

REPORTS OF THE GOVERNORS OF  
OKLAHOMA TERRITORY  
1891 to 1899

By B. H. Johnson\*

The dust stirred by optimistic Oklahoma settlers at the opening of the Territory had long since settled by the fall of 1899. Prosperous farms had sprung up both in Old Oklahoma, as the regional settlement was called, and in the successive areas opened to white inhabitation. Where buffalo and Indians had once roamed, school bells now rang with the bustle of a growing civilization. Oklahoma Territory had survived her childhood, and, in the eyes of some, had moved into maturity.

Oklahoma's dramatic growth inspired a variety of promoters from the beginning. To those who believed in the future of Oklahoma, it was natural to tell the world of her greatness—to "sing her praises" as the booster often exclaimed. Thus, Cassius M. Barnes, the fourth governor of Oklahoma Territory, could speak of continued growth in his annual report to the Secretary of the Interior in 1899. In ten short years, he reflected, immigration to Oklahoma had changed from the "dash of a great storm wave" to a "slowly incoming tide." Indeed, Oklahoma offered new hope for those "dissatisfied with their surroundings." In typical booster language, the governor wrote: "Not a day during the year but the white-topped prairie schooner can be seen wending its way from north, south, east, or west toward a new abiding place in Oklahoma; every train brings newcomers to the cities, towns, or farms of the Territory."

Governor Barnes was by no means unique in lavishing praise upon a new territory. Such a spirit had pervaded all the American West and much of the entire New World. Walter Prescott Webb once observed that the American experience had bred "unbridled optimism." Roy M. Robbins, in his book on the public domain, noted that the government itself began an impressive promotional campaign after the Civil War. Such agencies as the Land Office, the Immigration Bureau, and the Army Engineers produced attractive reports designed to lure settlers to the hinterlands. Even

\* *Report of the Governor of Oklahoma to the Secretary of the Interior, 1891*. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1891), pp. 85-6. Hereafter all reports will be cited when given as *Report* with the appropriate year and page.

Other sources are:

Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Frontier* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1962), p. 6; Roy M. Robbins, *Our Landed Heritage: The Public Domain 1776-1936* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), p. 286; Edwin F. McReynolds, *Oklahoma: A History of the Boomer State* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1954), p. 306.

the territorial governors' official reports were not immune to the all-encompassing booster spirit.

This study will investigate the promotional activities of Oklahoma's governors as reflected in their reports to the Secretary of the Interior for the years 1891 to 1899. This period spans the administrations of four governors and covers the first decade of white settlement in Oklahoma.<sup>2</sup> Although the treatment is largely topical, a chronological pattern has been followed when possible. Before discussing the actual reports, however, the personal backgrounds of the four governors who wrote and compiled them are briefly discussed.

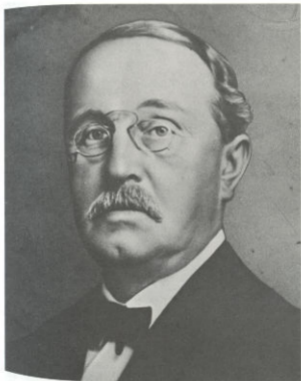
George W. Steele, a native of Indiana, served as the first chief executive of Oklahoma. His Republican political associations and ten years of experience as a major in the Army of the West influenced President Benjamin Harrison to appoint Steele. He took office on May 22, 1890, and resigned on October 18, 1891, after nearly a year and a half of confused politics.<sup>3</sup> After his resignation, Steele told a Pittsburg newspaper reporter that he accepted the job impulsively; when he tried to back out, President Harrison persuaded him to accept the position. Steele remarked that he found matters in "pretty bad shape" upon his arrival. Nevertheless, he took pride in the development of Oklahoma during his administration and even boasted that the Territory showed evidence of having been settled a hundred years instead of a few months.<sup>4</sup>

The next governor, A. J. Seay, moved into the governor's chair from his seat on the territorial supreme court, a post he had gained when Steele was named governor. Born in Virginia, Seay had moved to Missouri when a child. He taught public school there and later read law, but the outbreak of the Civil War in April, 1861, forced him to postpone a legal career. Instead, he entered the Union Army as a private and rose to the rank of colonel. After the war he served as a state judge in Missouri and later entered the banking business. His tenure in the governor's office lasted from February 1, 1892, to May 7, 1893, when the election of a Democratic president, Grover Cleveland, sent him back to his banking interests in Kingfisher.

<sup>2</sup> This study is not concerned with the boom activities that preceded the opening of Oklahoma. The subject has been treated by Carl Coke Rister in *Land Hunger: David L. Payne and the Oklahoma Boomers* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1942). The political involvements leading to statehood are given in Roy Gittinger, *The Formation of the State of Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1939).

<sup>3</sup> John B. Meserve, "The Governors of Oklahoma Territory," *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. XX (September, 1942), pp. 218-219.

<sup>4</sup> Doris Ann Stewart, *Government and Development of Oklahoma Territory* (Oklahoma City: Harlow Publishing Company, 1933), pp. 282-84.



GOVERNOR GEORGE W. STEELE

William G. Renfrow, the only Democrat of the four, served from May 7, 1893, to May 24, 1897. Although a native of North Carolina, Renfrow had moved to Arkansas after his release from the Confederate Army. Settling at Russellville, he held minor political jobs before moving to Oklahoma in 1889 and establishing a bank at Norman. Renfrow's relatively long tenure as governor enabled him to pursue a more orderly program than had his two predecessors.

When William McKinley entered the White House in 1897, the governorship reverted to the Republicans. This time the office went to Cassius M. Barnes, a former Receiver in the United States Land Office at Guthrie. Barnes had served in the Union Army, and, like Renfrow, had later settled in Arkansas where he served as Chief Deputy United States Marshal in the court of the famous Judge Isaac Parker. When Barnes moved to Oklahoma, he entered politics and served in the Third Territorial Legislature. Before his retirement on April 15, 1901, Barnes was recognized throughout the Territory as an effective governor. It was during his administration that Oklahoma celebrated her tenth birthday.

As chief executive of the Territory, the governor held an enviable position. Not only could he further the objectives of his party, but he could also enjoy the personal satisfaction of being the Territory's leading citizen—without the rigors of an election. Although his appointment came from the President, the territorial governor worked under the Secretary of the Interior, for whom he filed a written report at the close of each fiscal year. Through the years, these reports increased in volume, thus portraying in a sense the growth of the Territory itself.

The first report, dated October 9, 1891, was only fifteen pages in length. It dealt summarily with such topics as population, schools, taxable property, railroad freight, agriculture, and laws. A few statistical tables were appended. Brief as it was, this report set the pattern for the years ahead. Henceforth, each governor would mention virtually the same topics. Although each man added pertinent material, the format remained essentially the same except for the introduction of photographs in later reports.<sup>1</sup>

By 1897, the Report had grown to forty-one pages. In addition to his own comments on the condition of Oklahoma Territory, Governor Barnes included statements by other territorial

<sup>1</sup> Obviously, the governors were assisted by their staffs, and it is likely that the actual language was that of an aide. Newspaperman Fred L. Wenner worked on the reports while serving as private secretary to Governor Barnes. Nevertheless, the governors are accorded authorship since the reports appeared under their names. See "Wenner Biography," *Wenner Collection*, Division of Manuscripts, University of Oklahoma Library, Norman.



**GOVERNOR A. J. BEAY**

officials and experts. In 1898, he increased the document to seventy-six pages and included photographs of Oklahoma scenes and products, as well as a map of the Territory. The next year a 106-page report claimed to offer complete information on nearly all phases of life and activity in Oklahoma.

Despite their overt interest in promotion, the governors were aware of the need to be truthful. For instance, Governor Renfrow testified in 1894 that he was presenting the true condition of the Territory, "free from any of the pernicious 'boom' statements that have heretofore been so injurious to many of the Western States.<sup>6</sup> The next year he repeated his intent to make a "faithful report" based on reliable sources. Similarly, Governor Barnes vouched for the veracity of his 1898 report, despite its fictional appearance. Nevertheless, the governors exploited the propaganda potential of such material. Nearly seventy-five thousand copies of the 1897 report were circulated through the North and East, while some fifty thousand copies of the next year's study were given away at the Omaha exposition.<sup>7</sup> Information came from several sources, such as territorial officials and business leaders. Newspapemen were particularly adept at furnishing "boom" material.<sup>8</sup>

It is evident that the governors' reports contained masterful propaganda. Numerous examples show the effective use of overstatement, as in the case of Governor Renfrow, who predicted an "enviable destiny" for Oklahoma because of her "soft Italian climate" and "pure" American inhabitants. Moreover, the existence of "fine cities" where deer had recently grazed proved the enterprise of Oklahoma's citizenry. Surely no other state had attained so much in six short years.<sup>9</sup>

The assistance of the deity was implied from year to year. To the booster, there was a great similarity between the Oklahoma settlers and the Children of Israel. The relative orderliness of Oklahoma's settlement further convinced optimists that God was on the side of those who sought a better life in the Territory. The subsequent establishment of schools, churches, fraternal organizations, and other agencies of civilization dispelled any remaining doubt: God had smiled on Oklahoma.

One of the first topics to appear in each report was population. Dull as the figures seemed, they were of major importance

<sup>6</sup> Report, 1894, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 1898, p. 97.

<sup>8</sup> For the role of the newspaper editor, see Bobby E. Johnson, "Booster Attitudes of Some Newspapers in Oklahoma Territory—The Land of the Fair God," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. XLIII (Autumn, 1961), pp. 242-64.

<sup>9</sup> Report, 1895, p. 3.

to a growing country. A special census cited in Governor Steele's 1891 report showed a total of 60,417 persons in Oklahoma. The population more than doubled in the next year, and by 1894 the number of inhabitants had reached an estimated 275,000. The figure exceeded 310,000 in 1898, but Governor Barnes complained that assessors had been too conservative in their estimates. Nevertheless, a steady tide of immigration raised the population to 375,000 persons by the end of the decade.<sup>10</sup>

But mere population figures did not tell the entire story. The governors were equally interested in the quality of Oklahoma's inhabitants, as shown by Governor Steele's boast that Oklahoma citizens were "unusually intelligent, above the average in education, generous, . . . and God-fearing." Governor Renfrow revealed a similar pride in the mettle of Oklahoma's citizenry when he noted that a worthy moral element had overcome the ruffianism of earlier days. He marvelled at the enterprise and hardiness of the people.

The speed with which Oklahomans established religious foundations was another indicator for the watchful governors. The fact that many towns had held religious services before they were a week old especially impressed Governor Barnes. He had further reason to boast when Oklahoma's Christian Endeavor Union won a national prize for growth. The governors deemed religion so important that they devoted an entire section to churches each year.

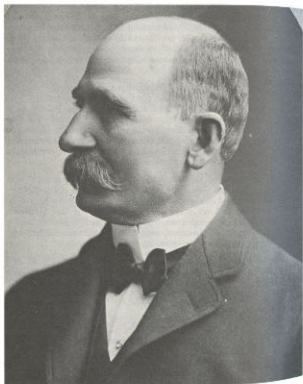
The presence of various social and fraternal groups also drew their attention. Governor Seay described such organizations as the Masons and Knights of Pythias as "instrumentalities of good." The Oddfellows and the Grand Army of the Republic were the largest fraternal groups in Oklahoma. The latter had a special appeal to Oklahomans, many of whom were Union veterans. Yearly G.A.R. encampments drew thousands.

The reports similarly accorded the press a share of the credit for Oklahoma's progress. Governor Barnes considered territorial newspapers comparable with those in any part of the nation. He termed Oklahoma editors "loyal and energetic" in looking after the territory's best interest.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to noting the contributions of the church and the press, the governors took pains to point out other special assets. Several of these "advantages" would not be particularly well regarded now because they dealt with nationality and race. Governor Renfrow's boast that Oklahoma's people were largely Ameri-

<sup>10</sup> A breakdown by race revealed that the population was 85 per cent white, 10 per cent Negro, and 5 per cent Indian. *Report, 1892*, p. 8.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 1897, p. 18.

**GOVERNOR WILLIAM G. RENFROW**



can by birth probably received applause in a time of heavy European immigration to America.<sup>12</sup> Earlier, he had reported that Negro settlement had slowed; consequently, there were few Negroes in Oklahoma. Since a hardy stock of "pure" Americans prevailed in Oklahoma, Governor Renfrow naturally resented any effort to impugn her citizens. He attacked the Associated Press in 1895 for implying that the Territory was filled with criminals and charged that desperadoes were as much a curiosity to Oklahomans as to Easterners.<sup>13</sup>

Oklahoma's concern over her public image is readily understandable when one ponders the true state of affairs. No doubt her assets were numerous, but the accomplishments of only ten years hardly placed her on a plane with older states. Nevertheless, comparisons abounded in the governors' reports, even if laboriously contrived. Governor Renfrow once boasted that the Sabbath was better observed in Oklahoma than in many older states. In another vein, Governor Barnes compared Oklahoma's cultural life to that of other areas: "Nearly every town has its literary society or Chautauqua circle, good lecture courses are carried on, the best of concerts and theatrical entertainments are well patronized, and the legislative and inaugural balls and banquets and other gatherings of note at the capital and other leading cities will bear the closest comparison with similar affairs in any State or Territory."<sup>14</sup>

A more bizarre comparison appeared in Barnes's 1898 report when he observed that Oklahoma had one convict for every 2,150 persons, while Arizona Territory had one for every 425 persons.<sup>15</sup>

In direct contrast, Oklahoma had a high percentage of school children. The implications did not escape the governors. The vision of a schoolhouse convenient to every family particularly delighted Governor Renfrow. Oklahoma's quest for knowledge led Governor Barnes to declare: "No community on earth ever took so early a stand for higher education or made so rapid progress in an educational way as has Oklahoma."<sup>16</sup> That the advantages of learning were not limited to whites was shown by Chillico Indian School, which had five hundred students. Neither did the Territory ignore her Negro students, who had their own school in the Territorial Agricultural and Normal University at Langston. Governor Barnes also acknowledged the contributions of several

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 1890, p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> The Oklahoma Press Association filed an official complaint with the Associated Press in 1895 for sending out such reports. See *Official Report of the Semi-Annual Meeting of the Oklahoma Press Association*, III Reno, August 16-17, 1895, p. 11.

<sup>14</sup> *Report*, 1897, p. 15.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 1898, p. 61.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

religious institutions, which included a Catholic school at Sacred Heart, a Congregationalist college at Kingfisher, and a Friend's academy at Stella. Business colleges at Oklahoma City and Guthrie offered practical training.

Higher education also drew the governors' praise. The Territory had three such schools by 1892: a territorial university at Norman, a normal school at Edmond, and an agricultural and mechanical college at Stillwater. Within three years the University had 147 students and five faculty members. Its graduates, thought Governor Renfrow, would prove "as well equipped as the graduates of Eastern institutions of learning." Another normal school opened at Alva in the fall of 1897, located on a forty-acre tract donated by the city.

The question of school support was particularly vital. Sections 16 and 36 of the public domain were reserved for the benefit of public schools by an act of March 4, 1889; sections 13 and 33 were later set aside in some counties. This land was leased to settlers, and by 1898 thousands of persons were living on school land. In 1894 the per capita apportionment for each school-age child was forty-two cents. The next year it reached sixty-nine cents, and by 1897 it amounted to \$1.34 for each of the Territory's 90,585 school children. Such expense seemed justified when it was revealed that Oklahoma's illiteracy rate was lower than that of thirty-five other states and territories. Governor Barnes attributed this to the Territory's fine educational system and summed up the desire for learning as follows: "A penitentiary we have gotten along without, jails were slow in building, poor-houses we have none, but schoolhouses are everywhere, nearly 2,000 of them capping the hilltops or dotting the valleys of the Territory."

Unlike man-made advantages, Oklahoma's natural attractions gave the governors a built-in sales device. The weather is of fundamental importance to any new land, and each governor dealt with it in some manner. Renfrow thought the climate "delightful, except for a short period in midsummer." The subject of rainfall recurred frequently, as though the chief executives felt compelled to show that Oklahoma had adequate moisture. For example, Governor Renfrow declared that the rains of recent years had removed Oklahoma from the realm of the "great American desert." Governor Barnes cited statistics from the weather bureau at Oklahoma City to prove that there were comparatively few droughts in Oklahoma. He also castigated eastern newsmen for leaving the false impression that Oklahoma was plagued by storms. To erase the stigma caused by such reports, he cited government records which showed that Iowa, Missouri, Ohio, Kentucky, and New York had experienced more storms

with less of life than Oklahoma in the preceding decade. He apparently failed to consider the more sophisticated record systems of the older states.

The governors further portrayed Oklahoma's climate as a panacea for the nation's infirm citizens. Governor Renfrow cited Dr. C. D. Arnold, the territorial superintendent of public health, to show that persons afflicted with throat and lung trouble had regained their health in Oklahoma. In 1897, Governor Barnes quoted Dr. L. H. Buxton, who asserted that there was "no better land under the sun for the consumptive or person with lung trouble." To those threatened by consumption, Dr. Buxton promised:<sup>17</sup>

We will not banish you to desert, uninhabited plains; to bleak, barren mountain regions, called from the sympathizing hands of humanity, but welcome you to our boundless, unadulterated prairies, dotted with churches and schoolhouses, and invite you to find employment and enjoyment, to eat of the bounty of our grain-laden fields, sit under your vine and fig tree, and become one of our intelligent and progressive citizens.

The climate also befriended agriculture, the Territory's leading means of income. Governor Steele considered Oklahoma "an excellent agricultural country. In Governor Renfrow's opinion, the territory was capable of producing all kinds of plants. Governor Barnes spoke of agriculture and her "handmaiden horticulture" as the mainstays of Oklahoma. Such crops as wheat, oats, cotton, and fruit were considered the basic sources of agrarian wealth. The most graphic example of agricultural promotion appeared in Governor Barnes' 1899 report. Although he admitted that the exploits of Oklahoma's farmers sounded like fiction, Barnes himself resorted to colorful language: "The farmer has converted the raw prairie into fields of grain, orchards of fruit, and gardens of vegetables; his home dots the landscape, his cattle and his sheep cover the hills, his swine run the timber, his horses and mules line the highway conveying a market the products of the land which has been made to bloom as the rose."<sup>18</sup>

Another phase of agriculture—stock-raising—brought still more comment from Oklahoma's official boosters. Governor Steele predicted success for the live stock industry because of the nature of western Oklahoma. The fact that he had never seen or heard of a horse with the "heaves" further convinced Steele that the Territory was suited to animal husbandry. Governor Barnes deemed Oklahoma's grazing lands among the finest in the nation. To Governor Renfrow the Territory's extensive grasslands were a haven for ranchers.<sup>19</sup> Fortunately, land was plentiful for those

<sup>17</sup> Report, 1907, p. 36.

<sup>18</sup> Report, 1899, p. 61.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 1898, p. 44. Governor Barnes placed the number of cattle, hogs, and horses at more than one and a quarter million in 1896.



GOVERNOR CASSIUS M. BARNES

who wished to enter the live-stock trade. A steady stream of settlers continued to flock into the western part of the Territory as late as 1896. They settled on some 7,046 sections, or a total of more than a million acres.

Although agriculture reigned in the 1890's, the governors were not blind to commercial and industrial advantages. Cities inevitably sprang up, and with them came the channels of commerce necessary to support a thriving population.<sup>20</sup> Governor Seay called on his own banking experience to predict success for the infant forms of business and industry that existed in 1892. Governor Renfrow later advised eastern capitalists to visit Oklahoma for a ripe investment market. By 1897 Governor Barnes could boast of such diversified industries as distilleries, canning plants, and railway shops. The Territory was virtually free of unemployment, he noted, except for an influx of "tramps and beggars" from northern and eastern states. Railroads were of primary importance to the growing commerce of Oklahoma, and each governor took care to include railway information in his report. In typical fashion, Governor Barnes boasted that there was "no new country with a title of the transportation facilities possessed by Oklahoma." The Territorial Board of Railway Assessors reported some 920.65 miles of track in Oklahoma in 1899. Of similar value to territorial commerce were the communication networks provided by the Western Union, the Missouri and Kansas Telephone Company, and the Perkins Telephone Company.

One of the by-products of development was sound public finance. Property valuation climbed steadily, although many farms were not yet subject to taxation. In 1891, Territorial Auditor J. H. Lawhead reported that taxable property totaled nearly seven million dollars. Less than ten years later, it was almost forty-three million dollars, and Governor Barnes thought this much too low. Moreover, Oklahoma enjoyed the best fiscal condition of all the territories. The per capita debt in New Mexico and Arizona was far higher than in Oklahoma, where it was less than seventy-five cents.<sup>21</sup>

Much of Oklahoma's growth was due to her stable government, for which the governors modestly took their share of the credit. After arguing about the location of the capital, the first legislative assembly finally enacted a code of law which Governor Steele described as "very fair."

Governor Renfrow took a more critical view a few years

<sup>20</sup> Oklahoma Territory had fifty-five banks with a total paid-up capital of \$789,786 in 1898.

<sup>21</sup> Report, 1896, p. 7. Arizona had a per capita debt of eleven dollars; New Mexico, four dollars.

later when he accused the early legislators of producing a mass of incongruity. He deemed the next two legislatures more capable, however, and praised them for writing a set of laws "fully abreast with the best thought of the times and the particular needs of the people." Another sign of responsible government was evident in the Territory's concern for her insane. The mentally ill were first sent to a private hospital at Jacksonville, Illinois, but this proved so expensive that they were returned to a private sanitarium at Norman. Such a move would save the Territory some eight thousand dollars a year, argued Governor Renfrow.<sup>22</sup>

Despite the effectiveness of their territorial government, most Oklahomans looked forward to statehood. Indeed, this was the most popular topic throughout the Territory. Governor Seay called for immediate statehood as early as 1892. His predecessor followed a more cautious policy in proposing single statehood for Oklahoma and Indian Territory. Renfrow offered the following candid appraisal of the problem: "The question of statehood for Oklahoma has been much agitated, and the people are divided on the question. Some desire statehood for Oklahoma with its present boundaries [1894]; others prefer to have the matter of statehood deferred until such time as Oklahoma and the Indian Territory may be admitted as one State."<sup>23</sup>

Governor Barnes also favored single statehood. Whereas one state would give Oklahoma vigorous position, he reasoned, separate states would be "burdensome and annoying." Barnes preferred one large state which would bring "pride and gratification" to its people.

True to his role as official booster, Governor Barnes placed great emphasis on "pride." He was no different in this respect from the rest of the governors and most of the populace. The country itself was a source of pride at first; later, the people and their institutions became the joy of Oklahoma's promoters. The governors' reports reflect this penchant for self-praise. From mere pamphlets of a few pages, they evolved into lengthy dissertations, filled with statistical tables, eye-witness accounts, and photographic proof of Oklahoma's progress. It would be unfair, however, to dismiss the reports as a mere indication of Oklahoma Territory's inferiority complex. More important, they present a wealth of factual material, much of which is unavailable elsewhere. The documents also tell a story of true growth.

<sup>22</sup> *Report, 1896*, p. 8. William M. Jenkins, the fifth governor of Oklahoma Territory, was removed from office in 1901 because of a political scandal concerning the hospital for the insane at Norman. See McReynolds, *Oklahoma*, p. 308.

<sup>23</sup> *Report, 1893*, p. 12.

for it can not be denied that Oklahoma grew with the speed of a cyclone, although one of her governors might have objected to such a comparison.<sup>24</sup>

The historian should approach these sources with care. To cite them indiscriminately would be misleading, since their very nature fostered distortion. Thus, one should weigh them as he would the material gathered by pressure groups today—with one eye on the facts and the other on the gatherer. Or, in the case of Oklahoma, with one ear attuned to the song, the other to the singer.

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<sup>24</sup> The population rose from 61,824 in 1890 to 396,331 in 1900. U.S. Office of the Census, *Twelfth Census of the United States: 1900. Population*, Vol. 1, Part 1, p. 11.