

The Oklahoma Delegation to the Democratic Convention of 1924

*By William D. Pennington**

Oklahoma delegates to the Democratic National Convention of 1924 were determined to make a better showing than they had four years previously. At that convention, they had clung to their own favorite son, Senator Robert L. Owen, too long to receive any credit for helping in the nomination of James M. Cox. This time the delegates wished to play an important role in the jockeying for support by the leading candidates for president. William G. McAdoo of California and Alfred E. Smith of New York were the leading candidates, and their fight for the nomination would cause the convention to go down in history as the longest on record. Oklahoma would play a significant part in the selection of the nominees and the proceedings of this historic political convention.

The Oklahoma delegation to the Democratic Convention in New York City was divided into two distinct groups—the pro-Klan and the anti-Klan. Ed Semans of Oklahoma City was the obvious leader of the pro-Klan group, while Governor Martin E. Trapp led the anti-Klan forces. These two factions would test their strength throughout the convention.

Hey There, Gangway!



No wonder they want to go to New York.

Look at this welcome of Oklahoma delegates at the Pennsylvania station. Reading from left to right: Scott Ferris, national

committeeman; Mrs. Catherine van Leuven, assistant attorney general; Mrs. D. A. McDougal, national committeewoman from Oklahoma; in the background with the cheaters, Cam Campbell, Ferris' aide; Gov. M. E. Trapp,

skip one then "Big Boy" Mayor Cargill, with the bow tie and the acre of white shirt showing; next Mrs. Scott Ferris; Mrs. W. W. Cohen, and Mrs. Allen Carruthers, one of the officers of the Oklahoma society of New York.

This photograph of the Oklahoma delegation arriving in New York appeared in The Daily Oklahoman. Pictured are Scott Ferris, national committeeman (left), Governor M.E. Trapp (center), and Mayor O.A. Cargill (back with bow tie).

The unit rule, casting a state's vote as a block, gave Oklahoma the appearance of being united when in reality a fierce fight was being waged within the delegation. Scott Ferris of Lawton, national committeeman from Oklahoma, made every effort from the beginning to patch this division. He wanted either Trapp or Semans elected chairman of the delegation with the other being named to the resolutions committee.¹ His first recommendation was followed, but the second was not. After a two-hour heated argument over the chairmanship of the delegation, the Oklahoma anti-Klan forces won the first battle with Trapp defeating Ed Semans 11 1/2 to 8 1/2. Instead of Semans being elected to the resolution committee, Senator Robert L. Owen

THE
TORS
SPORT
legislature
Provide
ctors.

state legisla-
de sufficient
ent is made
e labor com-
on the mech-
hool June
lost his life
me

"That the
ling was due
n" Connally
overning the
and shows
lable for fail-
The penalty
0 to \$200 and
irty days to
t save.

his report
e the duties
ectors in his
are required
een 500 and
er elevators;
ories and the
ousands of

voidable
deaths due
this city Con-
resulted from
ew buildings
ok. Each of
less sacrifice
the state of
dequate force
partment for

GIRL
T

Fay Cr
Trai
Na

Judged
oon by
Crain wa
Training
day night
sheriff, a
ant comm
correction

With 6
arms are
Mrs. J. S
the girl
bed beca
of temper
witnesses
scribed h
old, woul
temperam
sky to be
placed he
court.

"Either
T. G. Net
the Capit
med up t
The girl
a zealous
In the
nothing c
character
court she
ing the j
justice—t
a ward c

Afterw
her fath
friends, c
she brok
verdict w
har baby,
what har

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA



Governor M.E. Trapp, head of the Oklahoma delegation, as he appeared when he was Lieutenant Governor in 1915 (above left); members of the Ku Klux Klan (lower right), who exerted great influence at the convention and in the Oklahoma delegation (Courtesy Western History Collections).

was chosen for the post. Owen later was to play a key role when the Klan issue arose during the platform report.

It was quite evident coming into the convention that Oklahoma's twenty votes would go on the first ballot for McAdoo, even though the state convention had not so instructed the delegation. This was due in part to the strong support given McAdoo by the pro-Klan members of the delegation and the strong McAdoo support throughout Oklahoma. Three days prior to the opening day of the convention, Oklahoma's delegation was considered certain to vote for McAdoo on the first ballot. Surprisingly, after that first ballot, there was no prediction as to their action.² Ferris announced the strategy when he said that it was safe to predict that Oklahoma's delegation would vote for McAdoo on the first ballot but also declined to guess what it would do after that.³

As the opening day of the convention neared, McAdoo's support within the Oklahoma delegation began to decline somewhat. There were wild rumors that the Oklahomans would eventually vote for Al Smith, but this was called a joke by the Oklahoma delegates.⁴ It was not as much a joke as some thought. After talking to a few delegates from Oklahoma, Smith stated in a very positive manner, "I will get some votes from Oklahoma on the first ballot and eventually all of them."⁵ The split in the delegation between the Klan and the anti-Klan factions now began to carry over into the choice of the presi-

OKLAHOMA AND THE DEMOCRATIC CONVENTION OF 1924

dential nominee. McAdoo was drawing his main support from the Railroad Brotherhoods, Drys, William Jennings Bryan's faction, and the Ku Klux Klan. On the other hand, Smith was supported by the Wets, Catholics, and city delegates. Consequently, Semans's group would be for McAdoo all the way, while Trapp's side would change often. Being anti-Klan, Trapp and his allies also tended to be anti-McAdoo.

As the convention opened, speculation as to whom Oklahoma would strongly support continued. Trapp said that the sentiment of the delegation was uncertain but probably "leaned toward McAdoo."⁶ It was also believed that Oklahoma would give a solid vote for Smith at some stage in the balloting, a strategy first suggested by Mayor Otto A. Cargill of Oklahoma City. The Smith managers believed that if they could get the solid vote of Oklahoma at some time in the balloting, it would start a tide that would lead to the Smith nomination. They figured if the convention saw Oklahoma, a strong Klan state in the past, voting for Smith, it would instantly remove a lot of religious prejudices and start a stampede to Smith.⁷ Governor Trapp agreed with this thinking by saying he wanted the Oklahoma vote thrown to Smith, but felt there was a lot of determined opposition which would probably send Oklahoma behind a dark horse no later than the third ballot.⁸

Roy McNaughton of Miami, Oklahoma, suggested a dark horse candidate, John W. Davis from West Virginia.⁹ Sentiment also was



THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

shown for giving Robert L. Owen the Oklahoma vote on the first ballot. This strategy was based on the fact that this would not offend any of the men being nominated.¹⁰ As these stated alternatives indicated, the Oklahoma delegates were prepared to begin their fight knowing their main objective was to help determine who was going to be the Democratic presidential nominee. They probably did not realize that their own split within the delegation would characterize the entire mood of the convention.

The keynote address opening the convention was given by the temporary chairman, Senator Pat Harrison. Following Thomas J. Walsh's selection as permanent chairman, the nominating and seconding speeches for candidates running for president on the Democratic ticket began. Oklahoma's only action during the early proceedings was when James D. Phelan placed the name of McAdoo in nomination. The Oklahoma standard held by Hubert Bolen joined the wild and enduring demonstration which followed. This was a good indication that Oklahoma was inclined to favor McAdoo when the balloting started, but not all the Oklahoma delegates were in the marching line.¹¹

Oklahoma took an active part in adopting a platform following the nominating speeches and demonstrations. When the proposition concerning the Klan was brought up, there was some question as to how Oklahoma would vote, even though it had the reputation of being strong for the Klan. Just before the convention began, the national leaders of the Klan surprisingly admitted that the anti-Klan forces were in control of the Oklahoma delegation led by the chairman, Governor Trapp, who was a well known anti-Klan leader in the Southwest. The national leaders of the Klan believed the Oklahoma delegation was 51.5 percent anti-Klan and 49.5 percent for the Klan.¹² With this prediction from Klan leaders, it was believed that the Oklahoma delegation stood in favor of ousting the Klan from the Democratic Party. But then again during an anti-Klan demonstration early in the convention, the Oklahoma standard was not raised.¹³

When the time came to debate the Klan issue, Oklahoma's member of the resolutions committee, Senator Robert L. Owen, opened the debate by speaking for the majority report. In his speech, he made it clear that he was not defending the Klan. He declared, "We are not afraid of the Klan in Oklahoma." But he did plead for harmony in the ranks of democracy.¹⁴ He felt unity in the party could only be maintained if the Klan was not named. The issue aroused heated debate as

OKLAHOMA AND THE DEMOCRATIC CONVENTION OF 1924

representatives from opposing sides emphatically expressed their views. Finally, the vote for the resolution in favor of not naming the Klan was passed by one vote.¹⁵ Oklahoma surprised the convention when, after having such unusual anti-Klan feelings, Trapp and his faction of delegates yielded to the soft persuasion of the Klan advocates. The reason was party unity. Consequently, Oklahoma cast twenty solid votes, if not in defense of the Klan, then certainly against naming it.¹⁶ Senator Owen's speech probably had considerable effect on the delegates from Oklahoma. The Klan issue drew enough notice that Oklahoma's Republican Senator, John W. Harrel, came from Washington to hear the debate.¹⁷

After the Klan issue was settled, the balloting for the presidential nominee began. It started as a two-man fight between McAdoo and Al Smith. McAdoo had nearly a majority but not the required two-thirds (732 votes) to be nominated. Smith had only about a third of the delegates, but his third was solid and was enough to block the McAdoo nomination, opening the possibility that a dark horse candidate could win the nomination.

The Oklahoma delegation agreed upon the unit rule at the beginning and adhered to it throughout the balloting. Oklahoma's twenty block votes were skillfully bargained for and highly sought after. Oklahoma was attempting to cast the right vote for the right candidate on the right ballot to be in a position to get on the bandwagon when it started.

As predicted, on the first ballot Oklahoma cast her twenty votes for McAdoo. Instead of switching, however, Oklahoma stayed with him through the first twenty-six ballots, waiting for him to be nominated. But McAdoo could not get enough support for the necessary two-thirds.¹⁸ At this point, Oklahoma presented the second break of importance, after Missouri deserted McAdoo. Oklahoma immediately followed, giving her vote to their own Senator Owen. The switch resulted from a demand by Charles A. Welch of Antlers to have the opportunity to get the entire delegation behind the West Virginian, John W. Davis. Unable to swing a majority from McAdoo to Davis directly, it was agreed to give Senator Owen the vote until the delegation could come to terms on someone else. Owen broke the majority for McAdoo when he cast his vote for himself, causing the Oklahoma delegation to drop McAdoo.¹⁹

When Oklahoma switched on the twenty-sixth ballot, Governor Trapp declared the vote would never get back to McAdoo, while Welch predicted the state would go for Davis within five ballots.²⁰

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA



Senator Robert L. Owen, member of the delegation and a favorite son on several ballots (left); a photograph of the convention floor that appeared in The Daily Oklahoman, June 27, 1924 (Courtesy OHS).

There even were rumors that the Oklahoma delegation might go to Senator Samuel M. Ralston when he made his run. William Jennings Bryan was using Owen as a pawn in the game to eliminate John W. Davis,²¹ whom he had openly denounced earlier in the convention.²²

It was felt that after McAdoo was definitely dropped by the convention, Owen probably would get support from Florida and Nebraska. The possibility, as slim as it might have seemed, of his gaining the nomination ran through the minds of the Oklahoma delegation when they switched to him. But some delegates feared this shift to Owen might inhibit the delegation and prevent Oklahoma from playing an important role in future jockeying.²³

Oklahoma stayed with Owen until the thirty-fourth ballot, when the delegates joined Missouri and slid back to McAdoo. The strategy was for Oklahoma and Missouri to give the McAdoo candidacy another chance to develop its strength for the satisfaction of wavering delegates. But Oklahoma agreed that if McAdoo did not have a majority vote by the end of five more ballots they would swing away.²⁴ This move enabled McAdoo to get enough votes to pass 500 but not quite a majority.²⁵ After another two ballots Oklahoma again switched back to Owen on the thirty-sixth ballot. The Klan faction then regained control to give their votes back to McAdoo on the thirty-ninth ballot.

After McAdoo's bandwagon failed to materialize, Oklahoma on the forty-third ballot went to Senator Joseph T. Robinson of Arkansas. After trying Robinson until the fifty-fifth ballot, Oklahoma once again returned to McAdoo. Then the vote shifted quickly: sixtieth ballot, Owen; sixty-first ballot, Robinson; sixty-second ballot to sixty-eighth ballot, Owen again.²⁶ The sixty-eighth ballot was somewhat unique, for Oklahoma was represented by two candidates on the long

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

column. Mrs. Frank P. Lucas, a delegate from Ponca City, expressed her disgust with the lengthy convention when she said, "the trouble with this convention is that it lacks a leader. If they'd turn it over to the Federation of Women's Clubs to run, we'd end it and be on our way home tonight."³⁰

Judge Rutherford Brett, ex-Chief Justice of the Oklahoma Supreme Court, and Jimmie Mother, former county attorney of Carter County, gave their solutions to the deadlock in the convention in two telegrams—one to Senator Walsh, Chairman of the convention, and the other to Trapp. They asked the Democratic convention to make the nomination of Republican President Calvin Coolidge unanimous. They justified it by saying that this was what the American people had done already.³¹

Meanwhile the seesaw battle between McAdoo and Owen within the Oklahoma delegation continued. Semans would gain control, then Owen would vote for himself and throw the votes back to his column. From the sixty-ninth to the eightieth ballot it was McAdoo. From the eighty-first ballot to the eighty-ninth ballot it was Owen. Then it went back to McAdoo for ballots ninety through ninety-five. On the ninety-sixth ballot, Oklahoma's twenty votes appeared for the first time under the column of the lawyer from West Virginia, John W. Davis. The poll of the Oklahoma delegates expressed the struggle existing—8½ for Davis and 7 for McAdoo. Oklahoma stayed with Davis through the ninety-ninth ballot when McAdoo finally freed his delegates. Oklahoma, on the 100th ballot, went back to Owen with its flag up saying clearly it was ready for a bandwagon if anyone would show it to them. But the Semans-Klan faction was still in control.³² Someone in the Oklahoma delegation made the point that the state convention had not imposed any unit rule on them, but the chairman of the convention, Walsh, ruled that since the delegates had acted under it for 100 ballots, it was only fair that it should go on under a restriction which it had assumed for itself.³³ Oklahoma then went to Davis on the 101st ballot.

Finally, after an exhausted and strenuous fight not only within the Oklahoma delegation, but also in the convention as a whole, the convention selected John W. Davis on the 103rd ballot. Will Rogers said, "Who said miracles don't happen? Didn't the Democratic National Convention nominate a man at least?"³⁴ With the help of Ray McNaughton of Miami and W. B. Johnson of Okemah, who, starting as a minority of two, had urged Davis's nomination throughout the voting, Trapp's forces finally won a majority on the final

THERE'LL BE NOTHING LEFT BUT THE STUBS



While the Oklahoma delegation was in New York, editorial cartoons in The Daily Oklahoman visually captured the frustrations in selecting a presidential candidate.

WHO, OH WHO, CAN MAKE THE GRADE?



STUCK BETWEEN FLOORS



THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

ballot. As a result, Oklahoma was able to jump on the bandwagon and help select Davis as the Democratic nominee.³⁵ The best the Semans faction could do at this stage was to "grab the end-gate and hang on as the band passed."³⁶ The last ballot within the Oklahoma delegation had Senator W. M. Gulager of Muskogee, Ed Semans, and Gus Wollard voting for Josephus Daniels while Dudley Monk of Okmulgee voted for E. T. Meridith. Ray Sanford of Enid cast a vote for Senator Walsh and E. A. Gay of Pawhuska refused to vote at all. The rest of the delegation had been won over to Davis.³⁷

As for the vice presidential nomination, Davis's first choice was Senator Walsh, but he declined.³⁸ On the first ballot, Charles W. Bryan was nominated by eight more votes than needed. Being a Middle Westerner, Bryan appealed to the Oklahoma delegation and no doubt they joined the bandwagon early.

The Democratic nominee, John W. Davis, although considered a friend of big business, was considered a good choice in Oklahoma. An editorial in the *Tulsa World* said that one thing was accomplished in the selection of Davis—"a safe custodian for the traditions of democracy."³⁹ *The Tulsa Tribune* felt about the same. It said he was a good choice and "a worthy leader for democracy." It went on to say, "Democracy's ticket for 1924 is strong, well-balanced, and definitely progressive."⁴⁰

Analyzing the significance of Oklahoma's role in the convention can be done in part by attempting to answer two questions. The first is, did the unit rule help or hurt Oklahoma's influence? The answer is that it did in fact help Oklahoma because it kept the delegation together under one candidate on each ballot. Thus Oklahoma's voting as a block caused candidates to be concerned about whom the Oklahoma delegates would support. A candidate could win all twenty votes by only obtaining support from a majority within the delegation. Moreover, could the delegation have played a more significant role in the balloting if the Semans-Klan faction had not had so much support? Probably the Oklahoma delegation would have been more outstanding. Semans's supporters caused the delegation to cling stubbornly to McAdoo when there was really little hope left for his nomination. It prevented the entire delegation from acting as freely as it could have. Perhaps Trapp's group of delegates could have done more in the way of jockeying instead of having to throw their votes to Owen simply to keep from supporting McAdoo. Taking everything into consideration, Oklahoma did as well as could have been expected with the split delegation. The real significance for the Oklahoma delegation was the fact that it was able to see at last the bandwagon and was not too stubborn to let it get by without jumping aboard.⁴¹

OKLAHOMA AND THE DEMOCRATIC CONVENTION OF 1924

ENDNOTES

* Bill Pennington holds the Ph.D. in history from the University of Tulsa. He currently is Dean of Student Services with Tulsa Junior College, Northeast Campus, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

¹ *The Tulsa World*, June 22, 1924.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, June 24, 1924.

⁴ *Ibid.*, June 23, 1924.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, June 24, 1924.

⁷ *Ibid.*, June 25, 1924.

⁸ *Ibid.*, June 27, 1924.

⁹ *Ibid.*, June 24, 1924.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, June 27, 1924.

¹¹ *The Tulsa Tribune*, June 26, 1924.

¹² *The Tulsa World*, June 23, 1924.

¹³ *The Tulsa Tribune*, June 26, 1924.

¹⁴ *The Tulsa World*, June 29, 1924.

¹⁵ Herbert Eaton, *Presidential Timber: A History of Nominating Conventions, 1868-1960* (London: Collier-MacMillan Limited, 1964), p. 300.

¹⁶ *The Tulsa World*, June 30, 1924.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, July 1, 1924.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, July 2, 1924.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *The New York Times*, July 2, 1924.

²³ *The Tulsa World*, July 2, 1924.

²⁴ Eaton, p. 302.

²⁵ *The Tulsa World*, July 3, 1924.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, July 4, 1924.

²⁷ Eaton, p. 302.

²⁸ *The Tulsa World*, July 6, 1924.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *The Tulsa Tribune*, July 7, 1924.

³¹ *The Tulsa World*, July 7, 1924.

³² *Ibid.*, July 12, 1924.

³³ *Ibid.*, July 9, 1924.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, July 10, 1924.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, July 12, 1924.

³⁷ *The Tulsa Tribune*, July 10, 1924.

³⁸ Richard C. Bain, *Convention Decisions and Voting Records* (Washington, D.C.; The Brookings Institution, 1960), p. 226.

³⁹ *The Tulsa World*, July 11, 1924.

⁴⁰ *The Tulsa Tribune*, July 10, 1924.

⁴¹ Eaton, p. 305.