, with the majority arguing that the commission had violated the city charter. From then on the control of the police department was more important than ever for Walton, who could count on frequent opposition from the hostile commissioners.²⁹

The commission was more successful in dissolving the police union that had formed with Walton’s blessing. The union seems not to have been particularly active, but it had been part of the link between Walton and the city unions. The commissioners also succeeded in abolishing the mounted unit, which they described, probably accurately, as showy but not effective.³⁰

Thus, Walton was again in control of the police force when the meatpackers' strike began in late 1921. On September 15 the representatives of four of the five major national meatpackers put forward demands that included the evisceration of the union grievance system and the open shop in contract negotiations. The Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen Union called a strike vote, and the roughly one thousand members of the Amalgamated in Oklahoma City voted almost unanimously to strike. The state's labor movement geared up for the strike as well, seeing in it the potential of crippling the open shop movement.³¹

However, wages were dropping in Oklahoma, having gone down 4.8 percent between February 1920 and February 1921, and the open shop movement had already scored some victories. Industry in the state was 85 percent open shop by May. On the eve of the strike, an estimated two thousand men were out of work in Oklahoma City alone—and things were getting worse. This figure was probably low; an unemployed demonstration along Grand Avenue in January 1922 numbered some five thousand people at a time when the official estimate put three thousand out of work at the time. Economic conditions meant a large number of potential strikebreakers. In addition, the weather was cold, and the union's strike funds were scanty. However, the union had to fight, especially after Morris Company joined the other major packing companies, and its Oklahoma City manager announced a wage reduction and a 25 percent cut in pay for piece work. A rank-and-file union member summarized what must have been the feelings of many of his fellows: "Well, I'm not making enough now to live on, and if I have to starve, I'd rather do it resting [that is, on strike]."³²

Frequent scuffles between strikers and the strikebreakers marked the strike. Almost immediately after the strike began, fights ended with two strikebreakers requiring hospitalization. Strikebreakers' relatives were also attacked. A. J. Scruggs, the father of a strikebreaker at the Wilson plant, received a painful thrashing when assailants alleged to be strikers dragged him from a streetcar. Indeed, union members rode streetcars leading to the plants as a means of intercepting and "inducing" strikebreakers to refrain from crossing picket lines. Though the police and sheriff's departments were on the scene, they generally held themselves aloof from the scuffles, with Walton arguing that as the firms' facilities were located just outside city limits, the Oklahoma City Police Department had no jurisdiction. When the packers specifically requested protection, Walton refused, claiming budget constraints. Meanwhile, the sheriff's department, headed by anti-Walton Republican building contractor Ben Dancy, increased its presence at the site of

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

the pickets but did not have the numbers to seriously disrupt or crush the picket lines.³³

The Walton administration aligned itself with the union, even before the strike began. At a five-hundred-person-strong meeting of the butchers' union on December 2, labor lawyer Giddings spoke on behalf of Walton. In addition to repeating the by then almost ritual denunciation of the *Daily Oklahoman* and *Oklahoma City Times*, Giddings told the union that the mayor was with them "to the last ditch." E. T. Bynum noted near the outset of his reminiscences on Walton that the mayor not only politically declared himself to be on the side of the strikers, but he also emotionally sympathized with them.³⁴

The packers responded to the violence by getting strikebreakers to the plants in armored cars and even allowing those working behind the picket lines to live in the facilities. These measures did not render the strikebreakers immune to the continued anger of the strikers. On December 27 picketers launched an attack with bricks and stones against the armored cars. One of the drivers claimed that the police had slowed him down and thus rendered his armored car more vulnerable to the strikers. After this incident Walton increased the number of police observing the situation from across the street from sixteen to seventy-five men, leaving a skeleton force of two men to patrol the city's central business district. Oklahoma County Sheriff Ben Dancy also increased his forces at the scene, while the Oklahoma County attorney filed ten charges of assault and battery against the picketers.³⁵

John Shirk of the Open Shop Division of the Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce fumed, "When a City cannot depend on its police force for protection, and riot conditions are allowed to exist everywhere, it is time for drastic action at the polls." Governor James B. A. Robertson had similar concerns and threatened to impose martial law on the capital city if conditions did not return to normal. Somewhat uncharacteristically, Robertson never followed through on this threat.³⁶

Sheer desperation provided much of the impetus for the bouts of violence on the picket lines. By late December the union was keeping men picketing by restricting access to its soup kitchens to picketers alone. Indeed, the *Daily Oklahoman* began using the line at the soup kitchen as a barometer of the union's strength. In a city with significant unemployment the men knew the stakes were high and that the companies that were refusing even to bargain with the union or submit to arbitration would likely not rehire them if the strike failed. Moreover, the packers had succeeded in recruiting and maintaining a relatively stable scab workforce. One striker, an African American man, expressed the sentiment of many. "They'll never get past me, not

walking,” he said. “But then, they’ll never get this far. The men will stop them further down the line.”³⁷

The strike ended in the wake of the lynching of Jake Brooks, a black strikebreaker, on January 14, 1922. The lynching was unusual in two ways. First, the alleged lynchers were a racially integrated group of strikers from a racially integrated union. Second, the state government and press reacted in a way at odds with their typical behavior following a lynching. As in many other places in the nation lynchings generally went unpunished even in cases where the lynchings were carried out by mobs in broad daylight. The howls of outrage in this case had little if anything to do with the racist nature of lynchings, even as odd a lynching as that of Jake Brooks. They had everything to do with a hatred for the butchers’ union.³⁸

In spite of the integration of the butchers’ union, old antagonisms flared. The packers had used disproportionately black strikebreakers—a common move at the time. Further, given the overarching racist climate in the state, it is not surprising that black strikebreakers made relatively easy targets for strikers. Under the circumstances, it is also not surprising that the body found swinging from a tree in the Capitol Hill neighborhood was black.³⁹

With the lynching the business class and the Gaylord papers began calling for martial law. In a typical editorial the *Daily Oklahoman* demanded that Lieutenant Governor Martin Trapp, who was acting chief executive in Governor Robertson’s absence, step in and take control: “In the hands of the governor lies the power vested in him by the constitution to take the enforcement of the law out of the jurisdiction of officials who have failed to enforce it and by the use of state troops to bring the lawless to justice and end the reign of terrorism.” Despite such pleas Trapp did not do so. However, Sheriff Dancy used the lynching as a pretext to harass local radicals. The strike lost much of its remaining popularity and went down in defeat shortly thereafter.⁴⁰

Walton’s position among African Americans was much more precarious than among the white working class. While Walton had courted African American voters at the outset of his political career in 1917, which gained him the support of the *Black Dispatch*, this was an initial foray. However, he kept at it, and both as mayor and later as governor he made significant inroads into a population that had traditionally voted Republican and had no illusions about the Democrats’ commitment to white supremacy.⁴¹

The position of the African American population of the city, as one might expect, left much to be desired. At 7.2 percent the black illiteracy rate far outstripped the white figure of 2.1 percent. A petition by lead-

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

John C. Walton as a member of the Oklahoma Corporation Commission 1933-39, after his time as mayor of Oklahoma City and governor of Oklahoma (Oklahoma State Corporation Commission Collection, OHS Research Division).



ing African Americans presented to the mayor on May 27 asked for more police protection and better sewage facilities, lighting, gas, and water service in African American areas. It also asked for improvements at Riverside Park in the black section of town and for a black health inspector. The main demand, however, was for a \$50,000 hospital, which was to have a black staff. The city commission dealt with this petition with a sneering dismissal. In the Oklahoma City City Commission, where the Waltonites held a 3-2 majority at the time, the commissioners refused to even consider the petition. Meanwhile, attacks on the city's segregation code continued.⁴²

Walton did, however, earn the grudging respect of some of Oklahoma City's black residents as his term progressed. His appointment of two black men to the police force improved his standing in the eyes of some—a concession that the Republican Overholser administration had failed to give. That said, the hiring of the two black officers, W. R. Parker and W. D. Fuller, was essentially a cosmetic move. This became clear when Oklahoma City Police Captain Frank Haefner, a Walton crony, sacked Parker for "insubordination" after Parker arrested white patrons of black brothels on his beat as well as black people. Still, Walton's limited actions led to the formation of a black Non-Partisan League to back pro-Walton candidates in the 1921 municipal elections, in which more black people voted in the Democratic Party primary than in the Republican. The formation of a Lincoln League to back the Republicans soon after the primary underscored the fact that although Walton's inroads among black people remained limited, black Repub-

licans realized they were significant enough to demand a concerted counteroffensive.⁴³

Although the *Black Dispatch* praised Walton for hiring black policemen, the force continued a tradition of racist harassment of black people. Under Walton the “protection” black residents often received could at times be better called police brutality—including in the years when Walton’s control over the city government was most secure. Cases usually made the news when the black person assaulted was particularly prominent. For example, on July 13, 1920, a plainclothes policeman and a Scott-Halliburton private detective assaulted F. A. Patrick, an Okmulgee dentist, having assumed that he was a black suspect in a theft at the Scott-Halliburton store because of his skin color.⁴⁴

Walton also received kudos from many black citizens when he opposed the creation of a segregated library in the city. The Oklahoma City Public Library had been open to members of both races until March 21, 1921, when it began barring black patrons, most of whom were from the professional middle class, claiming crowded conditions. In response to complaints, the Oklahoma City Library Board offered to open a black library, which prompted further protest from the black community, with the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in the forefront. Joe Patterson, the commissioner of public property, was adamant that black people would not have access to the main library, and the city commission agreed with him—with the exception of Walton. Walton’s support, however, was insufficient to sway the city commission, and a two-room black library called the Dunbar opened on Second Street and Stiles Avenue in December 1921.⁴⁵

Thus, Walton became one of the first white Democratic Party politicians to reach out to black voters in Oklahoma. At the same time a minority of black people came to feel that working within the Democratic Party, which was, after all, the majority party in the state, would reap them more benefits than remaining with a Republican Party that often seemed embarrassed by its legacy from the Civil War and Reconstruction as a defender of black rights. Though often accused of opportunism—frequently correctly—by black leaders who remained with the Republicans, those who became Democrats in the 1920s were the harbingers of one of the most significant shifts in party alignment in the twentieth century.⁴⁶

Walton’s regime in Oklahoma City would lay the basis for what would be perhaps the most tumultuous governorship in the state’s history. Though Walton failed miserably as governor, in Oklahoma City he managed generally to stay ahead of his opponents. But Walton’s

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

tenure as Oklahoma City's mayor was significant in its own right. His government's active alliance with the working class—backed by the left but not leftist in political ideology—as well as his cautious and contradictory courting of black voters revealed an unusual way of dealing with the politically turbulent landscape of the post-World War I era. He was hardly a statesman, but in a period of race and class tension he was nevertheless able to adroitly build a base of support that presaged his base while running for governor.

Endnotes

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¹ For the Populist movement in Oklahoma, see Worth Robert Miller, *Oklahoma Populism: A History of the People's Party in the Oklahoma Territory* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987). Histories of Oklahoma Socialism include James R. Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism: Radical Movements in the Southwest 1895-1943* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978); Garin Burbank, *When Farmers Voted Red: The Gospel of Socialism in the Oklahoma Countryside, 1910-1924* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1976); and Jim Bissett, *Agrarian Socialism in America: Marx, Jefferson, and Jesus in the Oklahoma Countryside, 1904-1920* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999). A recent study by Murray Wickett, *Contested Territory: Whites, Native Americans, and African Americans in Oklahoma, 1865-1907* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), has illuminated the fraught interactions between whites, blacks, and American Indians in the period leading up to statehood. The pattern of low levels of Socialist support in the cities is common throughout the region, though there were ephemeral upsurges in Dallas and Houston as well as Oklahoma City. Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism*, 24, 185-87.

² Untitled biography, John C. Walton Collection, box 9, folder 1, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma.

³ Ernest T. Bynum, *Personal Recollections of Ex-Governor Walton, A Record of Inside Observations* (Oklahoma City: self-publication, 1924), 20, 26.

⁴ *Daily Oklahoman* (Oklahoma City), May 14, 1920; May 2, 1921.

⁵ *Daily Oklahoman*, July 22, 1920.

⁶ *Daily Oklahoman*, April 16, 1921.

⁷ Ron Owens, *Oklahoma Justice: The Oklahoma City Police—A Century of Gunfighters, Gangsters and Terrorists* (Paducah, KY: Turner Publishing Co., 1995), 72; Roy P. Stewart, *Born Grown: An Oklahoma City History* (Oklahoma City: Fidelity Bank, 1974), 200; Albert McRill, *And Satan Came Also: An Inside Story of a City's Social and Political History* (Oklahoma City: Britton Publishing Co., 1955), 154-71.

⁸ *Daily Oklahoman*, April 9, 1919.

⁹ *Oklahoma Federationist* (Oklahoma City), November 17, 1917; December 1, 1917; January 12, 19, 1918; McRill, *And Satan Came Also*, 185.

¹⁰ Perhaps the clearest example of an anti-Walton history of Oklahoma City in this period is McRill's *And Satan Came Also*; Owens's *Oklahoma Justice*, a history of the Oklahoma City Police Department, closely follows McRill's account of Walton's administration.

¹¹ *Daily Oklahoman*, March 18, 29, 1919; *Oklahoma Federationist*, April 27, 1918; McRill, *And Satan Came Also*, 133, 135.

¹² *Daily Oklahoman*, February 15, 19, 20, 23, March 4, 1919; *Oklahoma Federationist*, March 8, 1919.

- ¹³ McRill, *And Satan Came Also*, 152-53, 186; *Daily Oklahoman*, March 6, 1919.
- ¹⁴ McRill, *And Satan Came Also*, 187; *Daily Oklahoman*, March 14, 19, 1919.
- ¹⁵ *Daily Oklahoman*, March 19, 1919.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, March 26, 30, April 1, 1919.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, April 2, 1919.
- ¹⁸ Owens, *Oklahoma Justice*, 74-77; *Daily Oklahoman*, May 29, 1919, March 31, 1921.
- ¹⁹ The accusations of a deal between Walton and Patterson came be found in McRill, *And Satan Came Also*, 187-89 as well as Owens, *Oklahoma Justice*, 74-75. Owens's account clearly relies on McRill's as a major source and states a bit more baldly what McRill insinuates.
- ²⁰ *Daily Oklahoman*, April 13, 1921.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, April 24, May 12, 13, 1919.
- ²² *Ibid.*, July 26-29, 1919.
- ²³ *Daily Oklahoman*, June 14, 15, 16, 25, 1919.
- ²⁴ Nigel Sellars, "Butchers and Businessmen: The 1921 Packing House Strike in Oklahoma City," unpublished manuscript in author's possession, 1-2; *Oklahoma Leader* (Oklahoma City), October 22, 1920.
- ²⁵ *Daily Oklahoman*, January 5, 1921.
- ²⁶ *Daily Oklahoman*, March 16, 29, April 6, 1921; *Oklahoma Leader*, April 1, 1921.
- ²⁷ *Oklahoma Leader*, March 11, 1921.
- ²⁸ *Daily Oklahoman*, April 21, May 5, 13, 26, 29, 30, June 1, 1921.
- ²⁹ *Oklahoma Leader*, May 18, 1921; *Daily Oklahoman*, May 4, 7; July 6, 1921.
- ³⁰ Owens, *Oklahoma Justice*, 78.
- ³¹ Sellars, "Butchers and Businessmen," 3-5; *Oklahoma Federationist*, October 1921; *Oklahoma Leader*, December 11, 1921.
- ³² *Daily Oklahoman*, May 8, November 26, December 3, 1921; Sellars, "Butchers and Businessmen," 6-7; *Oklahoma Leader*, January 17, 1922.
- ³³ Sellars, "Butchers and Businessmen," 7-8; *Daily Oklahoman*, December 17, 29, 1921; December 28, 1920.
- ³⁴ *Daily Oklahoman*, December 3, 1921; Bynum, *Personal Recollections of Ex-Governor Walton*, 6.
- ³⁵ Sellars, "Butchers and Businessmen," 7-8; *Daily Oklahoman*, December 24, 29, 1921.
- ³⁶ *Daily Oklahoman*, January 12, 1922; Sellars, "Butchers and Businessmen," 8-9.
- ³⁷ *Daily Oklahoman*, December 29, 30, 1921.
- ³⁸ Jimmie Lewis Franklin, *Journey Toward Hope: A History of Blacks in Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982), 128-38; Sellars, "Butchers and Businessmen," 9-10.
- ³⁹ Sellars, "Butchers and Businessmen," 9.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 10. *Daily Oklahoman*, January 20, 1922; *Oklahoma News* (Oklahoma City), January 18, 1922.
- ⁴¹ Franklin, *Journey Toward Hope*, 124, *Black Dispatch*, April 1, 1921.
- ⁴² *Daily Oklahoman*, May 30, 1919; Owens, *Oklahoma Justice*, 78.
- ⁴³ *Black Dispatch*, April 9, September 24, 1920, February 25, March 4, 18, 1921; Owens, *Oklahoma Justice*, 78.
- ⁴⁴ *Black Dispatch*, July 16, 1920.
- ⁴⁵ *Black Dispatch*, March 11, September 15, 29, 1921; *Daily Oklahoman*, October 29, December 25, 1921; *Tulsa World*, August 14, 1922.
- ⁴⁶ Franklin, *Journey Toward Hope*, 126.