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DENNIS T. FLYNN

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The life of Dennis T. Flynn, identified vividly with Oklahoma in the commonwealth's formative stages, is that species of biography which is history. In reviewing Oklahoma's initial years it is not possible to think of Oklahoma without including Flynn in the survey, or of Flynn without including Oklahoma. In the centuries to come the commonwealth will carry certain indelible evidence of his distinguished part in its earliest hour, together with a survival of some of the flavor imparted to the pioneer period by Flynn's own personality, and unquestionably due to his character.

This enduring place of Dennis Flynn in Oklahoma's history is assured because he exemplified in his life the ambitions and achievements of a majority of the individuals who made up the infant domain and who vitalized it with their vision and industry.

Indeed his career comprehends the spirit and substance of the era which made the evolution of the present day Oklahoma inevitable.

BEYOND HIS EXPECTATIONS

That career can be divided for convenience into three periods. The first finds Dennis Flynn as a youth caught in the sweep of a westering tide, common at that time to Americans who were not rooted to the place of their parentage. The second finds Dennis Flynn as a fairly young man helping with a firm hand to forge the frame work of a new social unit—a state. The third finds Dennis Flynn living in ripened age to see his most glamorous imaginings surpassed in realizations which enriched not only the commonwealth but himself.

As with the many of the earliest Oklahomans Dennis Flynn's biography begins in an eastern state, which at the time had little or no direct contact with the deep, remote interior of the continent.

As with a majority of the earliest Oklahomans Dennis Flynn was to push west and first to serve an apprenticeship in pioneering at the borders of the new land he was destined to help build.

As in the case of all Oklahomans of his era he was privileged to see the new domain dramatically exceed all his early expectations.

EARLY BECOMES AN ORPHAN

Dennis Flynn was born February 13, 1861 at Phoenixville, Chester County, Pa., his father Dennis Flynn being from Cork, Ireland; his mother Margaret Clancey who came also from Ireland after she was grown. When Dennis was nearly three his father died. His mother, who passed away in 1906, took him as a baby to Buffalo, New York in 1863. The child went into a Catholic orphanage near Buffalo, New York, there as he grew up to attract the attention of the superintendent, Father Hines. The boy Dennis learned to set type and to handle type-forms. When he was twelve Father Hines placed him in Canisius College, Buffalo. During his four years there Dennis Flynn finished his education. At sixteen he was a printer, and if need be, was able to show himself a capable business man. Most of all he was a personality. Out of school he managed a saw mill for Father Hines on a farm near Arcade, New York, for a while. Thereafter he adventured down to New York City and learned the craft of broom-making, pursuing it for a short period.

HE TURNS TO THE WEST

When he was around twenty-one years of age, the urge came to Dennis Flynn which was to turn his eyes to the West. He started in 1882 for the Territory of Washington. Stopping off at Riverside, Iowa, to visit relatives, he bought the local newspaper, the Herald, because it could be purchased at a bargain. Within six months, the old urge bidding him to be up and onward, he sold the newspaper and headed again for Washington territory. However, a fellow townsman asked him to accompany the townsman's son to Girard, Kansas. Flynn did this. In the eastern Kansas town these young men heard of desirable land available in Western Kansas, in Barber county, and induced a third youth to join them. These young men invested their capital in a yoke of oxen, a wagon and supplies and set out for the promised land. They had to learn to drive their oxen. But at the end of three weeks they did learn. Eventually young Flynn was sent ahead to spy out the land. He arrived at Harper, Kansas, by stage coach and progressed beyond that place by walking. He was searching for homesteads for his young friends and himself.

When these young men had settled on the land they were attracted to a new town, Kiowa, with a population of twenty-five nearby. Flynn determined to move to town and start a newspaper. The Kiowa Herald was the result. Now he met Addie M. Blanton, daughter of a Kansas pioneer. They were later to be married. When the railroad extended into that county it missed the town of Kiowa, which promptly moved and became New Kiowa

with Flynn acting as agent of the townsite company. In the meantime he had been studying law under an attorney in Medicine Lodge, and was admitted to practice.

IN ON THE FIRST TRAIN

At this period personality was again playing the dominant part in this young man's life. It won the local Republicans to him. He became postmaster (December 5, 1884 to July 17, 1885). He was city attorney 1886-1889. He was now in the town-lot business, was making land loans, writing insurance, was running a newspaper and practicing law. This was a period in which he had his first experience of prosperity. It was to be short. Times tightened. The Kiowa Herald was sold at a loss.

Dennis Flynn had now served his apprenticeship as a pioneer. At his feet in Kiowa stretched another unoccupied domain. It was Indian land mostly. At its center was a compact body of land called Oklahoma. It was not Indian land. It was public land. In 1888 Congress decided to open this fragment of public land to settlement. On April 22, 1889 it was opened. Before that date Dennis Flynn had noted that a place called Guthrie in the new country was to be a land office town. He asked Congressman Samuel R. Peters of Kansas to have him named postmaster there. Peters did. In the race by which the original Oklahoma was settled that day, Dennis Flynn reached Guthrie on the first train and staked out a lot adjoining the acre reserved for the government. There, after his commission arrived, he set up a frame postoffice and managed to get the population its mail, working day and night himself because of insufficient clerk hire. He was postmaster at Guthrie from April 4, 1889 to December 20, 1892.

It was at the window of this postoffice that the personality of Dennis Flynn most impressed itself upon that whole community where every man was a stranger to his neighbor.

HIS ARRIVAL IN WASHINGTON

Here was a young man. He was alert of eye—and understanding. He was quick of speech—and clear. He was kindly of heart. He was unafraid. And his whole manner made certain that he wanted more than he wanted anything else on earth at the moment—friends. Of course he was foremost in local politics. He was made the first Oklahoma member of the National Republican Committee. When in 1890, a year after the opening, a territorial delegate was to be elected to Congress, Flynn ran for Congress. The power of the new territorial governor, Steele, was sufficient to prevent Flynn's friends from giving him the nomination, D. A. Harvey winning. In the next two years Dennis

Flynn overcame that reverse. He marshalled the political forces in the Indian reservations lately added to the original Oklahoma, (the Cheyenne and Arapaho reservation among them) and won the nomination and election.

In Washington with its thousands of public officials, Dennis Flynn immediately made a remarkable personal impression. He was a territorial delegate and without a vote. He had nothing with which to bargain. But he had personality and it came into play immediately in a wonderful way. All Congress, Senators and Representatives, came to know Dennis Flynn of Oklahoma because of his anxiety about his constituents and his incessant solicitation in their behalf largely on a single score. This appeared through the fact that settlers on Indians lands had to pay for their "claims" within a definite time. Great numbers of settlers could not make these payments on time and Flynn set out to have Congress extend the date of payment. Beaten in the House where he had a seat, he was able to make the postponement law when in the Senate it was adopted as a rider to an appropriation bill.

HIS CAMPAIGN FOR FREE HOMES

At the next election in Oklahoma Flynn was returned to Congress and he set out on a campaign to improve on the extension of time payment idea by doing away with the payment entirely and thus have his constituents come into the possession of their homesteads free. At the outset Congress declined to give serious consideration to the proposition, although Flynn's ceaseless contention for it gained it an increasing audience. Congress at first could not see its way clear to accommodate this insistent young delegate at so high a cost to the government.

Therefore the exemption was not granted at the start. Flynn was confident that in time it would be and so asserted. But at the next election, 1896, he was beaten for delegate by a coalition of Democrats and Populists. Flynn went back to Guthrie and as a member of Overstreet & Flynn, Attorneys, turned his attention to the practice of the law. Perceptibly he had cooled toward politics. But in 1898 a Republican convention at El Reno dramatically nominated him after, in a personal appearance, he had formally declined to run. He did run, and after election returned to Washington to see his free homes idea triumph.

Following this election Flynn was to serve four years more in Congress, always a delegate, but by reason of his personality prominent and powerful in legislation affecting the affairs of Oklahoma now waxing great and nearing the place where statehood could not be denied.

HIS WORK FOR OKLAHOMA

I should hazard the guess that at this time Dennis Flynn's keen edge of eagerness in politics began dulling. It does dull often in public life.

Flynn had become expert in the history and the laws of land in America. He knew and was skilled in the relations of the Federal government to its territories. Nothing of moment transpired between the two capitals, Washington and Guthrie, in that time without Flynn's knowledge and seldom without his counsel. He worked for Federal enactments and departmental regulations which would help Oklahoma. In this category was the aid Oklahoma was to be assured from school lands in the Cherokee Strip; the provision of funds for court houses and schools in Lawton, Hobart and Anadarko from the sale of townsite lots, the substitution of a number-drawing for the old "horse race opening" when the Wichita, Kiowa and Comanche reservations were made available to settlers.

During his service in Congress Dennis Flynn knew all the great figures of his time with a contact that was something more than political, an intimate contact which can again be accredited to his personality. Always diligent in national politics he had liked Thomas Brackett Reed in the 1896 presidential nomination more than William McKinley. This made Flynn some trouble in Oklahoma political affairs under McKinley but not for long. When Theodore Roosevelt succeeded McKinley, Flynn was a consultant at the White House. He did not always have his way in patronage. But he frequently did. In the line of Republican presidents subsequent to statehood Flynn had friends, but his earlier intimacies at the White House were not repeated in the same degree.

This might be traced to the fact that he had withdrawn from personal politics markedly. He did not stand for the nomination for territorial delegate in 1902.

OUT OF PERSONAL POLITICS

He had come to the end of his political work—the erection of a skeleton of a new commonwealth. Did he know that the pattern of Oklahoma henceforth was not to parallel his political desires? I do not know this, for certain, but I think that Dennis Flynn felt, long before statehood, that single statehood, instead of double statehood, meant the end of his personal political advancement to the Senate, for he must have realized that the Democratic party normally would dominate the coming state of Oklahoma because of the inclusion of the Indian territory.

Added to this motive in removing himself personally from politics was unquestionably another urge. It was an anxiety

which comes to most men in middle-age, an anxiety to assure themselves of material estate. Every one had entered Oklahoma with the purpose of increasing his prosperity. Flynn did. Now he was no longer young. Politics is usually a poor provider in this world's goods.

All about him in Oklahoma Dennis Flynn saw men advancing in their material well-being. The domain had developed sensationally, almost immeasurable riches. Communities were crystallizing into opulent cities.

Once after 1902 Dennis Flynn ran for office in Oklahoma, for the Senate in 1908. But it was as a party sacrifice. His hope was not in it nor his heart.

LATER YEARS OF HIS LIFE

After 1902 he went back to his home life, Addie Blanton Flynn and his boys, Streeter and Olney, who have become eminent since in the legal and oil circles of Oklahoma. When the head of the legal department of the St. Louis and San Francisco railroad asked Dennis Flynn to form a law partnership to represent the railroad at Oklahoma City, Flynn became identified as an attorney to Oklahoma in the firm of Flynn & Ames (C.B.)

With Ames, Flynn became an owner in the Oklahoma Gas & Electric Co., sold later to H. M. Bylesby. Afterward Flynn became one of the founders and officers of H. M. Bylesby & Co., Chicago. In the latter years of his life he was connected with one of the larger banks of his state. He proved as able a financier as he had been land pioneer and territorial delegate.

Dennis T. Flynn's personality justly can be placed at the bottom of his success in life and his satisfaction with life. He wanted to win, not only in big things but in little things. He wanted friends, not only selfishly but unselfishly. And in his passion for winning and in his passion for friends, he had a most uncanny capacity for dramatizing incidents in which he had had part personally. Any reminiscence Dennis Flynn recounted was vivid with a vigor and vitality that fascinated the auditor. A thousand stories in Oklahoma with Flynn at their center, soon to become legends, alone will suffice to keep his memory green.

THE VITALITY OF HIS PERSONALITY

This was his secret—the vitality of his personality. In 1925 Bishop Francis C. Kelley recommended the appointment of Dennis T. Flynn and the Pope appointed him Knight of the Order of Saint Gregory, highest order conferred on a civilian by the Catholic church.

Bishop Kelley in June, 1939, delivered the funeral address over Flynn's bier.¹ In the course of it the Bishop said that he had been strangely conscious while preparing the address the night

before, of an incisive and inescapable impression that Dennis Flynn was not dead.

This was a manifestation of the vitality of Dennis Flynn's personality. It could thrust itself forward despite the evidence of death. It will, I feel certain, succeed in defeating the forgetfulness to which the future consigns so many of a country's pioneers.

To my mind it would be tragic indeed if the future history of Oklahoma should omit pictorially a scene depicting a characteristic campaign meeting addressed by Dennis Flynn. Such a meeting epitomized completely the pioneers of Oklahoma and their day. Flynn was driven to hundreds of such meetings overland, often at such great distances that he took provisions along. Sometimes he camped in the open. Frequently he spoke on the street; or in a fraternity hall; or in a church; or a rudely constructed arbor with a brush roof; sometimes in a frame school house. Such a school house meeting at night presented an unforgettable spectacle where few and none too certain kerosene lamps gave light.

A PIONEER FLYNN MEETING

Men, women and children, some of these in arms, filled the room to its last inch. Auditors actually hung on the words from the lips of this young campaigner. Their eyes never left his eager face, evidencing so plainly his anxiety for their friendship; not a note of his musical speaking voice escaped them. He was talking things to which all their intimate interests were tied—the land and the intricacies of the law which confer ownership from wilderness to aborigine, from aborigine to intruder, and from intruder to civilizing settler. He preferred campaigning in those new areas where the formative processes in society had only begun. The picture of the Flynn meeting on the frontier is applicable not only to the history of Oklahoma in its entirety but to all its parts, the Cheyenne and Arapaho country, the Kickapoos, Otoes, the Sac and Fox, Cherokee strip, the Kiowa, Comanches, Caddos, Wichitas, and all the other segments which were included from time in the Oklahoma circle. Somehow there should persist in the ultimate story of Oklahoma, in the midst of all its mounting wealth and its accumulating culture, the vision of this young, slender pioneer, alert, vital, vivid, facing a pioneer audience, every soul in it as avid of progress, as ambitious of social advance, as eager for the glory of Oklahoma as himself.

In such a scenic setting he was every inch the frontiersman facing fellow frontiersmen and forging before them, with dauntless spirit, the destiny of a new American unit after the pattern of his and their deep desire and faithful to his and their shining dream of another great, glamorous commonwealth.

¹ Mr. Flynn died at Oklahoma City on June 19, 1939.