

“One Who Was Trusted”: E. L. Mitchell of Western Oklahoma



*By Paul F Lambert**

Reverend George W Mitchell and his wife Josephine Harris Mitchell could not have known when their eighth child was born on March 13, 1876, that their baby boy, Elza Leon, would become a pioneer journalist in Western Oklahoma a quarter of a century later. Moreover, they could not have foreseen that he would become a state senator, a renowned attorney, a mayor, a state district judge, and a candidate for governor of Oklahoma. He would also become a civic leader, a religious leader, and a beloved family man. A life-long Democrat, he would be praised upon his death in 1952 by staunch Republican newspaper publisher E. K. Gaylord as “One Who Was Trusted.”¹

Elza Leon, or “Lon” as he was known to his family and friends, was born near Haynesville in rural Clinton County, Missouri, just eleven years after the end of the Civil War. His mother, Josephine, was part Cherokee, and his father, George, was of Irish ancestry. According to family tradition, the first Mitchell in his family in the United States

was John Mitchell, a roving, sea-faring sort who heard about the beginning of the American Revolution while at Bermuda. Determining that an enemy of England was a friend of his, he made his way to the mainland, joined the American forces, fought, and was wounded at the Battle of King's Mountain. He remained in the new nation following the war. Generations of John Mitchell's descendants migrated westward during the decades between the end of the American Revolution and the beginning of the Civil War ²

One of Lon's ancestors, his maternal grandfather Solomon J Harris, was a pioneer settler in Kentucky and was remembered as a "practical man." In his later years he found religion and determined that he should be baptized. The minister of his church was away from the community, however, and Harris wanted the ritual to be concluded before the weather turned cold. Taking matters into his own hands, he waded into a lake and "there in the presence of the only God Almighty" he proclaimed, "Solomon J Harris, I baptize thee in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen" ³

Lon's father, George W Mitchell, described as a "powerfully built" man with "snapping black eyes," had established a successful mercantile business in Haynesville when the Civil War began in 1861. Elements of Mitchell's family were slaveholders and the sentiment in northwest Missouri strongly favored the Confederate cause. Mitchell abandoned his business to fight for the Confederate States of America under the command of General Joseph O. "Jo" Shelby, famed cavalry commander who led the renowned Iron Brigade, so called because of their toughness. After the war ended, Shelby led six hundred of his men south to Mexico rather than surrendering his command. Mitchell, however, returned to his wife and family to start life anew ⁴

In 1876 George Mitchell became a minister in the Christ in Christian Union denomination, a decision that would have a life-shaping impact on his son Lon. This denomination, composed of Christians from a variety of denominations, had its origins in Ohio in 1864. While their beliefs were fairly orthodox, there were some interesting characteristics. Each local church governed its own affairs, partisan political sermons were "discountenanced," and they sought union without controversy ⁵

Mitchell was a popular minister who brooked no improper behavior during his services. In one instance a drunk wandered into the church and caused a disturbance. Mitchell grabbed the man by his collar, dragged him to the back of the church, deposited him outside the building, and returned to the pulpit to continue his sermon. In 1894 Mitchell founded and was elected president of the Grand River Christian Union University at Edinburgh, Missouri. Young Lon was raised in a

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religious environment and was a devout Christian the remainder of his life. His religious principles shaped both his public and private life.⁶

The Mitchell family lived on a farm near Holt, Missouri. Their home was a weather-boarded, walnut-log house that featured “two large, native limestone fireplaces at either end of the house,” Mitchell’s younger brother Dick recalled. Nearby was a “dug well of pure water, walled up with native stone.” Lon enjoyed his youth as a barefoot country boy who enjoyed fishing and hunting and who excelled during his time in the public schools of Holt. Later in life, when asked if he had any hobbies, the first two he mentioned were “fishin’ and huntin’,” which he acquired as a youth, and “golfin’,” which he undertook later in life.⁷

Mitchell’s family and most of the people in northwestern Missouri were staunch southern Democrats. His father had fought valiantly for the Confederacy as had many others in the region. Consequently, he was exposed during his early years to people who feared African Americans and considered them to be inferior in intelligence and character. Mitchell was not immune to the impact of his cultural environment, and it would shape his attitude toward African Americans as a journalist and a politician for decades.⁸

Mitchell worked as a “printer’s devil,” an apprentice in a print shop performing whatever tasks the printer needed done, such as mixing tubs of ink or fetching type, at age fifteen. When he enrolled at Grand River Christian University in 1895 he continued his journalism education and edited the *Edinburgh Truth and Light*, a college publication. He also studied English and learned to read Greek and Latin. Years later he would recall reading works such as *Les Miserables* and *Don Quixote*. At that time he also owned Bibles written in Greek and in Latin, and a grandson remembered him using the Greek Bible to outline a lesson plan for a Sunday school class that he taught. After graduating in 1899 he studied journalism at the University of Missouri in Columbia for one year before returning to Grand River Christian University as a member of the faculty, teaching Latin, Greek, and German. He also operated the college’s printing shop.⁹

When the college closed in 1900, he purchased the school’s printing equipment and established a specialty printing shop. He also began reading law with the goal of passing the state bar exam to become an attorney. But his life and career soon would take a major turn.¹⁰

One of Lon’s older brothers, Benjamin Solomon “Cap” Mitchell, earlier had moved to Higgins, Texas, where he became publisher of a weekly newspaper and the postmaster for the community. In 1892 he obtained a 160-acre homestead just across the boundary in Day County, Oklahoma Territory, where he erected a large, four-room sod

house and moved his family to that location. He continued operating his newspaper in Higgins, walking the five miles from his homestead to his office each day.¹¹

In 1900 Cap wrote Lon to tell him that Day County had a Republican newspaper but no Democratic newspaper. He encouraged Lon to move to the county seat, Grand, and establish such a newspaper. This seemed to be a good opportunity in Lon's view and, accompanied by his younger brother Richard "Dick" Mitchell, he made the move in 1902. He shipped his printing press by rail to Canadian, Texas, and from there transported it by wagon to Grand. There he and Dick established a weekly newspaper, the *Canadian Valley Echo*, with Lon serving as publisher and Dick as editor. While operating the newspaper, Lon continued studying law.¹²

Day County was a county in Oklahoma Territory from 1892 until 1907. Located at the site of Upper Robinson Spring near the "best native grove of pecan trees on the prairies of Western Oklahoma," Grand was situated at the western edge of the grove on the north bank of the river. Mitchell claimed a 160-acre homestead nearby and quickly got his newspaper into production.¹³

Mitchell became a strong advocate for the Democratic Party through editorials and in covering the activities of the party on the local level. He also personally became active in party politics and was one of the organizers of a meeting to establish a county Democratic Party Committee. During the organizational meeting, Mitchell was elected chairman of the committee by unanimous vote. Editorially and through his individual activities, Mitchell also strongly supported the party at the state and national levels. For Day County, Mitchell and his colleagues stood for "an honest administration of the affairs" of the county, "a reduction of taxes," "economy in public expenditures," and the advancement of the county "financially, intellectually, and socially." Dr. O. C. Newman, who later would be renowned as a pioneer physician at Shattuck, was elected secretary of the committee. Mitchell and Newman, both bachelors, became close friends, living in the same boarding house for a short time.¹⁴

Mitchell's bachelor days would be short lived in Grand, however as he soon was reunited with a young woman he had met while in college at Edinburgh. Frances Ethel Madden was the daughter of William P. Madden, a member of the faculty at the university. Madden had moved his family to a homestead near Archer City, Texas. He then learned about an available tract of land near Roll, a community in Day County south of the Canadian River. He had sufficient confidence in Ethel to send her to the land office at El Reno, Oklahoma Territory, to

Ethel Madden, c. 1890 (photograph courtesy of the Mitchell Family Papers).



file a claim to homestead this land. When she announced to the clerk the land for which she wished to file, a man standing immediately behind her declared that was the land he had planned to claim. Had she arrived a few minutes later, the land that would become the family homestead likely would have been unavailable. It was upon this land, one mile west of Roll, where Madden, his wife, Aranette, and their two children established their farm.¹⁵

Madden became active politically in Day County and must have quickly come into contact with Mitchell. A music major in college, Ethel taught school at Pie Flat and Springer in the county. She also taught piano and voice lessons in Grand and organized the Rebecca Lodge in that community. Ethel and Lon, now known professionally as E. L., became reacquainted and soon fell in love. They were married on the Madden Farm in 1904. Ethel and E. L. proved to be a wonderful match and their marriage would endure until his death in 1952. They had four children. Bryan Leon in 1905, Bernice Ethel in 1907, Ruth in 1910, and Norris Madden in 1912.¹⁶

Through the years Ethel would support her husband in all of his public and civic endeavors. She was active in clubs such as the Ohoyahoma Club, Literary Club of Clinton, and the Chalisto Club. She was the organist for the Eastern Star and the Rebeccas, and she belonged



Photograph of Lon and Ethel Mitchell on their wedding day in 1904 (photograph courtesy of the Mitchell Family Papers).

to many social clubs. Ethel also “took care of the family completely” She loved to cook, always had a vegetable garden whenever she had room to do so, and she loved to raise chickens. She raised fryers, collected eggs to cook and sell, and started her husband’s daily routine with a breakfast of bacon and eggs.¹⁷

The advent of statehood, which Mitchell fervently supported, brought major changes to Mitchell and his family. During the constitutional convention, county boundaries for the new state were established, and Day County passed from existence. The portion of the county north of the Canadian River became part of Ellis County while the area of the county south of the river was incorporated into Roger Mills County. Grand no longer was a county seat and the community’s prospects seemed dim. The Mitchell family, his close friend O. C. Newman, and others debated whether to move to Cheyenne, Arnett, or Shattuck. Newman decided that, from a medical standpoint, it would be better for him to move to Shattuck. Mitchell determined that Cheyenne was the place for him as a newspaper publisher, political activist and potential candidate for office.¹⁸

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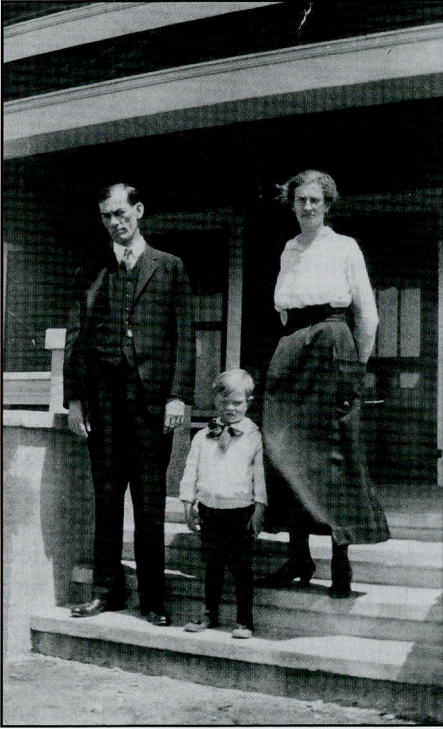
A small village, Cheyenne had 288 people in 1907; however, it was to be the county seat for Roger Mills County, making its future seem bright. The town incorporated in 1909, and by 1910 the population had increased to 468. Mitchell chose Cheyenne in part because he believed that there was room in that community for a new newspaper. Thus he moved his printing press to Cheyenne and, with Dick, established the *Roger Mills Sentinel*. They made the move in February 1907, and fording the Canadian River was the most difficult aspect of the move. The wagon carrying the press became bogged in the river. The brothers worked in the ice and frigid water of the stream for twenty-four hours before successfully traversing the treacherous river.¹⁹

In his inaugural issue of the newspaper, Mitchell announced the arrival of the Mitchell brothers as the publishers of the *Roger Mills Sentinel* "because this town and Roger Mills County suit us." The brothers reversed the roles they previously had played with the *Canadian Valley Echo*, with Dick becoming publisher and E. L. serving as editor. Changes in E. L.'s life would lead him to resign as editor in 1911, although he would maintain his offices in the Sentinel Building.²⁰

For the subscription price of \$1 per year, the estimated 2,500 readers of the *Sentinel* enjoyed extensive state, national, and international news coverage. Local events and people also were well covered, and the Mitchell brothers produced an extraordinary amount of editorial copy. In addition to local advertisers, the paper featured advertising for products such as California Fig Syrup, a "family laxative" used by "millions of the Well Informed of the world." Thedford's Black-Draught, "a prompt and successful liver medication," promised readers that it would "clean out your clogged canal," thereby providing relief from various ailments. By all appearances, the newspaper quickly became a profitable enterprise.²¹

Mitchell immediately became involved in Democrat politics. In their inaugural issue E. L. and Dick announced that the paper would be an "advocate of the policies of the great Democratic Party" because they believed that "in the ascendancy of the Democratic doctrines lies the great hope of the country." Within two months after his arrival in Cheyenne, E. L. cochaired a meeting to establish a new Roger Mills County Democratic Party Committee. Mitchell represented the portion of the county that formerly was Day County while J. L. Paschal represented the remainder of Roger Mills County.²²

Mitchell quickly became involved in politics at the state level, voicing opinions on a variety of issues. He also strongly supported the successful candidacy of Charles N. Haskell for governor. When William H. Taft defeated William Jennings Bryan to become president of the



The Mitchell family in Cheyenne, c. 1909 (photograph courtesy of the Mitchell Family Papers).

United States in 1908, E. L. and Dick expressed bitter disappointment. They asserted that wealthy individuals and large corporations had “dumped” sufficient money “into the slush fund to do the work.” Bryan, “The Great Commoner,” went “down for the third time before the invincible hosts of plutocracy,” E. L. wrote.²³

The Mitchell brothers also used the newspaper to boost the economic development of Cheyenne and Roger Mills County. They emphasized positive developments and helped promote some of them. One such project was funding and construction of a short line railroad from Cheyenne to Strong City, a Roger Mills County community that was the western terminus of the Clinton and Oklahoma Western Railway, which commonly was referred to as the “Cow.” E. L. served on the board of the company of local men who built the railroad, invested in the project, and urged others to do so to ensure the future growth and prosperity of Cheyenne. They were successful and the short line began operation in June 1913 shipping livestock, cotton, broomcorn, grain, and hay to market.²⁴

Mitchell’s years spent reading the law came to fruition when he was a member of the first class admitted to the Oklahoma State Bar

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after statehood in 1908. He immediately formed a partnership with Sylvester Grim, creating the firm of Mitchell and Grim, which pursued the general practice of law. This firm persisted until 1911, after which Mitchell practiced independently. He advertised weekly in the *Sentinel* proclaiming "Careful Attention Given All Clients" and "Your Business Solicited." He practiced alone until 1915 when he partnered with his brother-in-law Perry Madden, forming the firm Mitchell and Madden. This partnership was dissolved in 1916 when the pursuit of politics would cause him to alter the course of his career.²⁵

Mitchell launched his political career soon after arriving in Cheyenne. His status as an attorney and journalist combined with his populist political convictions made him a logical candidate for public office, and he announced his candidacy for a seat in the Oklahoma State Senate in 1908. In a campaign advertisement, he noted that he was "especially interested in the material development" of Oklahoma and particularly the western part of the state. He stated that he was a "firm believer" in the "doctrine of the greatest good to the greatest number," and that in the legislature he would support only those measures that "will be just and equitable alike to farmer and merchant, capital and labor, poverty and wealth." Finally, he pledged to represent his constituents as "faithfully and as well as his ability will admit." He was elected easily and was reelected four years later without opposition.²⁶

Mitchell's election had an impact on his family life. Ethel did not like living in the city and believed that Cheyenne provided a better environment for raising children. While the Mitchells rented a house in Oklahoma City to be occupied when the state senate was in session, Ethel stayed in Cheyenne with the children, only occasionally spending time with her husband in Oklahoma City. A devoted family man, Mitchell must have missed seeing his family on a daily basis.²⁷

Mitchell's role as a leader in the Senate became apparent during his first term when he was elected secretary of the Senate Democratic Caucus. He also chaired the committee on private corporations. His leadership stature was such that he was among other state leaders waiting with Governor Charles N. Haskell at the Huckins Hotel in Oklahoma City on June 12, 1911, for the arrival of the official state seal which had been spirited out of Guthrie immediately after Oklahoma City was selected by the voters to be the state's capitol. Mitchell continued to rise in stature in the senate, ultimately being elected president pro tempore of that body in 1915. During his eight years in the senate he would serve on a variety of committees and deal with a number of important issues.²⁸

As a staunch southern Democrat, Mitchell was thrust immediately into the issue of the role of African American men as voters and office holders, and the enforced segregation of the races throughout society. Mitchell's attitude toward blacks in the political process was shaped by his life experiences in Missouri. Moreover, he knew that most blacks would vote Republican, the party of Abraham Lincoln, if given the opportunity. His viewpoint was made clear in 1907 when he encouraged voters to approve the proposed state constitution, thereby ending the territorial period during which Republican presidents had appointed Republicans to govern the territory. In his view the alternative to approving the constitution was to "continue under the domination of the coon, carpet-bagger, and corporation."²⁹

A symbol of the African American and Republican threat to Democratic Party control of state government was A. C. Hamlin, the lone African American member of the first legislature. A senator from Logan County, Hamlin's treatment in the senate was described by Mitchell. "'Hon.' Mr Hamlin very graciously 'Jim Crowed' himself by taking a seat at the extreme southeastern section of the hall. No seat is placed beside his, and nothing oppressive or odoriferous is noticed from that region." Mitchell believed that "the negro vote is a menace to white government" and that "the majority of our citizens favor an effective law restricting suffrage to decency and intelligence." Mitchell thus supported the amendment of the state constitution to institute the grandfather clause, which exempted descendants of men who voted before 1867 from being subjected to new literacy and property requirements for voting. This caused the new requirements to fall heavily on blacks while scarcely impacting others. Hamlin was defeated for reelection when he ran for a second term, and he was the last African American to serve in the state legislature until 1964.³⁰

Mitchell remained vigilant regarding blacks and voting. He observed in 1910 that the Republicans had "begun war on the Grandfather Clause." Referring to the gubernatorial election, he observed that "a vote for [Democrat Lee] Cruce is a vote for white domination—a vote for [Republican Joseph] McNeal is a vote for negro domination." The voters, he asserted, would "answer with their suffrage the ominous question 'Shall Oklahoma be Negroid or Anglo Saxon?'" Seven years later he noted that the state had been "very careful" to have "separate coaches for negroes and to limit the black man somewhat" in his voting privileges, but, he asserted, the state had done "great things in providing for the education of the blacks. Separate schools had been established wherever there were blacks," and "at Langston a really great university for the colored people is being maintained by the state."³¹

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Regarding women's suffrage, an issue gaining prominence in 1910, Mitchell believed that the women of Roger Mills County "were content to let the 'old man' do the voting and do their part in helping him to cast a good, honest ballot." A woman, he wrote, should "occupy her natural sphere as guardian of the home life and the dispenser of moral sunshine." "Less than one in five women in Roger Mills County would want the vote, he believed, and "without the ballot they will remain the same ideal, lovable beings they have ever been in America, God bless 'em."³²

Interestingly, Mitchell's views on women's suffrage changed quickly. In 1916 he observed that states in the West that allowed women to vote had strongly supported Democrat Woodrow Wilson to serve a second term as president of the United States. "Women came to the rescue," he observed, and "vindicated the argument in favor of suffrage." With the exception of "certain illiterate females of color," he was convinced that women will "read and study the issues more intelligently than the men generally." Two years later, in 1918, he noted that "petticoats in politics" were coming because of the imminent passage of the suffrage amendment to the US Constitution. Mitchell was pleased because "they can't mix it up any worse than the he's."³³

During the Second, Third and Fourth Legislatures he steadily rose in prominence in the senate. Early in his career he focused on legislation impacting agriculture. He also supported a bill that made it a felony to "run a joint where intoxicants are sold, or to set as agent for a wholesale liquor house and take Oklahoma orders." During the Fourth Legislature he became chairman of the committee on revenue, taxation, and appropriations and focused much of his attention on the matters coming before that committee. He was the joint author of an anti-race track gambling bill that was passed into law and a good roads bill that passed but was vetoed. He also chaired a special committee that recommended the final adoption of the Harris-Day Code, which provided for the codification and printing in a useful form all the laws of the state of Oklahoma to that date.³⁴

Mitchell's rise to prominence in the senate was sufficient that he became a candidate to be elected by his colleagues to the position of president pro tempore of the senate, the top leadership position in that body. His opponent was Senator C. C. Shaw of Mill Creek. Five days before the scheduled caucus during which the leadership positions would be determined, both candidates declared themselves to be confident of victory. Mitchell was said to be "absolutely certain of winning," noting that he could count on twenty-six democratic votes and twenty would constitute a majority. Shaw withdrew his candidacy the follow-

ing day, throwing his support to Mitchell in the interest of harmony, noting that “with Senator Mitchell in the chair all members, regardless of previous alignment, will be accorded fair treatment.”³⁵

One of Mitchell’s first duties was to preside over a joint session of the senate and the house of representatives as part of the inaugural celebration for newly elected Governor Robert L. Williams. The joint session was held at the Overholser Theater, during which the oath of office for Governor Williams was administered by Oklahoma Supreme Court Justice Matthew J. Kane. Mitchell had strongly supported Williams’s candidacy and the two became friends and political allies. Mitchell’s young daughter, Bernice, recalled years later that Ethel was visiting Mitchell in his office when Governor Williams stopped by to invite Mitchell and his family to go the state fair with him. E. L., Ethel, and Bernice accompanied the governor to the fair. Bernice remembered the sulky races and that the governor was “big and fat.”³⁶

As president pro tempore, Mitchell presided over the daily business of the senate and served as an ex officio member of every senate committee. He also coauthored a measure proposing an amendment to the state constitution abolishing the county court system, and he was a joint author of a bill relating to libel that was intended to prevent unfair statements in public speaking and debate. Neither measure was enacted into law. However, he acquitted himself well as the leader of the senate.³⁷

As the Fifth Legislature session drew to a close, Mitchell’s plan not to seek reelection was known to the senators. To express their appreciation to him for his leadership, senators and senate employees present him a “twenty-one jewel gold watch.” Various senate Democrats rose to speak in praise of Mitchell. Speaking for his Republican colleagues, Oklahoma Senate Minority Leader John H. Burford Jr. of Guthrie saluted the “genial, generous, fair, and unprejudiced” Senator Mitchell, expressed gratitude for his “manly impartial treatment,” and wished him “happiness and success and better rewards.”³⁸

Mitchell returned to Cheyenne to develop his law practice and enjoy family life, but his plans soon were disrupted. On March 27, 1916, Mitchell’s brother, George, shot and killed a bartender in front of a bar in Excelsior Springs, Missouri. His father appealed to him to assist in the legal defense of his brother. George, who was said to be “at times addicted to drink,” testified that he had taken two drinks that evening and was sitting on a bench near the entrance to a bar. Bartender Charles Coffey determined that George was bothering passersby and decided to move him. A fracas ensued during which George shot and killed Coffey. Mitchell participated with a local attorney to defend

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George at his preliminary hearing on April 7 during which George's trial was scheduled for September 11.³⁹

Mitchell returned to Cheyenne only to have calamity strike on June 8 when a fire destroyed the building that housed the *Roger Mills Sentinel* production equipment and its offices. His law office also was located in this building and he lost all of his office furniture and books. His uninsured loss was valued at \$1,500. The building and equipment, also not insured, were valued a \$4,000. Mitchell asked the court for a continuance because the loss of his office and library to the fire rendered him unable to prepare properly for the trial. In addition, the local lawyer who had been engaged to assist him had died in July, and the defendant had been unable to obtain another attorney until September 9. Notwithstanding those circumstances, the court ordered the trial to commence the next day, September 12. To Mitchell's regret, his brother was convicted of murder. The conviction was appealed to the Missouri Supreme Court in June 1918, but the verdict was upheld. George served only seven years in prison.⁴⁰

The fire at the *Sentinel* plant had been discovered at 3 a.m. and the first individuals on the scene believed that the floor of the building had been soaked with oil and that the fire clearly was a case of arson. Dick Mitchell asserted that there was "absolutely no question about it, the fire was incendiary." Moreover, he was certain that it was the work of members of the Socialist Party who intended "to stop the publication of the *Roger Mills Sentinel*." The Socialist Party had become a significant political force in the region, and Dick Mitchell had strongly condemned them. He managed to continue printing the paper in Cheyenne for a year using for a time the printing facilities of another community newspaper. In June 1917, however, he announced that he had sold the *Sentinel* to an employee who would move the paper to Strong City, another community in Roger Mills County. He also urged his fellow citizens to be "loyal Americans and 'cut out' socialism."⁴¹

In 1916 at age forty, E. L. Mitchell had decided not to stand for reelection to the Oklahoma Senate, and his office in Cheyenne had been destroyed by fire. He was open to new opportunities in journalism and in the legal profession. Such an opportunity arose in Clinton, Oklahoma. Mitchell became an owner of the *Clinton Chronicle*, a weekly newspaper, and was listed as publisher, editor, managing editor, and business manager of the enterprise. He also resumed the practice of law. Mitchell was at work at the *Chronicle* by the first week of July 1916, but he was at loose ends until he was able to rent a house so Ethel and their children could join him. He wrote Ethel on July 10 that he hoped to have the deal closed within two weeks. He noted that he



Clinton, Oklahoma, street scene, photo by Blunck Studio (19589.26.3. Alvin Rucker Collection, OHS Research Division).

did not know if he could “stand Jenson’s that long or not. They are light feeders. I am anxious for you to get down here, so we can be at home.”⁴²

Mitchell indeed was a dedicated family man. He was loved and respected by his children who would “jump if he said jump,” and would go to bed without argument when told to do so. He was able to accomplish this without ever having to raise his voice. The citizens of Clinton quickly learned that Mitchell also was a hard-working individual who already had significant newspaper, legal, and political experience. They soon became accustomed to seeing him in his standard “uniform,” a three-piece suit and a tie, and he quickly became a recognized and respected leader in the community.⁴³

In his editorials and choices in news coverage, Mitchell unabashedly operated the *Chronicle* as an advocate for the Democratic Party. He attacked the Socialist Party and its adherents in western Oklahoma, accusing them not only of burning down the *Roger Mills Sentinel* building, but also of torching the Roger Mills County Courthouse. He editorialized on a wide range of political subjects, supporting the creation of the Oklahoma Tax Commission, and repeatedly arguing for the implementation of an aggressive road building program.⁴⁴

Mitchell also continued his advocacy for frugality in government. He seemed especially interested in revising the size and structure of the state legislature. On one occasion he editorially supported the concept

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of a unicameral legislature that had been proposed by the editor of the *Daily Oklahoman*. Under this proposal the legislature would have only one house that would consist of two members elected from each of the state's congressional districts and four members elected at large. These twenty individuals would receive "good" salaries and be kept "on the job all the time." Perhaps realizing that this change likely would never happen, a month later he proposed reducing the size of the legislature to forty in the house of representatives and sixteen in the senate. Senators and representatives would be paid sufficiently to get the "best men" to run for office, and they would meet for ninety days each year. He also advocated reducing the number of secondary agricultural and mechanical schools by three and the normal schools by three because the state needed "fewer and better institutions."⁴⁵

Mitchell also had strong opinions about the electoral process in Oklahoma. He was troubled by the cost of running for statewide office, noting that the cost of campaigning in a primary election, often a run-off election, and the general election prohibited many of the "ablest" and "cleanest" men from seeking the governorship. Consequently, he advocated a state convention for the Democratic Party during which the party's candidate for governor would be selected. This would make it possible for individuals who did not have a "large roll" of money in their pocket to have a chance to be nominated. This would allow the party to get behind a "clean, competent and honest person for governor" "whether he has a red cent or not, and if he hasn't the better"⁴⁶

Mitchell also editorialized on local political issues, on religious topics, and often printed jokes and humorous sayings in the editorial section. Reflecting his populist viewpoint, he was concerned about "exclusive social sets" that tended to form in churches because he believed that many people who could not afford "expensive clothes and other trinkets" chose not to attend. The churches, he believed, "will have to go more on religion than society in order to be attractive to more people." Unlike many of his contemporaries, Mitchell had a favorable opinion of people of the Jewish faith. Noting in 1916 that the Jews of America were preparing to make an enormous, unsecured loan to the Jews of various war-torn nations in Europe, Mitchell observed that this act demonstrated the "great race pride of that people. American Jews always have aided in meeting great issues." Mitchell often lightened the tone of his editorial section with jokes such as "It is a good thing for a newly married couple to remember that while love may be blind, the neighbors are not."⁴⁷

Mitchell maintained his law office at the newspaper office, and he continued to do legal work for clients. One such foray led him to Wash-

ington, DC, where, in conjunction with another local attorney, Sam Hawks, he sought to have the Indian Agency at Colony moved to Clinton. Mitchell and Hawks were successful in obtaining the order, but it was set aside by Commissioner Cato Sells of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and “a certain church organization” because Clinton and its leading citizens were said to be “wet.” While in Washington, Mitchell and Hawks visited the Library of Congress, the White House, the Government Printing Office, and the Smithsonian Institution. They also sat in on sessions in the US House of Representatives and the Senate, and they had the privilege of seeing and hearing the “immortal” President Woodrow Wilson deliver a speech.⁴⁸

While in Washington, Mitchell observed that tension among lawmakers and administration officials was palpable. Every person they met “seemed to labor under some particular mental strain. We were not yet in war but we knew we soon would be.” When the United States entered World War I, Mitchell editorialized frequently to rally support for the war effort and to advocate the justness of America’s participation in it. He exhorted his readers to support the troops by purchasing war bonds, working efficiently, supporting the farmers in their efforts to maximize food production, and understanding that there would be “no peace as long as the German army is intact.” Moreover, he asserted that any “man in Custer County that is not in accord with our government and its plans of prosecuting this war, Germany is where he belongs and he should be separated from his property acquired here before he is shipped.”⁴⁹

Before returning home from Washington, DC, Mitchell and Hawks took the opportunity to visit New York City, taking a midnight train from Washington and arriving in the Big Apple at 7 a.m. Mitchell was impressed by the metropolis, noting that it seemed to be “without limit in size and extent.” He enjoyed a breathtaking view of the city from the fifty-eighth floor of the “great Woolworth Building. It certainly was the most remarkable thing I ever saw,” he exclaimed. The big rivers and harbor filled with various types of sea craft, the magnificent Statue of Liberty, the Brooklyn Bridge, Trinity Church, and Wall Street all captivated the interest of Mitchell and Hawks.⁵⁰

By spring 1918 Mitchell was considering entering the political arena once again. For a time he pondered getting into the race to be governor and was said to have received “urgent requests” to make that effort. He ultimately decided not to do so because there already were many candidates from the west side of the state. Mitchell then was approached by leading citizens of Custer, Washita, and Kiowa Counties to become a candidate for the Oklahoma Senate. He knew that returning to the

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Mitchell's law office, c. 1920 (photograph courtesy of the Mitchell Family Papers).

senate could cost him a “great deal of time and considerable money and business,” but he believed in the importance of public service and agreed to stand for election.⁵¹

Perhaps Mitchell looked forward to serving in the senate with William H. Murray, the “Sage of Tishomingo” and, like Mitchell, a political ally of the current governor, Robert L. Williams. Mitchell strongly supported Murray for governor in the Democratic Party primary against J. B. A. Robertson. Robertson, however, defeated Murray in the primary election on August 4, 1918. Mitchell received the Democratic Party nomination without opposition but afterward accepted an appointment by Governor Williams to the chairmanship of the State Industrial Commission, thereby necessitating his withdrawal from the senate race. It is not clear why he choose the appointment over his nearly certain election to the senate. He may have viewed the senate seat to be less attractive with Robertson in the governor’s office rather than Murray.⁵²

Mitchell was appointed by Williams specifically to fill the unexpired term of commission chairman A. A. McDonald, effective September 1, 1918. McDonald had fifty-four months remaining in his term. Mitchell’s appointment was an interim appointment, as it would have to be rati-

fied by the Oklahoma Senate during the next session. His appointment was affirmed on January 20, 1919. Perry Madden, Mitchell's brother-in-law and former law partner, moved from Cheyenne to Clinton to take over Mitchell's law practice, and he turned the management of the *Clinton Chronicle* to his brother Dick. He found a home for this family on North Kelley Avenue in Oklahoma City, somewhere between Northeast Thirteenth Street and Northeast Twenty-Third Street.⁵³

The Industrial Commission was charged with administering Oklahoma's Workmen's Compensation Law. It operated much like the Worker's Compensation Court of recent vintage. The three commissioners would listen to the claims of injured workers to determine if they should receive compensation and, if so, how much they should receive. As chairman of the commission Mitchell presided over the hearings and wrote some of the opinions that were rendered. In other instances, a commission member would write the opinion. In each ruling the commissioners who did not write the ruling would indicate whether they concurred with the opinion or disagreed with it. At least one additional commissioner was required to agree with the written opinion in order for it to be effected.⁵⁴

Mitchell's service as chairman of the Industrial Commission proved to be relatively brief, as he resigned effective March 10, 1919, just six months after taking office. During that period he wrote nine opinions, six of which were in favor of workers seeking compensation. The remaining three cases were decided in favor of the business. One of those plaintiffs was determined to be a contract employee, while another was ruled not to have been in the employ of the defendant. The third involved an apparently fraudulent claim involving an alleged neck injury for which the claimant never sought treatment, did not notify his employer of the injury, and waited a year to file the unsubstantiated claim.⁵⁵

Mitchell and his fellow commissioners also endeavored to increase the protection offered to workers by recommending to the legislature some modifications to the Workmen's Compensation law. In 1918 the law did not provide compensation for loss of an ear, nose, or disfigurement for life by the effects of fire or explosions. The commission took the position that such disfigurement constituted a liability for a man who had to earn his living by labor, and, therefore, the individual should be compensated. The commission also recommended extending the period of "medical attention" from fifteen to thirty or sixty days at the discretion of the commission and that the maximum rate of compensation be increased from \$10 to \$15 per week. The legislature in early 1919 did amend the Workmen's Compensation law to reduce the

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waiting period before compensation could begin from fourteen to seven days and to alter the maximum compensation per week to \$18.⁵⁶

Mitchell's reasons for resigning his position on the Industrial Commission with four years remaining on his term are not known. Perhaps Ethel's preference for living in smaller communities was a factor, or he did not enjoy the work to the extent he had anticipated. Mitchell undoubtedly took some satisfaction from playing a role in making the workers compensation law more favorable to employees, much to the disapproval of many employers as represented by the Oklahoma Employers Association. After his resignation became effective, Mitchell decided to return to Clinton to resume his practice of law.⁵⁷

Mitchell quickly settled into his law practice and soon began to get involved in civic leadership. He served terms on Clinton's school board and as a trustee of the Clinton Public Library and became increasingly well known and respected in the community. By March 1923 he was ready for a new responsibility—mayor of Clinton. In an editorial in the *Clinton Chronicle*, Mitchell's brother Dick observed that Clinton needed a man like E. L. Mitchell who "will be accessible to all and who will unite the people for the progress of the city." Mitchell received 60 percent of the vote in the primary election against two other candidates. Because there were no Republicans in the race, Mitchell's primary election victory was all that was required for him to become mayor.⁵⁸

Endnotes

Paul F Lambert is coordinator of the annual Oklahoma History Conference, which is sponsored by the Oklahoma Historical Society. He also serves as an assistant curator of exhibits at the Oklahoma History Center. Part two of this article will appear in volume 92, no. 4 (winter 2014–15).

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