

JAMES HUGH MCBIRNEY¹
1870-1944

By Fred S. Clinton, M.D., F.A.C.S.

James Hugh McBirney was born in CloghJordan, County Tipperary, Ireland, on March 1, 1870, the eldest son of the Reverend Hugh McBirney D.D., and Susan Mark McBirney. The family moved to the United States when James was about five and a half years old. Settling in Southern Kansas, Doctor McBirney carried on his ministry in the Methodist Episcopal Church for thirty years and he and Mrs. McBirney reared their family of six children,² giving them the advantages of a cultured, Christian home and of education in the public schools.

In 1899, James Hugh McBirney was employed as a bookkeeper in the Bank of Columbus, Columbus, Kansas, and seven years later held the same position in the C. M. Condon and Company Bank, Coffeyville, Kansas.³ In 1897, he accepted the position of bookkeeper in the Tulsa Banking Company, the first banking institution in Tulsa, Indian Territory.⁴

The Tulsa Banking Company was reorganized into the First National Bank and Mr. McBirney was elected Vice President in 1904. When another reorganization of the Bank took place with the majority ownership going to outsiders, he decided to organize and establish a home-owned banking institution. He was joined by Sam P. McBirney, Lee Clinton, and T. E. Smiley, and on February

¹ This sketch was requested and written especially for *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*.

² In the order of their birth, the six sons and daughters were James Hugh McBirney, subject of this sketch; Robert A. McBirney, 1119 South Boulder; Miss Anna McBirney, 1605 South Elwood; Sam P. McBirney, died January 20, 1936; Lea McBirney, 1605 South Elwood; Mrs. H. O. Bird (Caroline McBirney, 1411 South Galveston, all residents of Tulsa.

³ The C. M. Condon and Company Bank is now known as the Condon National Bank of Coffeyville, Kansas. On October 5, 1892, the notorious Dalton gang of outlaws made a surprise attack on the C. M. Condon and Company Bank and the First National Bank of Coffeyville, Kansas, at the same time. The fight that took place resulted as follows: Bob and Grat Dalton and Dick Broadwell were killed within five feet of each other; Tom Evans was killed and Emmet Dalton received twenty-seven gunshot wounds resulting in permanent injury. Coffeyville citizens killed were George Cubine, City Marshall Connelly, Charlie Brown, Lucian Baldwin; and seriously injured, Thomas G. Ayers and T. A. Reynolds. None of the robbers escaped and no money was lost. Emmet Dalton died in California on July 13, 1937. His mother was a sister of Cole Younger's father.

⁴ The Tulsa Banking Company was organized in 1895 with the following officers: Jay Forsythe, President; Ben F. Colley, Vice President; C. W. Brown, Cashier. In 1896, Lee Clinton was employed as book-keeper.

4, 1904, organized the Bank of Commerce. This was reorganized under the name of National Bank of Commerce on March 9, 1911, with the election of James H. McBirney, President; Lee Clinton, Vice President; S. P. McBirney, Cashier; and Lea McBirney and Joe P. Boyd, Jr., assistant cashiers. With its steady growth and expansion, the planning and building of an entirely modern bank home was commenced at 10 East Third Street. The National Bank of Commerce moved into this magnificent and substantial seven-story building with sub-story and basement, in 1923.

The McBirney Building, a modern business and office structure of ten stories, erected in 1928, occupies the southwest corner of Main and Third streets, Tulsa, and adjoins the Bank Building with which it is connected and operated. The builder and owner, the McBirney Investment Company, had the following officers: J. H. McBirney, President; A. P. Wright, Vice President; Charles S. Jones, Vice President; V. P. Rader, Secretary; S. P. McBirney, Treasurer.

Mr. McBirney continued in the banking business fifty-two years, forty-seven of which were in Tulsa, entitling him to the honor of Dean of the Banking Industry in Tulsa. The Bank of Commerce, organized in 1904, and nationalized in 1911, is the only bank in Tulsa that has stood the stress of storm and test of time for forty years under the same uninterrupted management.⁵

In addition to being a stockholder, director and officer in the Bank, Mr. McBirney had investments or interest in insurance, bonds, stocks, and properties, both real and personal, including minerals and oil. He was interested in sports for general amusement, diversion or skill, such as athletics and outdoor activities, like baseball, football, hunting, fishing, swimming, boating, and camping. One of the objectives in coming to Tulsa was to accept a position as pitcher for the City's first baseball team organized in 1897. In this, he earned an enviable reputation.⁶

⁵ The Board of Directors and Officers of the National Bank of Commerce of Tulsa, June 30, 1944, are as follows:

<i>Directors</i>	<i>Officers</i>
J. D. McBirney	J. D. McBirney, President and Chairman of the Board
W. A. Vandever	A. P. Wright, Executive Vice President
J. N. Thompson	C. B. Wallace, Vice President
A. P. Wright	Mac W. Rupp, Vice President
Wm. M. Thompson	T. P. Farmer, Vice President and Cashier
Mrs. Vera McBirney	Lea McBirney, Asst. Vice-President
	C. V. Baker, Asst. Cashier
	R. A. West, Asst. Cashier
	Ray C. Montgomery, Asst. Cashier

⁶ W. J. Baber, who came from Coffeyville, Kansas, to manage the Lynch Mercantile Company in Tulsa, arranged with the Tulsa Banking Company to offer James H. McBirney, of Coffeyville, the position of book-keeper with the privilege of playing baseball on the Tulsa team in 1897.

James Hugh McBirney was united in marriage on June 6, 1901, with Miss Vera Clinton, of Red Fork, Indian Territory, the daughter of Charles and Louise (Atkins) Clinton. The marriage ceremony was performed by the Reverend Doctor McBirney assisted by the Reverend Mr. C. W. Kerr, Pastor of the Presbyterian Church of Tulsa, at the Clinton family home in Red Fork where the Clinton High School now stands.

Enjoying their home and sharing it with others, open house was maintained by Mr. and Mrs. McBirney from the time of establishing their home in their first modest residences, 417 South Main Street and 515 South Denver. Their handsome, modern residence at 1414 South Galveston, Tulsa, occupied in 1928, is adapted to both small and large parties, games, and a variety of entertainment, having been the scene of many gatherings, —family, church, business, and social.

Four children were born to Mr. and Mrs. McBirney, three of whom are living: Dorothy Vera, Martha, and J. D. McBirney. Simmons McBirney, aged 16, died July 21, 1936. Dorothy Vera McBirney is now Mrs. Robert M. Hardy, of Yakima, Washington. Martha McBirney married David M. Bradley and resides at 2101 East 22nd Place, Tulsa. They are the parents of three children: James D., John Thomas, and Dorothy Anne Bradley. Lieutenant J. D. McBirney married Elizabeth, the only daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Greis, of Tulsa. Lieutenant McBirney has been in the U. S. service over two years, he and his wife making their home in Tulsa.

James Hugh McBirney was a member of Tulsa Lodge No. 71, A.F. and A.M.; held the Knights Templar degree in the York rites and the 32nd degree in the Scottish rites, and was also a member of Adkar Temple, A.A.O.N.M.S. He was a member and supporter of Red Cross and Community Chest; a member of the Tulsa Club, the Tulsa Country Club, Chamber of Commerce, Mens Dinner Club, Knife and Fork Club.

He served for over ten years as member of the Executive Council of the American Bankers Association, and for six years as chairman of the Agricultural Committee of the same organization. He was member of the Examining Committee of the Northwestern Life Insurance Company of Milwaukee more than three years.

Christened as an infant in the Methodist Episcopal Church by his father, Mr. McBirney was a member of the First Methodist Church in Tulsa from about 1897, and a member of the Official Board of Trustees from 1904. He gave many years of his official and personal service to keep an efficient organization to plan, construct and pay for the magnificent Gothic structure of the First Methodist Church on Boulder Avenue, Tulsa, which stands as a monu-

ment to his leadership and to the sacrifices of every contributor. The McBirney Chapel, a small, beautiful auditorium adjoining and opening into the main auditorium is dedicated to the memory of the Reverend Doctor and Mrs. Hugh McBirney, father and mother of James Hugh and his brothers and sisters.

Hundreds of messages of condolence came to Mrs. McBirney and the family from friends and business connections in Oklahoma and throughout the Nation, upon the death of James Hugh McBirney on June 8, 1944.

The day of the funeral, promptly at 2 p.m., the soft music of the great pipe organ stopped the vagrant whispering in the large audience which filled the main auditorium of the First Methodist Church and the service began. The altar on the east side of the Church was banked with beautiful floral offerings extending from north to the south wall of the Church except in front of the pulpit. The service was conducted by the Reverend Mr. John J. Crowe, Pastor of the First Methodist Church, and he was assisted by the Reverend Doctor C. W. Kerr, Pastor Emeritus of the First Presbyterian Church; the service was dignified and harmonious. Appropriate music was furnished by Mrs. George B. Stanley, Miss Nina Elkins, and Mrs. Don Drake, organist. Pall bearers were Messrs. A. P. Wright, C. B. Wallace, Mac W. Rupp, Lou Witwer, H. J. Haines, and T. P. Farmer. Interment was at Rose Hill Cemetery, Tulsa.

Countless flowers given during and after his last illness attested the wide esteem in which Mr. McBirney was held by people in all walks of life. Many gave expression of their friendship in more lasting memorials, such as contributions to the Baby Milk Fund and to the Daughters of the American Revolution "Blood Plasma Memory Book" fund providing blood plasma for transfusion to help save the lives of soldiers on the battle fronts of World War II. A book fund to establish a section in the Public Library dedicated to the memory of Mr. McBirney was proposed and met with immediate acceptance June 9, 1944. The following inscription was placed in the first book donated to this Library memorial:

This Book of Books is a memorial to James H. McBirney,
March 1, 1870—June 8, 1944

"Blessed be the memory of those who have left their blood, their spirits, their lives in these precious books, and have willingly invested themselves into these during monuments to give light unto others."

Bishop Joseph Hall
(1574-1556)

The following tribute is from a letter addressed to the writer of this biographical sketch, by Bishop A. Frank Smith:⁷

"This generation has never witnessed a better example of a sane, well-rounded life than was afforded by the life of the late J. H. McBirney, of Tulsa. Nor one of whom it could more appropriately be said, as the Old Testament records of David: 'He served his own generation by the will of God.' Mr. McBirney put first things first and all other things were added unto him.

"He was born and reared in a religious atmosphere, and his relation to God and his fellow man were determined for him before he had reached the age of understanding; and when he became a man he did not turn his back upon his Christian heritage, rather did he carve a career that stands as everlasting proof of the fact that the ways of a righteous man are blessed of God.

"Mr. McBirney achieved eminence in business, social, and professional circles, not only in Tulsa, but in the life of the Nation; but he remained a devout, humble Christian, and he counted all honors and achievements as secondary to his service in his Church and to his Lord.

"For more than forty years he was the Chairman of the Board of Trustees of The First Methodist Church of Tulsa, the most responsible position open to a layman in the Methodist Church. Under his leadership the magnificent Gothic cathedral, one of the noblest edifices of worship in America, which houses First Church, was erected. During all these years he stood as a bulwark in his church and community, opposing everything that was wrong, and supporting all things that were good.

"Mr. McBirney will long be remembered as a financier, a civic leader, a builder, a master of men. But those who knew him best will remember his moral character, his beautiful family life, his humble devotion to his Lord, and they will look forward to seeing him again in 'that house not made with hands,' whose builder and maker is God."

⁷ Bishop A. Frank Smith, of the Methodist Church, lives in Houston 4, Texas. He was the Bishop of the Southern Methodist Church Conference in 1930-31 and 1934-37 in Oklahoma, and, as one of the participating Bishops of the South Central Jurisdictional Conference, had a part in the consecration of the Bishops elected at this Conference and the recognition of the Retiring Bishop at the First Methodist Church, Tulsa, Oklahoma, June 15, 1944.