

ROBERT LEE WILLIAMS AS I KNEW HIM

*By Baxter Taylor**

Robert Lee Williams, destined to eminence in manhood's estate was born in 1868 in the ruin and shambles of a tragic civil war. His Southland at that day was prostrate, devastated, in dismal ruin—the bleeding wounds of fraternal strife had not yet healed.

He was born amid the grimmest conditions of the poverty then suffered by his beloved South. Under these conditions he was reared to early manhood. His inner life yearned for an education. To attain his heart's desire he bore the hard life of self-denial; he ate the ashen crust and wore the thread-bare garments of poverty's barren existence. But in this, his first and grimmest contest of life, he won. He went through college and obtained a college degree. He thus went forth with an education, due preparation and training for the hard and strenuous life ahead.

From heredity, and environment there was in his soul a deep and abiding spiritual yearning. He early felt that soul-impetus and desire for the work of the ministry; and for a brief time he labored in that field. But he soon adjudged himself unsuited to that high calling; in his self-appraisal he concluded that his life and talents were best suited for the legal profession. He studied law under an able master, and was soon admitted to the bar of his native Alabama. In that far-gone day and under the conditions then prevailing in the South, ambitious youth turned their eager eyes Westward, which to them was the promised land. In his youthful vision, young Williams saw the far spreading prairies, and fields of the harvest as plenteous as the land of the Nile. He saw the beckoning hand of destiny and he followed its Western course. His trail of high expectations ended in the Indian Territory in the year 1896. He pitched his tent in the little village of Atoka in the Choctaw Nation. Remaining there for less than a year, in his discerning eye he saw conditions of richest promise in the then small town of Durant. And here Robert L. Williams settled in January 1897; and here he lived, labored and attained high success in his noon-day and here he went to his eternal rest in the evening when life's labors were done.

Robert Lee Williams was not a usual or an average man. He had vision; he had ambition; he had character, and he walked the roadway of life unafraid of evil men and of evil temptations. His was a laudable ambition for power. Its well-springs were the desire

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to see right prevail over wrong. Judge Williams had a mortal hatred of dishonesty in its every form; and he was at eternal war with the crooked conduct of men. I think that he never aspired to office without the noble purpose in his heart of making better the conditions of life in which he and his fellow men lived.

Judge Williams in his forward looking, had a vision of statehood of the land that he adopted as home; a vision of a great enlightened, prosperous commonwealth, formed by a combination of the Indian Territory and the Oklahoma Territory. He was a leader in the movement and was therefore politically active.

When I came from my Tennessee birthland to Atoka, Indian Territory on the last day of September 1906, I entered a vast zone of political warfare. Judge Williams, and the other 111 men, had just been nominated on the Democratic ticket for delegates to the Constitutional Convention. He and some other enthusiastic Democratic partisans felt the necessity of having a newspaper at Atoka to proclaim their kind of political gospel. I became the editor, business manager, errand-boy and general roustabout. The crown of political righteousness was placed upon my youthful head and the sword of Democratic truth was put into my hands. I went forth to help do battle for Candidate Williams, and other nearby candidates; and the election brought palms of victory and crowns of glory to our side. Judge Williams thereby became an accredited delegate to the Constitutional Convention that met in Guthrie. He at once took his place as one of the three most important leaders of that Convention. His large fund of legal knowledge, and his great practical wisdom enabled him to write some of the most important and vital provisions of the Constitution of Oklahoma. All his work in that Convention came of a desire to promote the general welfare of the people of the State then and for the years to come. Indeed, the purpose of all his life efforts was mothered by the desire to keep evil persons from wronging good people.

When Statehood was finally established, he became a candidate for the Supreme Court and was elected. He served the term and was re-elected. He became the first Chief Justice of that Court. And more than any member of the new Court, he gave life and vitality to the new and progressive Constitution which he helped to write—which contained all the provisions then formed to fit modern life. In 1914 Judge Williams was elected governor of his adopted state on a platform of rugged honesty and cruel economy. And he kept the faith. He built the State Capitol and the University Hospital and no touch of graft, no act of dishonor occurred in the construction of those two noble edifices. The final structure of his crowning glory is the Historical Society Building. I may be pardoned for saying I was there and know first-hand the steps taken that led to the building of that temple of history, one of the three

most beautiful structures dedicated to history in all the United States. Having entire confidence in his ability, experience and integrity, the leaders of the legislature told him to write the bill and they would pass it. He did so; and it now stands a building of classic beauty whose use is to preserve the history of Oklahoma for the centuries to come. It is the final monument to his best loved work in life—the preservation of the story of the lives of this people from year to year and age to age.

Governor Williams put on the judicial robes of a United States District Judge in 1919, a few days after his term of Governor expired—an appointment made by President Wilson. For 18 years he held this post of honor and hard service. Then in April 1937 President Roosevelt elevated him to the United State Circuit Court of Appeals for the 10th Circuit, the second highest tribunal in the country. In these high judicial positions he labored most industriously and untiringly. He honored this high bench. His wisdom balanced his integrity. His true sense of right brightened the pages of his every decision.

It is a fact of great profit in these days that he disdained profligacy and wanton waste in the personal lives of men. He saved and grew financially strong rather than spend and have nothing when old age came.

Judge Williams was a man of noble convictions that were as deep as life. He gloriously exemplified the high art of living honestly; and in all his living let the truth, be said, that he lived not for himself alone. He was generous to every honest and worthy need, although he let not the left hand know what the right hand did. He knew not the sweets of domestic life—the devotion of wife, the touch of a childish hand upon his cheek as father, the blissful atmosphere of home's temple. But God gave him a heart that felt and knew the holy impulse of love; and these sentiments moved him to give Thanksgiving dinners for the little news-boys; he loved the preachers and gave to them freely when there was just need. He believed devoutly in God and he revered all that was holy.

Judge Williams loved his adopted State; and he cherished the history of the struggles and triumphs of the builders of Oklahoma. To him his native state and his native South were the immortal children of affections. And the little country Church of his boyhood in Alabama remained to his last hour the inner sanctuary of his fond and prideful memories.

Judge Robert Lee Williams lived a laborous, honest, abundant life; and this our State, for us, our children and our children's children is thereby a better place in which to live.