

Woodward's



*William E.
“Billy”*

Bolton

*Good Citizen,
Hard Worker,
Deep Thinker*

By William D. Welge

Like most Oklahoma communities, Woodward has its favorite sons, famous sons, and adopted sons. Although it is unclear if the town was named for him, Uncle Dick Woodward, a favorite son, was a former buffalo hunter and teamster who lived and operated a harness shop in Woodward for many years.¹ Temple Houston, a famous son whose father was Sam Houston, the noted general and later president of the Texas Republic, moved his law practice to Woodward from the Texas Panhandle after the opening

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of the Cherokee Outlet in 1893.² David P. Marcum, another favorite, had lived in the area since the 1880s. A civilian clerk at Fort Supply, he moved to Woodward when the fort closed. Marcum joined Houston's law practice, served in the territorial legislature in 1897, established a newspaper sometime after 1900, and brought distinction to the community.³ Newspaper publisher William E. "Billy" Bolton moved to Woodward nearly a year after the land run and became one of Woodward's favorite adopted sons by upbuilding and improving the community.

Born on November 28, 1860, in Vigo County, Indiana, Bolton was one of nine children born to Ellen and Isaac Bolton. The family moved to Illinois four years later, then finally settled near Council Grove, Kansas, in 1877. Little is known about Bolton's childhood or educational advantages, but one suspects he probably received an above-average schooling to take up the profession of journalism.⁴

At age twenty-four Bolton moved west to the budding settlement of Greensburg, Kansas, forty-five miles east-southeast of Dodge City and roughly one hundred miles north of Woodward. In 1886 Bolton and Milo M. Lee established the newspaper *The Signal*, with Lee as publisher and Bolton as editor. The first edition hit the dusty streets of Greensburg on February 19, 1886. Fifteen months later, Bolton bought out Lee and became sole owner.⁵

Greensburg's future was apparently assured when the Chicago, Kansas and Nebraska Railroad Company constructed its main line through the booming prairie town in early 1887. During the next five years, both the community and Bolton enjoyed growth and prosperity. Following the financial panic of 1893, Greensburg began to lose businesses and families. The opening of the Cherokee Outlet later the same year resulted in more of the populace leaving to seek better opportunities elsewhere. Bolton resisted until mid-1894 when he too decided to move, although he retained ownership of *The Signal*.⁶

The city of Woodward provided a splendid opportunity for Bolton, and on June 1, 1894, he released the inaugural issue of a new enterprise. *The Woodward News* introduced itself to the community with a solemn pledge and Bolton's dry wit:

[W]hen in the course of human events, to establish peace, to insure domestic tranquility and to labor nineteen hours a day for the advancement and upbuilding of a community, [and] believing that Woodward is surrounded by more natural advantages than any other city in the Territory The Woodward News is an established fact.⁷

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Published weekly, *The News* consisted of four pages of eight columns each, with the first and fourth pages devoted to local news. The second page highlighted territorial, national, and international news. Page three carried the weekly serial, a predecessor to the modern soap opera. Bolton filled the paper with light and lively banter about local persons and events. Competitors in the field of journalistic endeavors congratulated "Brother Bolton" with favorable comments. The *Woodward Advocate* stated, "Billy Bolton, late of Greensburg, Kansas arrived here with his newspaper plant on Saturday last week[.] [W]e wish him success in his new venture, . . . if he takes the . . . independent route, [advocating] low taxes and honesty in county officers."⁸ The *Woodward Jeffersonian* declared, "[T]he Woodward News is the latest thing out in these parts. Billy Bolton the genial Kansan, is the editor. Success to you, financially, Billy."⁹

The accolades accorded Bolton and *The Woodward News* were short-lived, because the publisher soon began to monopolize the printed word in the community. Louise James in *Below Devil's Gap* stated, "Bolton purchased the subscription list of I.C. Price, editor of the *Woodward Advocate*. The rival *Jeffersonian* also failed in



William E. Bolton (p. 292) moved printing press, lead type, and his dream for a prosperous future to the fledgling community of Woodward in 1894 (All photos courtesy Oklahoma Historical Society unless noted).

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THEY ARE. SELECT YOUR CANDIDATES REGARDLESS OF PARTY.” True to his claim, Bolton then listed each candidate with the office they sought and their party affiliation. He made no endorsements.¹³

Bolton seemed genuinely more interested in encouraging his readers to participate in the political process than in becoming a voice for a particular party. To generate voter interest, Bolton injected timely statements to arouse a complacent electorate, reminding his readers that “independent thought and action [are] the safeguard of liberty and prosperity,” and “the political battles in Kansas show to what extremes a partisan will go to injure his community.”¹⁴

If Bolton remained an independent in politics, he showed no such reticence in boosting his adopted community. In late 1894 the federal government began the process of closing Fort Supply near Woodward and disposing of the property. Bolton urged through the medium of the printed word, “[S]ince the Fort and reservation [are] abandoned, all effort should be made for the location of a Government or Territorial institution of some kind at that point.”¹⁵

Weekly, Bolton sounded the theme to take action on Fort Supply, asking his fellow citizens:

[G]entlemen of Woodward City and county, will you allow this golden opportunity to increase your taxable wealth, provide home markets for your labor, and secure a steady income, pass by? Now is the time for action . . . [T]he opportunity now before you to make Woodward a city will never be duplicated. Do something, and do it mighty quick!¹⁶

He offered suggestions for a territorial college, prison, or insane asylum as suitable replacements to occupy the former reservation grounds. The *Medford Patriot*, also vying for a territorial plum, decried, “Woodward wants the penitentiary or some other state institution located at Fort Supply. The News leads in pulling for it. That is too healthy a county for a penitentiary· it would be better for the asylum. Eh! Bolton?”¹⁷

The editor replied, “Fort Supply isn’t three-quarters of a mile from the center of the universe, and it would be a superb site for the penitentiary.”¹⁸ When he heard rumors that the federal government would close one of its Indian schools such as Haskell Institute in Kansas or Carlisle in Pennsylvania, Bolton quipped that “nothing better could be done by Uncle Sam.”¹⁹

Bolton’s crusade began to bear fruit. An article in *The Sunday Oklahoman* mentioned that “Governor Renfrow is making earnest

effort to secure the Fort Supply buildings in Woodward County for the location of a Territorial Institution."²⁰ Although the territorial legislature did not establish an institution at Fort Supply—an insane asylum—until after 1900, Bolton no doubt helped plant the seed that eventually saw fruition.

Within a year of his arrival in Woodward, Bolton branched out by establishing his third newspaper and his second in Woodward, which he called *The Live Stock Inspector*. Devoted exclusively to the livestock interests, the first edition appeared in April, 1895. Published monthly, the newspaper was a neat sixteen-page, four-column product that carried items of interest to farmers and ranchers. News from Kansas, Texas, Oklahoma Territory, and eventually other areas filled each issue. *The Live Stock Inspector* became the official organ of the recently organized Oklahoma Live Stock Association. Bolton devoted the first issue to the first annual session of the association when it met at Woodward. In his introductory statement he asserted:

[T]he Stockman of Oklahoma, and especially those engaged in cattle raising, have never here-to-fore had an organ which represented their interests in a direct manner. . . [T]his new organization is founded upon the idea of business interest, that the stock interests may be better represented and protected by impartial legislation.²¹

Livestock reporting was no casual hobby for Bolton. He traveled extensively to stockyards across the Midwest, including Chicago, to find news of interest to his readership.²²

To bolster its membership and fashion the Oklahoma Live Stock Association into a worthwhile organization, Bolton, who was elected secretary of the group, traveled to Fort Worth, Texas, to meet with the executive committee of the Texas Cattle Raiser's Association to gain support for the new group. The *Fort Worth Gazette* stated, "W.E. Bolton of Woodward had the executive committee of the Texas Cattle Raiser's Association to indorse [*sic*] the Oklahoma Association and to wish them great success," an action that undoubtedly strengthened both organizations.²³

In spite of his exemplary dedication to the town of Woodward, Bolton had to endure a fair amount of ribbing about his size and marital status. An imposing figure standing well over six feet in height, Bolton weighed, depending upon who was counting, more than 300 pounds. The not-so-kind editorial staffs of some territorial rags suggested he weighed considerably more. The *El Reno Democrat* dryly mentioned, "[I]t is said that Billie [*sic*] Bolton,

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editor of the *Live Stock Inspector* . . . now sojourning with the editor[s] in Mexico, has a greater storage capacity for hot tamales and goat[']s milk, than any two of them in the herd."²⁴ The *Medford Patriot* quipped:

The Woodward News believes that the airships reported to have been seen so often are visitors from some of the other planets who have acquired greater scientific knowledge than the inhabitants of this mundane sphere. The Patriot inclines to the opinion that they are after Bolton, but have not a vessel large enough to convey him away. We suggest that he lay low.²⁵

Bolton seemed to take all the ribbing good-naturedly.

Editors and publishers from around the territory and Kansas also commented upon the fact that winsome Billy Bolton was an eligible bachelor in need of marital bliss. The *Wichita Eagle* claimed that "up to date Bill Bolton has not pleaded guilty to the charge of matrimony." The *Norman Transcript* came to his defense by remarking, "the cruel 'knights of the quill' all over the territory have recently been lacerating the tender feelings of Billie [sic] Bolton by referring in a flippant manner to his love affairs."²⁶ It must have been a slow news week; Bolton countered by labeling their prattle, "Ten Minutes Among The Liars."

The election year of 1896 became a turning point in Bolton's political philosophy. Always considered an ardent Republican, he bucked the party when it nominated William McKinley, who was reportedly in the hip pocket of a political machine. Although still proclaiming *The News* independent of any party, Bolton openly endorsed William Jennings Bryan for president.

The outcome of the election, which saw McKinley elected, took some of the wind out of his sails, but Bolton remained committed to Woodward's progress. *The Woodward News* announced that it had employed a special correspondent to report on condi-





The Live Stock Inspector's sophisticated new masthead in 1901 (opposite and right) more clearly reflected the breadth of its work for the state's growing livestock industry (Courtesy Plains Indians and Pioneers Museum, Woodward Oklahoma).

tions in Cuba, a coup both for Bolton and the people of Woodward. It was that commitment to cover aspects of national events that made his fellow journalists hold Bolton in such high esteem.

Though not a founding father of the Oklahoma Press Association (OPA), Bolton was a prime mover in the organization. In 1895 the OPA elected Bolton recording secretary at its annual meeting at Perry. At Enid the following year, OPA members elected the Woodward editor president. In ensuing years, Bolton served on the OPA executive committee and for several years as the representative from Oklahoma on the executive committee of the National Editorial Association. Always mindful of civic obligations, Bolton also helped organize the Woodward Country Club which devoted its energies to "the promotion of public interests."²⁷

As secretary of the Oklahoma Live Stock Association, Bolton developed a good working relationship with territorial governor Cassius M. Barnes. When Bolton invited the governor to speak to the organization at its annual meeting at Woodward in 1899, Barnes accepted.²⁸ Barnes reciprocated by appointing Bolton a regent of the Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College at

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Stillwater in early February, 1900. In 1901 the governor named the portly publisher to the livestock sanitary board.²⁹ Their association probably indicated that Bolton's flirtation with the Democratic party was brief.

In 1908 Bolton's health began to suffer. By August of that year, he sold to an Enid publisher the two newspapers that had dominated Woodward for more than a decade. In late November, 1909, he married Bertha Bernard of Missouri. Bolton died three weeks later on December 14, 1909, at the age of forty-nine.

After his death, the Woodward Bar Association proclaimed in a resolution, "[T]he citizens of Woodward . . . have lost a good citizen, a hard worker, and a deep thinker; a man whose talent and energy [have] ever been felt for the upbuilding of this city and its interests from incipiency."³⁰ William "Billy" Bolton could not have said it better himself.

ENDNOTES

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¹ Louise James, *Below Devil's Gap: The Story of Woodward County* (Perkins, Oklahoma: Evans Publications, 1984), 72.

² Joseph B. Thoburn, "John J. Gerlach," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, 10 (March, 1932): 40.

³ James, *Below Devil's Gap*, 155.

⁴ *Woodward (Oklahoma) Bulletin*, December 17, 1909.

⁵ (Greensburg, Kansas) *Kiowa County Signal*, May 21, 1886.

⁶ Crystal Patterson and Helen Porter, *History of Kiowa County, Kansas, 1880-1980* (Lubbock, Texas: Taylor Publishing Company, 1979).

⁷ *The Woodward (Oklahoma Territory) News*, June 1, 1894.

⁸ *Ibid.*, June 8, 1894.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ James, *Below Devil's Gap*, 111.

¹¹ *The Woodward News*, April 12, 1895.

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¹² *Ibid.*, June 1, 1894.

¹³ *Ibid.*, September 7, 1894.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, November 20, 1894.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, November 30, 1894.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, December 14, 1894.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, December 21, 1894.

²¹ *Ibid.*, May 8, 1895.

²² *Ibid.*, March 22, 1895.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, March 2, 1897

²⁵ *Ibid.*, June 25, 1897

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, March 4, 1898.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, November 25, 1898.

²⁹ *Kingfisher* (Oklahoma Territory) *Free Press*, February 15, 1900, March 14, 1901.

³⁰ *Woodward Bulletin*, December 17, 1909.