

PORTRAIT OF GOVERNOR LEON C. PHILLIPS

By Herbert L. Branan

PRESENTED TO THE OKLAHOMA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The following memorial on Governor Leon C. Phillips with introductory remarks was prepared and read by Honorable Herbert L. Branan at the Annual Meeting of the Oklahoma Historical Society on April 25, 1968:

INTRODUCTION

I appreciate the opportunity to be here today and participate in the presentation ceremonies of the portrait of Governor Leon C. Phillips. First, I want to acknowledge the assistance and interest of Mrs. Marie Anderson McMillan in making preparations for this program. This portrait has been painted by Richard Gertz under the commission of Mrs. Helen Conklin Phillips, the surviving widow of former Governor Leon C. Phillips. She and Mr. Phillips, in their youth, attended high school in the same class in Arapaho, Oklahoma. She is the daughter of a Presbyterian minister and after her residence in Arapaho moved with her family to Shannec, Oklahoma, where she completed high school, later moving to Ohio to attend college. It is under her auspices that this portrait is presented here today.

LEON C. PHILLIPS: A PORTRAIT PRESENTATION

Leon Chase Phillips was the 11th Governor of the State of Oklahoma and was the 9th individual elected to that office. He was inaugurated as Governor January 9, 1939, and ended his term January 11, 1943. He was born December 9, 1890, in Worth County, Missouri, and moved to Oklahoma at an early age. He attended the public schools of Arapaho, graduating in 1908, and went on to college to study for the ministry at Epworth University, a forerunner of the present Oklahoma City University. He studied two years for the ministry, changed to law and went to the University of Oklahoma where he graduated with a law degree in 1918. During his college years he interspersed several of them teaching school in order to maintain himself and to continue his education.

After serving in the armed forces in World War I he returned to Okemah to practice law. He served in a number of party positions and in 1932 was elected to the Legislature of which he was a member until elected as Governor in 1939. He was the first Governor of our State chosen directly from the Legislature.

It is a tenet of my philosophy of history that the temper of the times produces the men who are needed at the time for existing conditions and that leaders arise as a product of the society and culture which creates them. In the contemporary process of events, it is difficult to understand the historical mood and course of events much less to be effectual in molding the

direction of them. We are so much a part of what is taking place we are unable to see, and sometimes unable to know, all the elements undergirding the forces with which we must deal. We only feel these forces. He who can grasp the course and force of events with an understanding of their antecedents and with the courage and conviction of leadership can direct or turn them for good or for ill. If the times produce the leader, and if society backs his courage with its conviction, he is able to lead actively, consciously and with unswerving devotion to his objectives. As Thomas Carlyle thoughtfully said, "It is the property of every Hero, in every time, in every place and situation, that he come back to reality; that he stand upon things, and not the show of things. According as he loves, and venerates, articulately or with deep speechless thought, the awful realities of things, so will the hollow show of things, however regular, however decorous, however accredited by convention or conclaves, be intolerable and detestable to him." This was the character of Leon C. Phillips.

In March, 1958, on returning from Okemah where I attended the final services for Governor Phillips, I wrote a letter to A. C. Martin, one of his devoted friends and in that letter I said, "As I sat in the church and looked over the crowd at the funeral, I had a variety of thoughts. The main one being that all of the group there found leadership in Red Phillips around which each of them could rally his own best efforts. That group, under his leadership, had the temerity to stand up against insuperable odds and they won out in the fight. If they had ever stopped to contemplate the magnitude of the task, they would never have begun." This was the type of leadership that Leon C. Phillips contributed to the State and this was the kind of followers he attracted to make that leadership effective.

He came upon the scene at a time of great depression in our history when our State and many of its subdivisions of local governments were practically bankrupt. When the most necessary of governmental functions and services were failing under the depressed conditions, he took over the leadership. In 1935 he was elected Speaker of the House of Representatives against the express wishes of the then chief executive. In 1937 he was defeated for the Speakership, but to bring it about, the administration in office had to use unmatched power, patronage and promises to do it. At the close of the session in 1937, as is usual in the closing hours of a Legislative session, the leaders were making goodbye speeches and pointing with pride to their achievements. It was an hour of hospitable relaxation and good feeling. In the course of calling upon various individuals for a final note of cheerful departure, Mr. Phillips was asked to

speech. He had held no official position in the leadership in House, but in spite of it, he had retained the powerful leadership of an undaunted group that stayed by his side and for a tight, effective minority. In those closing hours when his versatile expected some final note of accord, a relaxation his driving force, he did not permit them to enjoy such a moment. Deep within his religious nature that formed a part of his undergirding welled up his Biblical learning and raising his desk to create a tense moment, with his right hand raised and his finger pointing, he said, "The final decision on you have done here has not been written nor have the people the final say. I can only recall to you the words written by moving hand on the wall at the feast of Belshazzar, "Thou art weighed in the balance and found wanting." From this point on he was destined to be elected the next Governor of Oklahoma, and so he was

He brought sound, sensible and sober government to the State Capitol. He left a number of great monuments. The greatest endure today and are without parallel in any of the fifty states. One of these monuments is the State Regency for Higher Education and the other is the Budget Balancing Amendment to our State Constitution, both adopted by the people in March 1941.

Thomas Carlyle has also said that one of the true measures of a man's greatness and usefulness is what would be if he had not been. When we consider the value of these two great monuments to our State Constitution and to our system of government we ponder what would be the chaotic situation today in our education and the bankrupt situation in our State finances had not been and these measures had not become a part of our Constitution. The enactment of these two monumental measures illustrate the necessity of the persistent devotion Mr. Phillips maintained towards his objectives. The genesis of the Regency for Higher Education was House Bill 686 introduced by him in the session of 1933 to create a statutory coordinating committee with powers to coordinate higher education in some order into the system. It was enacted into law and is found at Page 374 of Session Laws of 1933. It was weak and ineffective, but Mr. Phillips kept the idea alive and before that when he became Governor it was a part of his program. It was his idea, fostered for eight years, that became in Article XIII A of our Constitution, creating a unified system of higher education under the State Regents of Higher Education.

The Budget Balancing Amendment adopted in 1941 has its genesis in a simple resolution, HR 10, that I introduced in the House of Representatives on January 17, 1936. It provided

the seed for a balanced budget. It failed of adoption without roll call, but the force and courage of Governor Phillips brought it into being six years later as the Budget Balancing Amendment of 1941. Whatever else may be said of this man, these two things must ever be applauded. He knew State government. He knew and understood the people of this State. He knew what it took to bring about better government. He made enemies in the process, but he made followers and friends who stood with him. No other Speaker in our Legislature has ever faced the odds that he faced in 1935 and yet maintained his leadership purely by individual appeal and personal magnetism.

His philosophy of government was clear and any position he took was consistent. The finest characterization that can be given about him was that you never had to ask Governor Phillips twice his position on any relevant issue and seldom did you have to ask even once. There are many things that I could say and many things that could be written and will be said and written, but what I have said is only a summation abbreviated in order to lay the ground for presenting to the Oklahoma Historical Society and the State of Oklahoma this portrait of Governor Leon C. "Red" Phillips and this I do on behalf of its donor, Mrs. Helen Conklin Phillips.