

LEO MEYER: TEXAS AND OKLAHOMA SETTLER AND POLITICIAN

by John R. Lovett

In 1901, Leo Meyer arrived in the newly-founded town of Sayre, located in western Oklahoma Territory. An experienced businessman, he realized the potential for profit as well as the risk involved in the new frontier settlement. Not only would Meyer accept the challenges of the new territory; he would also participate in the turbulent years of early Oklahoma politics.



Leo Meyer

Photo courtesy: Oklahoma Collection, University of Oklahoma Library

Meyer had been born in New York City on October 2, 1873. His parents were German immigrants who had settled in New York City several years before his birth. After attending public school in Brooklyn, Leo, at the age of sixteen left his native state for Texas in search of business opportunities. He settled in Bellville, seat of Austin County, a community of 807 people in 1890. There he entered the mercantile and cotton business.¹

WESTERN STATES JEWISH HISTORY, Vol. XXVI, No. 1, October 1993, pp. 55-64
© 1993 by Western States Jewish History Association

WESTERN STATES JEWISH HISTORY

While living in Bellville, Meyer met Margaret Lewis of nearby Nelsonville, whom he would marry in 1895.² He also became active in the local Democratic politics of the city. At the age of 21, he was elected to the position of City Assessor and Collector.³ He also served as school trustee and was elected mayor in 1895.⁴

In 1900, the same deadly hurricane that laid waste much of Galveston also destroyed the Meyer business at Bellville. As a result of this the family moved to Sayre, Oklahoma Territory, in search of new business opportunities. The land to which the Meyer's moved had been open to non-Indian settlement for less than ten years. Sayre itself was only a few months old when he and his family arrived in 1901. Six years later at the beginning of statehood the city would number just over a thousand inhabitants.⁵

The townsite of Sayre was located on the North Fork of the Red River, in what had been part of the Cheyenne-Arapaho reservation. That former Indian homeland had been opened by a land run on April 19, 1892.⁶ The town lay less than twenty-five miles south of the site where in 1868, General George A. Custer and the 7th U.S. Cavalry attacked a Cheyenne village, in what became known as the Battle of the Washita.

After arriving in Sayre, Meyer became the manager of the Dixie Dry Goods Store, owned by L. Ginsburg of New York.⁷ He also engaged in the cotton commission business. Local Democratic politics again attracted his participation. In 1903, he was elected to the first Sayre Board of Trustees, on which he served as treasurer.⁸ In 1905, he was elected mayor and served until 1906, at which point a larger political arena beckoned.⁹

As one of the local Democratic Party leaders from a strongly Democratic section of the territory, Meyer attended the Constitutional Convention held in 1906 at Guthrie, the territorial capital. The convention resulted from the Enabling Act passed by the Congress and approved by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1906. That Act empowered the citizens of the Indian Territory and the Oklahoma Territory to merge to form the single new state of Oklahoma. A constitutional convention would be required to frame the document necessary for entry into the Union.¹⁰

An election in November, 1906, to select delegates to the

constitutional convention seats had resulted in a sweeping Democratic victory. That party won ninety-nine of the available 112 seats.¹¹ Meyer did not actually serve as a delegate to the convention. Rather, he attended, both to support his fellow Democrats and to protect the interests of his local area. That presence and support would, however, also be useful to his own personal standing within the party.

Meyer supported the draft constitution produced by the convention, a document uniting Populist and Progressive ideas. Among other provisions, the new constitution dictated stronger control of railroads and other corporations, restricted child labor, established a prohibition amendment, and protected laboring men and their unions. It also made every state office elective.¹²

In June, 1907, even before the Constitutional Convention had adjourned, the Democrats held a primary election to select nominees for the upcoming September general election for statewide offices. Many of the convention delegates easily won nomination for these positions. Charles Haskell, the Democratic floor leader of the convention, was selected by the party as candidate for governor.¹³ The fall general election swept Haskell and the other Democratic candidates into office by a wide margin and overwhelmingly approved the new constitution.¹⁴

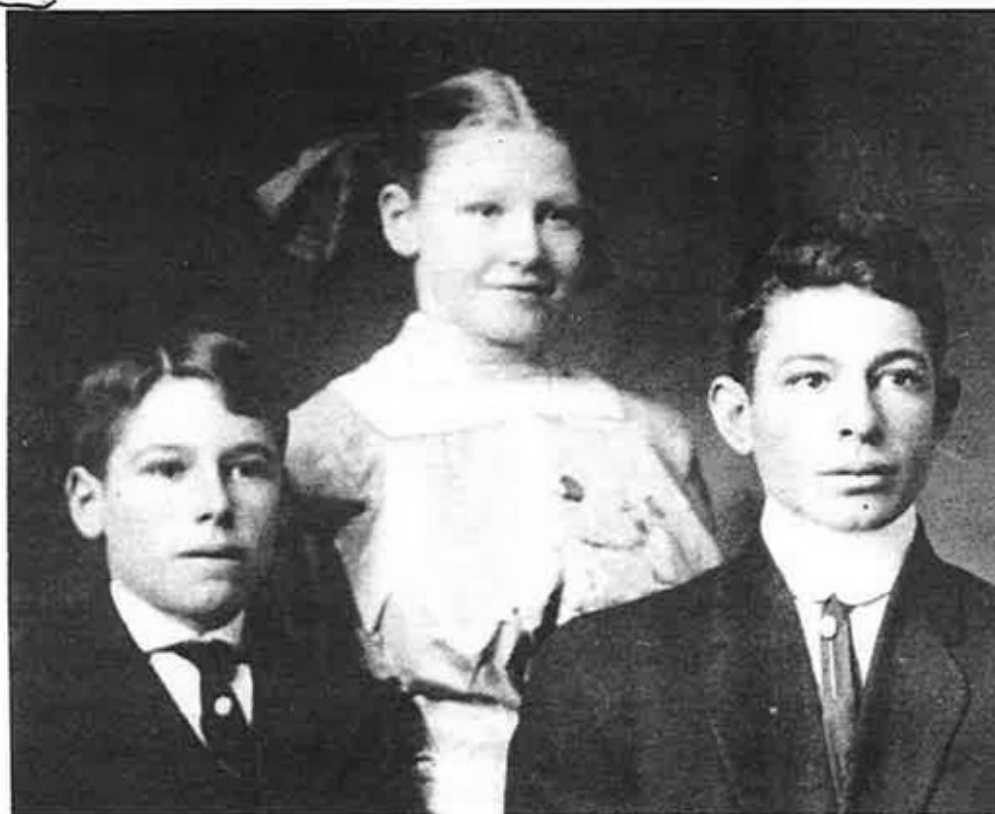
William Cross—known popularly as “Uncle Bill”—was elected Oklahoma’s first Secretary of State. Cross, in turn, chose Leo Meyer for the position of Assistant Secretary of State.¹⁵ The pair, as well as the other newly-elected officials, were in place, when on November 16, 1907, President Roosevelt proclaimed Oklahoma the forty-sixth state of the federal union.

As Assistant Secretary of State, Meyer’s salary was \$166.66 per month, he would definitely earn that pay.¹⁶ The tasks associated with organizing a new state dictated that he spend many long hours at the state capitol during the first months of office. Nevertheless, he did find the time to continue his hobby—baseball. Not only did he enjoy playing, but he also organized a team in Guthrie, and later became the president of the first baseball association in Oklahoma.¹⁷

Soon after his appointment, Meyer with his wife Margaret and

WESTERN STATES JEWISH HISTORY

their three children—Morris, Louis and Eunice—had moved to Guthrie. After settling in the town, they joined with the other Jewish families in the area to form a congregation. Although comprising only about ten families, this congregation proved very active. From its formation, Meyer was one of the guiding members of the group.¹⁸



Louis, Eunice and Morris Meyer, children of Leo and Margaret Meyer,
Photo courtesy: Oklahoma Collection, University of Oklahoma Library

In July, 1908, the Assistant Secretary of State traveled with Governor Haskell and other state Democratic leaders to Denver to attend the Democratic National Convention. The *Denver Post* described the entourage as “that long-haired outfit from Oklahoma.” The newspaper’s description was due in part to the presence of the colorful and outspoken William “Alfalfa Bill” Murray, past President of the Constitutional Convention, Member of Congress and Governor of the state, and the Speaker of the Oklahoma House of Representatives.¹⁹ At the Denver convention, Meyer was appointed to the platform committee.²⁰ That group’s finished

work would include leading provisions of the Oklahoma constitution.²¹ At the head of the ticket stood William Jennings Bryan in his third and final race as the party's nominee for president. Bryan's Populist record made him as well the unanimous choice of the Oklahomans at Denver.

Secretary of State Cross did not enjoy robust health. This caused Meyer to assume more and more of Cross's duties. The most noted event in the Haskell Administration—an event in which Meyer played a very active role—was the removal of the state capitol from Guthrie.²²

The Enabling Act of 1906 had designated Guthrie the capitol of Oklahoma until 1913. Governor Haskell, however, advocated moving the capitol to Oklahoma City.²³ Guthrie had not provided a suitable capitol, and Logan County, in which Guthrie was located, was a Republican stronghold. The Democratic-controlled Legislature adopted a bill in support of the governor's position. That legislation allowed any town to petition to be the capitol, if certain general requirements were met.²⁴

Representatives of Oklahoma city circulated a petition calling for a state-wide vote to select from among Oklahoma City, Guthrie, and Shawnee, the permanent site for the state capitol. On July 21, the completed petition was presented to Assistant Secretary of State, Meyer. Following a legal dispute concerning the petition, and a favorable ruling by the Oklahoma Supreme Court, a special election was scheduled for June 11, 1910.²⁵

Meyer himself joined in the capitol-selection campaign, returning to Sayre to champion Oklahoma City for the honor. When the election results indicated that Oklahoma City had indeed been chosen over Guthrie by a three-to-one margin, Governor Haskell ordered his private secretary to move the state seal to Oklahoma City. On the morning of June 12, 1910, Leo Meyer joined his fellow state officers in Oklahoma city at the Huckins Hotel, the building which served as the temporary capitol of Oklahoma.²⁶

The moving of the capitol enraged most of Guthrie. The city police and the Anti-Horse Thief Association formed a guard around the courthouse, which held the state records—a move designed to prevent the records from being removed to their rival

WESTERN STATES JEWISH HISTORY

to the south.²⁷ However, over the next few months, Meyer was able to transfer the Secretary of State's records without difficulty. This shift of the official records completed the previous symbolic transfer of the state seal.

Oklahoma's Democrats, meeting in convention during the summer of 1910, nominated Secretary of State Cross to run for position of State Auditor in the upcoming elections. However, Cross died suddenly within a few hours after his nomination. The Democratic State Central Committee then selected the late Secretary's assistant—Leo Meyer—to run on the ticket for Auditor in his stead.²⁸

In the November general election, Meyer easily defeated his Republican and Socialist opponents.²⁹ At this point in his political career, he was the fourth-highest official in state government, with a yearly salary of \$2,500. As State Auditor, Meyer was responsible for overseeing the payment of all accounts and claims against the state. In addition, he kept ledgers of the debits and credits of each separate state fund. The term of State Auditor ran four years, and under the state constitution, one could not succeed oneself in office.³⁰

In the 1910 general election, Lee Cruce was elected governor. Cruce, an Ardmore banker, had campaigned on the platform of economy in state government. The new governor wanted to reorganize, eliminate, and curtail state institutions. State Auditor Meyer also supported economy in state government and the policy of state government operating within its budget. He worked for a better financial standing for the state, and proposed changing the form of state indebtedness from state warrants to funding bonds. Bonds would provide for a better accounting of state funds.³¹

Governor Cruce struggled with the state legislature over his plans to reduce state government. This fight continued through the first half of his administration. Many of the legislators were more concerned with patronage for themselves and appropriations for their districts than Cruce's call for fiscal reform.³²

The Fourth Oklahoma State Legislature, which assembled on January 7, 1913, had been elected on the pledge by many of its members to "clean house." To their mind, the house to be cleaned

was that occupied by the Executive Branch of the state's government. No sooner had the legislature convened, than a series of legislative investigations of state officers and institutions commenced.³³ Nearly every elected state official came under investigation as the legislature sought to dismantle the Cruce administration, and Oklahoma politics entered one of its darker periods.

The legislature's investigation of Meyer's work as State Auditor was very detailed. As part of the legislature's attack, a charge of perjury was leveled against him. This charge centered around a



Leo and Margaret Meyer, Tulsa, 1960

Photo courtesy: Oklahoma Collection, University of Oklahoma Library

warrant he drew in April, 1911, to pay a clerk for making entries of abstracts in the Woodward, Oklahoma, district office of the United States General Land Office. Meyer testified to the investigating committee that one clerk was paid for part of the work and another clerk was paid for the remainder of the entries.³⁴

Support for the embattled Auditor came from an unlikely source—one of the state's Republican leaders, Walter Ferguson. Ferguson wrote: "As far as the specific charges brought against officials, they seem to be more the product of jealousy and

WESTERN STATES JEWISH HISTORY

factionalism than to indicate crookedness.” Ferguson also stated: “I can hardly conceive of Leo Meyer being guilty of anything crooked.”³⁵

On February 8, 1913, County Judge John Hayson, following a preliminary hearing on the charge of perjury against Meyer, ruled that there was insufficient evidence to show that the Auditor had committed an act of perjury or fraud. This ruling did not appease the legislative foes of the Cruce Administration, however. Bent on continuing their attack, impeachment proceedings against Meyer were filed that same afternoon.³⁶

Dismayed by the continued assault from the Democratic legislature, Meyer presented his resignation to Governor Cruce on February 12. Before the legislature’s fury was spent, however, the State Insurance Commissioner resigned, the State Printer was impeached, and Governor Cruce escaped impeachment by one vote in the investigation committee. Ironically, many of Cruce’s reforms—reforms which Meyer had supported—would be adopted over the next several decades.³⁷

After his resignation, Meyer and his family remained in Oklahoma City until 1916, when they moved to Tulsa. Meyer recognized the potential of the burgeoning Oklahoma oil industry and became associated with Josh Cosden and what became known as the Mid-Continent Oil Company.³⁸ The former State Auditor became tax counsel for the company, a post he held for 40 years.³⁹

The years that the Meyer lived in Tulsa are well known in the history of the Tulsa Jewish community. He was leader in the community, very active in the Tulsa Jewish Community Council. He continued also to have a great deal of influence in the state’s Democratic Party. Although he never again sought political office, he did aid many candidates. The only position he held was an appointment to the Park Commission of Tulsa, on which he served for many years.⁴⁰

Meyer’s work in Congregation Temple Israel of Tulsa spanned well over half a century. He helped with fund raising for the building of Temple Israel, and in 1924, he served as president of the congregation.⁴¹ Later he helped lead the fund raising for the second Temple Israel and served for many years as an honorary

president. In 1961, he was honored with a life membership from Tulsa Temple Israel.⁴²

Meyer died at home on February 14, 1964, at the age of 90. His wife, Margaret, preceded in death, in 1962, and his son Lewis, killed while serving in the U.S. Army in France in 1918.⁴³

Leo Meyer lived in Oklahoma for sixty-three years. During those sixty-three years he was a settler in western Oklahoma Territory, a businessman, a politician at both local and state levels, a community leader, and a devoted family man. It was once written that he knew more people personally, and could call them by name, than probably any other man in the state of Oklahoma.⁴⁴

Leo Meyer played an important role in the history of Oklahoma, and will always be remembered for his accomplishments in his adopted state.

NOTES

- ¹ John S. Brooks, *First Administration of Oklahoma* (Oklahoma City, Oklahoma Engraving Company, 1908), p. 212.
- ² Interview with Leo Meyer's daughter Mrs. Eunice Frank and her son Irvin Frank, Tulsa, Oklahoma, Summer 1992.
- ³ Seth K. Gorden and William B. Harrison, Compilers, *Oklahoma Red Book* (Oklahoma City, Democrat Printing Company, 1912), p. 121.
- ⁴ Rex F. Harlow, Compiler, *Makers of Government in Oklahoma* (Oklahoma City, Harlow Publishing Company, 1930), p. 797.
- ⁵ George H. Shirk, *Oklahoma Place Names* (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1965).
- ⁶ John W. Morris, *Historic Atlas of Oklahoma* (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1965), p. 48.
- ⁷ Mrs. J.M. Danner, *Sayre of Red River Valley*, (Sayre, The Sayre Sun Printery, 1939), p. 9.
- ⁸ Danner, *Sayre of Red River Valley*, p. 4.
- ⁹ Harlow, *Makers of Government in Oklahoma*, p. 796.
- ¹⁰ Brooks, *First Administration of Oklahoma*, p. 20.
- ¹¹ James R. Scales and Danny Goble, *Oklahoma Politics: A History*, (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), p. 19.
- ¹² Keith L. Bryant, *Alfalfa Bill Murray* (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1968), p. 71.
- ¹³ Scales and Goble, *Oklahoma Politics: A History*, p. 27.
- ¹⁴ Scales and Goble, *Oklahoma Politics: A History*, p. 30.
- ¹⁵ Brooks, *First Administration of Oklahoma*, p. 212.
- ¹⁶ Charles Evans, *Oklahoma Civil Government*, (Ardmore, Bunn Brothers, 1908), p. 362.