

WILLIAM CORY RENFROW, GOVERNOR OF OKLAHOMA TERRITORY

By Loren N. Brown

Since statehood, in 1907, Cleveland County has never had a governor of Oklahoma. However, during territorial days a man from this county was appointed territorial governor, and served with distinction.

William Cory Renfrow was born March 15, 1845, in the city of Smithfield, North Carolina. This is a small city about forty miles southeast of Raleigh, the capital of the state. All his formal education was obtained in the public schools of his home county, and he left school to join the Confederate Army, as so many of the young men of the area were doing.

After serving two years, he was mustered out at the close of the War Between the States, and was not yet twenty years old at that time. He didn't remain in his home state very long, as we find that he moved to Arkansas in 1865, the same year in which he had been mustered out. Here, he lived in two towns during the next twenty-five years, the second of which was at Russelville. During this time he had married, and they had one child, a girl whom they named Nellie.

Mr. Renfrow was apparently in Norman sometime during the year of the opening, and had accumulated some interests. On January 4, 1890, the Norman Transcript noted that W. C. Renfrow, from Russelville, Arkansas, had written, ordering the Transcript to be sent to him at his home. On February 8, the newspaper noted that he, and a Mr. Wells, had come to Norman, and intended to stay for some time. He expressed himself as being well pleased with Norman's growth and was busy attending to business. He apparently made good newspaper copy for his activities were noted in several instances such as making a trip to Guthrie, and points north, and a little item in the issue of March 8, 1890, showing the editor's pleasure with the fact that he was able to be out on the streets, again, having apparently been confined to his home for a few days. On March 15th, he had returned to Russelville because of illness in his family, but had stated that he hoped to return to Norman soon.

While in his home town, he had been quoted as saying that a rumor going around in Arkansas, that a Negro would be made Governor of Oklahoma was too silly for words. The newspaper article said, also, that Mr. Renfrow was planning to move to Norman, where he had made "large investments." An article quoted from a Russelville paper expressed disappointment that he was planning to leave, pointing out that he had been very active in community affairs in Russelville, being called on for many duties, and always responding gladly.

On April 26, 1890, Mr. Renfrow arrived in Norman but had been compelled to leave his wife and little daughter in Eureka Springs, Arkansas, because of illness in the family. By June 7, the family were in Norman, living in a house on Comanche Street, that was being renovated. He was having a good residence built on his lots on Comanche and Crawford, into which they moved after a short time.

It was not long until he became deeply involved in Norman's community life, just as the word from his former home, had described him. We find that he was working in a number of enterprises, such as: serving as financial committee chairman for the Fourth of July celebration; joining the Board of Trade; and being a member of the committee to welcome Governor Steele, during the first visit the territorial Governor made to Norman, in spite of the fact that Renfrow was an active Democrat, and Steele, a Republican. He visited in Oklahoma City, and told them of Norman's needs, and was engaged in correspondence with Doctor William Taylor, of Utica, Kansas, and helped induce the doctor to move to Norman. All these activities were duly noted in the Norman Transcript.

There were two or three banks opened in Norman during the first years. One of these was the Norman State Bank, established by Texans. Included in the list of officers was Mr. C. H. Bessent, who was to continue

in Norman banking for a number of years. Under the leadership of Mr. Renfrow this bank was reorganized in 1891, with him becoming President. Mr. Bessent remained in the organization as Cashier. There was a feeling of satisfaction on the part of residents of Norman, since it had become a "home enterprise." Renfrow and Bessent were to work together for a number of years.

In 1892, Grover Cleveland was elected as President of the United States for a second term, with Benjamin Harrison serving one term between Cleveland's two periods of administration. Harrison was a Republican, and his term had spanned the time of the run into Oklahoma, and the organization of territorial government here. Under existing practices, all the officers for the territory were Republicans, having received their appointments from the President. They came to be called Carpet Baggers by the residents of Oklahoma Territory. President Cleveland, soon after his inauguration, stated that he was interested in appointing Democrats to the offices, and that he would try to appoint residents who were already living in the territory. Early in April, W. C. Renfrow was appointed and inaugurated into the office of Governor. He administered the affairs of the territory in a commendable manner, and had the distinction of being the first one of the governors, during this period, who served out his full term, of four years.

His administration was marked by a remarkable growth in Oklahoma Territory. The opening of the Cherokee Outlet, called "the Strip", was the largest of all the land additions, adding an immense domain of land, organized into 10 counties, office holders in each of these were appointed by Governor Renfrow. He mentioned in his annual report for the year 1893-1894, that the appointment of these officers had taken a great deal of his time. The Supreme Court decision in 1896, adding Greer County to Oklahoma, also presented new administrative problems, since it had been settled by Texans, over a period of several years. Agreements had to be made with Texas, whereby the settlers there were to keep their lands, but under the administration of Oklahoma. This was the last of the large additions to be made to the territory until the Kiowa-Comanche, Caddo, Apache, and Wichita lands were settled following a lottery, in 1901.

The third Territorial Legislature, under Governor Renfrow, had a number of matters to be acted on. The matter of bonds and fees to be collected; salaries for territorial and county officers were provided; election laws were passed, and the Australian ballot was adopted. This is the same form of ballot that is used today in our elections. Territorial taxes were levied, as well as those for the counties. A small appropriation was made for the Oklahoma Historical Society to help them collect and preserve newspaper files, documents, letters, books, and other data on Oklahoma Territory and surrounding areas. Renfrow was favorable to that appropriation.

Early in the history of Norman, the Southern Methodist Church had established a school for young ladies, known as Hi Gate Academy, on the east side of Norman. This institution did not operate but for a few years, but had built a brick building on their campus. In 1895, this property was purchased by a company, organized as the Oklahoma Sanitarium Company, and an institution was opened, for the care of the insane.

Since the organization of the territory, the Oklahoma insane

were taken care of at Oak Lawn Retreat at Jacksonville, Illinois, under a contract providing for their care, for a charge of \$25.00 per month. In addition, the institution paid for the transportation of the inmates, but did not provide transportation for the officers who accompanied them. The bill for the latter was costing over \$8,000 per year, and the cost each year had been larger than the appropriations. The legislature had authorized a new contract for the care of these unfortunates. Such a contract was entered into with the Oklahoma Sanitarium Company for this service. The fee to be paid for the service was the same as that paid to the Illinois institution, but a marked saving was made by doing away with the necessity of transporting the attendants who took them to the out-of-state institution. During the first fiscal year, \$30,253.24 was paid to the Norman Sanitarium. Excellent reports were given by those who had visited the institution on several occasions. This operation was directed by Dr. John Threadgil, and he had as his assistant, Dr. D. W. Griffin, who was destined to take over the direction of the operation.

The Governor failed in his attempt to secure the erection of a penitentiary to bring the Territorial prisoners back from the Kansas Penitentiary where they were being taken under contract. They also failed to enter into a contract with any state for a reform school.

Additional recommendations, not accepted, included the item in each of his annual reports, in which he suggested that the several counties should erect their own buildings, instead of continuing to rent space. The question of statehood was being batted about, with increasing volume. In this matter, Renfrow was outspoken in his recommendation that there should be no state until the Indian Territory could be included.

The reform of the banking system came as the result of a condition that had been pointed up by Renfrow in his annual report in 1894. He pointed out that there were 56 banks in the territory, of which 50 were private institutions, and only 6 were national banks. He then pointed out the fact that it was virtually impossible to get reports from the private concerns, but among the few that did report was the Norman State Bank, W. C. Renfrow president. School lands presented another problem. In addition to the sections 16 and 36 set aside in the territory, the income from which was to be used for public schools, sections 13 and 33 were set aside in the openings, starting with the Cherokee Outlet, with the proceeds to be used for higher education and public buildings. These lands were to be leased, under the direction of a Territorial Leasing Board, consisting of the Governor, the Secretary, and the Territorial Superintendent of Schools. By the report time in 1894, net proceeds from the lands had climbed to \$91,633.91. By 1895, the population of the Territory had risen to 212,635, of whom 79,665 were of school age.

At the end of his term, Mr. Renfrow returned from Guthrie and became a Norman resident again. He continued to make investments, and was again active in the bank, the presidency of which he continued to hold during his term as governor. A new charter was obtained in 1900, and the institution was reorganized into the First National Bank. Mr. Bessent remained active as Cashier, and Renfrow became the president of the new

institution. They continued to occupy the building that had formerly housed the Norman State Bank, on the corner of Main and Peters, in fact, the name of the state bank remained carved in stone over the front door for some time. This location was to remain the home of the First National Bank until a new building was built on Peters Avenue and Comanche Streets in 1958.

The family continued to be recognized in Norman. In 1900, we find that Miss Nellie Renfrow went to Paris to "finish her education and to see the Exposition." Interest was growing concerning new lead and zinc deposits in the northeastern part of Oklahoma, and the Southwestern corner of Missouri, around Joplin, and the former governor was becoming interested, along with others.

During the last half of the year 1903, he sold his interest in the bank to E. B. Johnson, well known cattleman, west of Norman, and the advertisements for the bank carried the names of J. A. HULLUM, President, E. B. Johnson, Vice President, and C. H. Bessent, Cashier. Mr. Bessent remained in the organization until 1914, when he withdrew and opened the Security National Bank.

The Renfrows left Norman soon after this change, and moved to the mining territory in the northeast part of the state. He has left his mark on a number of undertakings in Norman, as a part of his considerable investments. In fact, his name still appears on the facade of a building in the 200 block of East Main. His death came at Miami, Oklahoma, on January 3, 1922. While we have no record of his activities in his new home, we are sure that he was engaged in many community undertakings.