

# Dirty Thirties

**THE GREAT DEPRESSION.** On October 29, 1929, the stock market plummeted after a meteoric rise. A record 16 million shares were sold on the stock exchange floor, and stock prices fell an average of 40 points each. The stock market crash is generally considered the beginning of the U. S. plunge into the Great Depression. Actually the Depression had existed for some time in Europe and the rest of the world. It had also existed in Oklahoma.

The state of Oklahoma had been in the throes of an agricultural depression since the World War. Farmers who had produced more to feed the armies and the people of Europe continued to produce more after the armies returned home. Devastated European countries were unable to buy much imported produce. Prices fell and farmers were unable to pay debts *incurred* during the productive wartime years. Some returned to simple *subsistence* farming. Others moved into the cities to seek industrial jobs.

The Great Depression not only eliminated many of the industrial jobs, but worsened the plight of the farmers who had stayed with the land. During the first two years of the Depression, farm prices fell 30 percent, but the taxes the farmers paid and the prices they paid for necessities stayed high. A bad situation became impossible for many farmers, and between 1930 and 1935 more than 750,000 farms were lost through foreclosures and bankruptcy sales nationwide.

Agriculture was only one industry of several that were devastated by the end of the war and the advent of the Great Depression. The petroleum industry was hard-hit. Peacetime armies use far less fuel than wartime armies, and at first, the industry felt the pinch of that decreased market. Soon, however, automobile sales escalated, and other mechanical inventions began to raise the market again. The number of registered automobiles increased from nine million in 1920 to 27 million in 1929. Oil exports also increased from 77 million barrels in 1920 to 153 million



*Governor William H.  
"Alfalfa Bill" Murray*

barrels in 1929, and Oklahoma's oil fields were producing more than 24 percent of the nation's oil. Companies like Skelly Oil Company (now Getty) and Phillips Petroleum Company attributed skyrocketing success to Oklahoma's rich oil fields in the Roaring Twenties.

**THE WILD MARY SUDIK.** During those years several oil fields were discovered in north-central Oklahoma, including the Oklahoma City Pool in 1928. The most productive of all the wells in that pool was the Mary Sudik, soon dubbed the Wild Mary Sudik. Brought in with a roar, the well *spewed* gas and oil so high that houses in Norman, eleven miles south, were sprayed. When the wind shifted, homes some twelve miles away in Nicoma Park were sprayed with the slimy substance. The *gusher* threw an estimated 200 million cubic feet of gas and 20,000 barrels of crude oil into the air daily for eleven days. Hundreds of acres of farmland were soaked with oil, ponds and lakes bore a thick film on their surfaces, and the derrick was invisible, hidden inside the mighty *gusher*. Fire hazard zones were announced by the fire marshal, and any use of fire was prohibited in the danger area.

The Mary Sudik became a national novelty, with radio stations everywhere reporting on her daily condition. Spectators gathered as closely as they were allowed by officials. Firefighters stood by, ready to extinguish even the smallest of threatening flames, hopeful that no spark would reach the menacing material. Several attempts were made to bring the well under control. Finally, on April 4, 1930, at 6:15 p.m., workmen battling tons of pressure turned the valve on the "Shaffer rant," which they had laboriously fastened to the well casing, and the rumbling fountain died.

*Gushers* were not unusual at that time, but the Wild Mary Sudik *spewed* more gas and oil into the air and endangered more property than any other well in the state's history. After the Mary Sudik was brought under control, the wind quickly blew away the dangerous pockets of gas, diluting them in the air. The oil-covered topsoil was soon plowed under. However, the state fire marshal maintained a strict *blockade* of the area for several days.

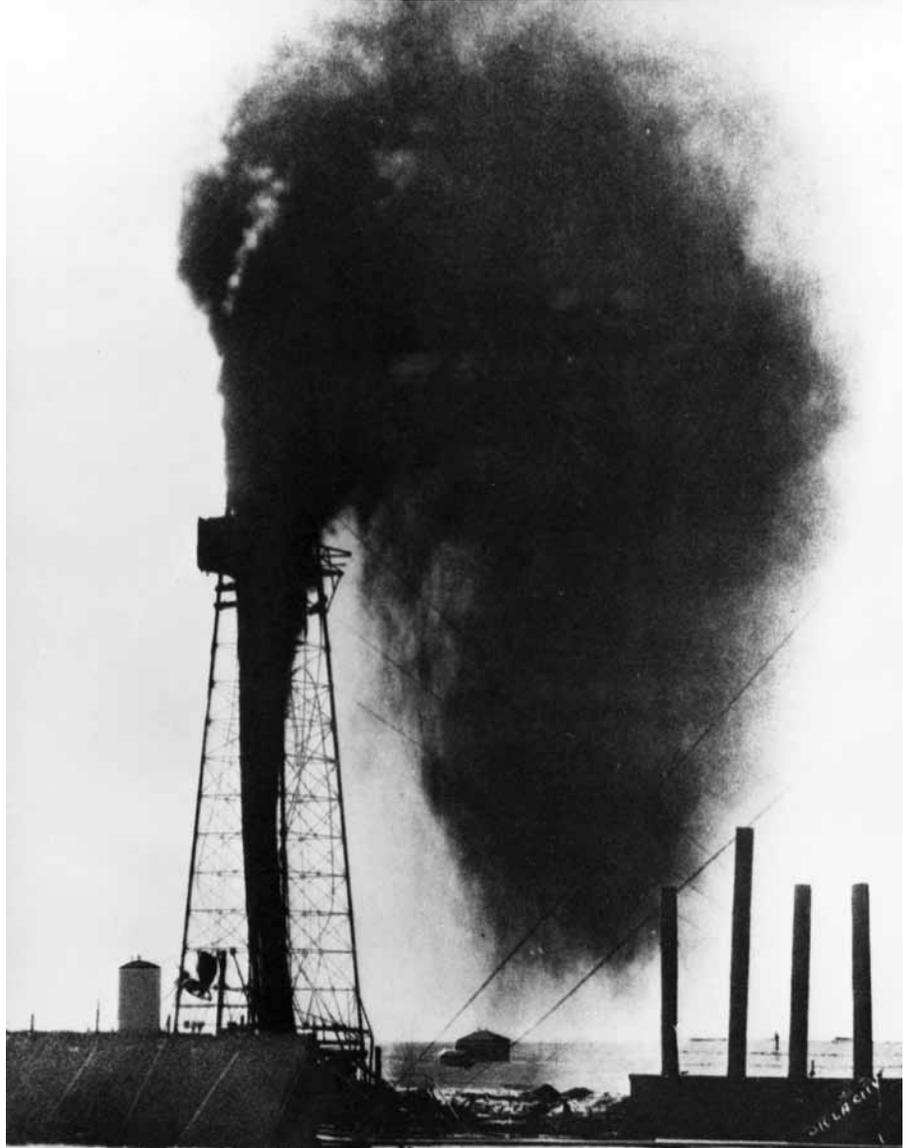
The Wild Mary Sudik became the greatest producing well in the Oklahoma City field, and it helped to glut (overfill) the oil market in the early 1930s. With the reduction in manufacturing, reduction in automobile sales, and the general worldwide reduction in available *revenue*, the petroleum markets could not accommodate the tremendous production

from the *prolific* Oklahoma oil fields. Companies refused to cut back on production, however, and the market dropped drastically. By July 22, 1931, a barrel of oil was worth 22 cents.

**GOVERNOR WILLIAM H. MURRAY.** Although Oklahoma farmers and farmers nationwide were suffering the ravages of depression, William H. Murray believed that the only lasting society was an *agrarian* society. Born in 1869 in the farming community of Toadsuck, Texas, William Henry David “Alfalfa Bill” Murray believed in the family farm, the *yeoman* farmer, the values of Thomas Jefferson, and the greatness of the Democratic Party. He believed in equal distribution of arable land (land suitable for raising crops), and he advocated laws to prevent accumulation of large tracts of land by corporations or foreign owners.

Bill Murray had worked as a salesman, a teacher, a news reporter, and an attorney when he moved to Indian Territory and married Mary Alice Hearrell, becoming an intermarried Chickasaw citizen. Murray, an expert in constitutional law, had been active in politics since statehood. He ran for governor in 1918 and was defeated by J.B.A. Robertson.

In 1924 Bill Murray and his wife led a group of Americans, mostly Oklahomans, to Bolivia, where they attempted to establish an *agrarian* colony. They returned to Oklahoma in 1929 after their project failed. Without funds, Alfalfa Bill borrowed \$40 from a Tishomingo bank and launched a campaign for governor. He toured the state in a used car, stopping to sit curbside, eating his lunch from a paper sack and talking politics with citizens on street corners. He was often unshaven and *unkempt*,



*The Wild Mary Sudik was the highest producing well in the Oklahoma City field in 1930.*

but many unemployed workers and tenant farmers identified with him. As Andrew Jackson had done in the 1830s, William H. Murray advertised himself as “the common man,” a man of the people, and he was elected. He borrowed \$250 to attend his own inaugural ball, which was a square dance with the new governor as the caller.

Many members of the Oklahoma House of Representatives had been elected on the party ticket with Murray, and the House stood behind the new governor in his policies. The Senate, however, contained many members who had served under Holloway, who had been involved in the Johnston impeachment, and who stood faithfully against the new governor and his policies.

Tax reform was the foundation of Murray’s campaign, and the State Tax Commission was created during his term of office. The Commission succeeded in balancing property values across the state and in lowering *ad valorem* (property) taxes by almost one-fourth. This was a major step for Murray toward keeping his campaign promise of tax relief for farmers and home owners.

**THE GREAT RED RIVER BRIDGE WAR.** During Governor Murray’s *tenure* of office, he called out the National Guard twenty-seven times and declared martial law thirty-four times. His first use of the Guard occurred during the bridge war between Oklahoma and Texas in July, 1931. In cooperation, the two states had built three bridges across the Red River — at the Terral-Ringgold crossing, the Marietta-Gainesville crossing, and the Durant-Denison crossing. Two of the bridges had been completed when the owners of a toll bridge at the Durant-Denison crossing obtained a federal court injunction barring the use of the new free bridge at that crossing. Texas Governor Ross Sterling ordered *barri- cades* set across the access to the Texas side of all three free bridges until the matter could be settled.

A strong believer in states’ rights, Murray believed the court order to be an infringement upon the rights of both states involved. He cited the 11th Amendment, stating that a private citizen could not enjoin a sovereign state in a federal lawsuit. On July 16, 1931, Murray defied the federal court injunction and issued a *proclamation* opening all three free bridges to the public. The Highway Department crews removed the *bar- racades* and opened the two completed bridges. Then they blocked the approaches to the toll bridges, sending for tractors with which to plow across them. Murray notified Sterling of his actions via a telegram.

Sterling responded by sending the Texas Rangers to close the Texas side of the bridges. He then sent a telegram to Murray:

I feel you have extended your *jurisdiction* beyond all reason. Certainly I cannot join you in attempting to make a federal court injunction inoperative. I have sent Texas Rangers to protect Texas highway employees endeavoring to obey the court injunction, on request of the Texas Highway Commission.



By July 17, Oklahoma highway crews were obstructing traffic on the toll bridges at the Durant-Denison and Terral-Ringgold crossings. Traffic was flowing across the free bridge at Terral-Ringgold, but Texas Rangers were halting traffic at the Durant-Denison free bridge. The toll bridge was operating at the Marietta-Gainesville crossing. Thus, two of the crossings were open to traffic on one bridge or another, but the Durant-Denison crossing was totally inaccessible to travelers.

The bridge war gained national attention, and Governor Murray's popularity rose. He became a national figure as a champion of the people. On July 19, the *Daily Oklahoman* reported that the *Houston Press* had said:

Governor Murray of Oklahoma may be ignorant, uncouth and all else you have heard about him, but somehow you have respect for a man who thinks his state is bigger than private interests...In Texas, we must wait until the lawyers quit wrangling before the people get their rights.

Spectators flocked to the Durant-Denison crossing, along with the press. On July 23, anticipating further court interference, Governor Murray declared martial law and called out the Oklahoma National Guard to

*Governor Murray visits troops during "The Great Red River Bridge War" with Texas.*

block the approach to the toll bridge.

On July 25, Federal Judge T.M. Kennerly removed the injunction barring Texas from opening the free bridges. Federal Judge Colin Neblett then issued an injunction barring Texas from opening the free bridges. Neblett then issued an injunction barring the Oklahoma National Guard from blocking the toll bridge approach. Traffic was already flowing across the free bridge, however. Neblett's injunction angered Governor Murray, and he instructed the National Guard to ignore it. He then departed for Durant where he personally took charge of matters as the state's commander-in-chief.

The public lauded Murray for what they saw as his defense of the people. Newspapers called him "Horatio at the Bridge" or likened him to Theodore Roosevelt. On the morning of July 26, a Sunday, for unexplained reasons, Murray ended the war and complied with the federal order to allow traffic to pass over the toll bridge. He stationed his guardsmen at the free bridge to ensure that it remained open, and he returned to Oklahoma City. In his fight to open the bridges, Murray had claimed that the federal courts were protecting the Red River Bridge Company, a group of businessmen, at the expense of the citizens of Oklahoma. He had also claimed that Oklahoma had the right to open the bridges because Oklahoma held title to both sides of the river. In a later court decision, the state boundary question was examined once again. The federal court reaffirmed that Oklahoma's boundary included the south bank of the Red River.

**MARTIAL LAW IN THE OIL FIELDS.** In August, 1931, just a few days after the end of the Oklahoma-Texas Bridge War, Governor Murray again made use of the Oklahoma National Guard. Oklahoma oil producers were producing more and more oil while prices for that oil were steadily declining. The Corporation Commission issued "proration orders" to avoid waste of crude oil and *disastrously* lower prices. These orders set a maximum of production per well and limited allowed production to the amount which could be sold.

Some companies had voluntarily slowed or ceased production, and on July 27, 3,000 oilmen assembled in Tulsa to call for a shut-down of all operations. Other companies refused to comply with the proration orders, and the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the Corporation Commission did not have the power to limit production.

On August 4, Governor Murray declared martial law in the oil fields,

instructing the Oklahoma National Guard to stop production. More than 3,000 wells were shut down. Murray announced that, when they were reopened, production would be limited to 77,000 barrels per day. The governor claimed that he took action to prevent the “exhaustion and waste” of the state’s natural resources. He further indicated that the large oil companies were jeopardizing the state and national economy, which was already in trouble, and that they were attempting to use the situation to obtain monopolistic control of the industry and to destroy the small



producers.

Murray called a series of meetings with the governors of Texas, Kansas, and New Mexico and encouraged them to take similar steps. He also asked President Herbert Hoover to urge the limitation of oil production in other states. The other officials took action and oil prices rose. Oklahoma’s oil fields were inoperative for two months, but the Oklahoma Legislature passed a new petroleum conservation law which specifically

*The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) helps prevent land erosion by sloping the sides of a washed-out gully and planting bermuda grass.*

granted the Corporation Commission the power to *enforce* its rules and *regulations*. This marked the beginning of the *regulation* of the petroleum industry in Oklahoma.

**THE MURRAY ADMINISTRATION.** The Senate refused to act on an income tax proposal which had swept through the House in record time. Murray had asked for a graduated tax beginning with two percent on earnings of \$1,800 annually and rising to 10 percent on earnings of \$3,600 and over. They passed other tax laws which were less effective in replacing the *revenue* lost in the property tax cuts, such as collection of gross production tax on oil, *inheritance tax*, and corporation license fees.

Murray sought help from various pressure groups, asking them to support the income tax. The most effective of those groups, the teachers' organization, did not respond, and the governor was finally forced to compromise with the Senate. The income tax law was passed, but at a much lower rate than Murray had originally designed. They placed taxes on corporate income, as Murray had asked, but exempted insurance companies and building and loan associations, and they granted depletion allowances to oil companies.

A *referendum* measure making legal the sale of 3.2 beer (not in excess of 3.2 per cent alcohol) was approved by the people, and \$369,000 was appropriated for building penal facilities at Atoka to relieve the crowded conditions at the McAlester prison.

Depression conditions were growing worse. Cotton prices dropped from sixteen cents to six cents per pound, and eastern Oklahoma depended on the cotton crop. Wheat prices dropped from \$1 a bushel to thirty-eight cents a bushel. Western Oklahoma depended on the wheat crop. Soon the roads were filled with families moving west — tenant farmers looking for agricultural work. Governor Murray asked for legislative appropriations to furnish free seed and emergency food *rations* for the needy. He was instrumental in forming the National Council for Relief, which met for the first time at Memphis, Tennessee, in the summer of 1931.

Governor Murray encouraged the state's farmers to increase production. Then he sent truckloads of unemployed men into the rural areas to work for the farmers in exchange for produce. He granted ten unemployed men permission to grow vegetables on the land between the governor's mansion and the Capitol building. He insisted that all state officials practice *stringent* economic measures, and he saw appropriations markedly

reduced to state institutions.

Governor Murray also engaged in several personal fights while he was in office. Several times he tried to reorganize the Highway Department and oust his adversary, Lew Wentz. He failed. He succeeded in creating jobs for the unemployed through the Highway Department, however, when he ordered the building of farm-to-market roads and set a minimum wage of \$2 per day for Highway Department employees.

Murray engaged in another fight with higher education, insisting that the “frills” be removed. He believed university professors should teach “eight hours a day, six days a week, twelve months a year,” and that “attendance at professional meetings was a waste of time.” He referred to the University of Oklahoma’s new student union building as a “country club.” He engaged in wholesale replacement of teachers and college presidents, and in 1931, he sent the National Guard to collect tickets at the Oklahoma-Nebraska football game, claiming mismanagement of ticket money at the University of Oklahoma.

The banking situation became acute during Murray’s administration. In 1933, after hundreds of banks across the country had failed, several eastern states declared a temporary general bank closing. Oklahoma banks were then unable to utilize reserves they held in those eastern banks, and depositors grew restless. To avoid runs (people withdrawing too much money) on the state’s major banking institutions, Murray declared a moratorium of all Oklahoma banks. That is, all banks in the state were to remain closed, beginning March 2, 1933. Two days later President Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered a national bank closing for more than a week. When the moratorium was lifted, only those banks which could meet new Treasury Department standards were allowed to reopen. Some were allowed to issue limited amounts of cash,



*When people traveled during the Depression, they often set up tents beside the road rather than spend money on lodging.*

and still others were never allowed to open for business again.

Despite his concern for the state's poor, Murray opposed Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal policy and made overt efforts to prevent its coming to the state. He personally disliked the President and allowed those feelings to interfere with state execution of national Depression policies.

William H. "Alfalfa Bill" Murray was the most colorful, controversial figure in the history of state government. Many loved him. Many hated him. Few were indifferent. He received national attention on several occasions and was *nominated* for President of the United States as a favorite son candidate at the National Democratic Convention in 1932. He believed in the benefits of an *agrarian* society to the extent that he rejected industrialization, urbanization, and centralization of governmental power. Yet he wielded the power of the governor's office more fiercely than any preceding governor of Oklahoma. Although he failed in some areas, he succeeded in making the state government financially sound during the worst economic crisis in national history.

**THE DUST BOWL.** In 1933 a drought hit western Oklahoma, and with it, the high winds of the Great Plains turned that part of the state and parts of Texas and Kansas into the "Dust Bowl." *Debilitating* (causing weakness or hardship) heat, clouds of sand and dirt, and swarms of grasshoppers and locusts plagued the residents of the Panhandle. Tons of Oklahoma topsoil were carried off by the wind and scattered across the country. Seeds planted were buried under sand dunes or sprouted to parch and die in the hot sun. Victims of the Dust Bowl joined eastern Oklahoma's tenant farmers on their trek west. As their forebears had come to the territories seeking a better life, these migrants left Oklahoma in search of a better life. Both desperate and courageous, they loaded their belongings and their families onto their vehicles and traveled west in search of jobs they had heard about in the fruitful fields of Arizona, New Mexico, and California. Though many of them were from Arkansas, Kansas, Texas, Colorado, and Missouri, they all became known as "Okies." *The Grapes of Wrath*, a novel by John Steinbeck published in 1939, was a best-selling book telling the story of the plight of a migrant family from Oklahoma. Through the popularity of the book, the name Okie became a permanent part of the American vocabulary. Many Oklahomans felt the book was demeaning and resented its author. Nevertheless, the name stuck.

**WILL ROGERS AND WILEY POST.** In August, 1935, the deaths of two Oklahomans shocked the nation and especially the state. Will Rogers, an internationally known humorist-actor-journalist, and Wiley Post, an internationally famous pilot, were killed in a plane crash near Point Barrow, Alaska. A member of the Cherokee tribe and a native of Oologah, Rogers had eased the pain of the Depression for many with his humorous point-blank analyses of social and political situations. Wiley Post, in 1933, the first man to fly solo around the world, was the adventurer who had put pride into the hearts of Oklahomans otherwise humbled by the Depression. The state mourned its two favorite sons, and for many, it seemed that the only bright spots of the decade were gone.



*Will Rogers and Wiley Post were killed in Point Barrow, Alaska, on August 15, 1935.*

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Identify “Wild Mary Sudik” and tell why the word “wild” was attached to the name.
2. Explain how William H. Murray’s personality, beliefs, and actions affected his administration as governor.
3. What was the Great Depression?
4. What were some of the causes of the depression? Consider (1) the stock market, (2) agriculture, and (3) the Dust Bowl.
5. Who were two famous Oklahomans who died in a plane crash in August, 1935?