

## A TRIBUTE TO JUDGE BAXTER TAYLOR

*By Edward M. Box\**

We are gathered today to pay respectful tribute to a great citizen of Oklahoma, Judge Baxter Taylor. He was for many years connected with the directing body of this, The Oklahoma Historical Society, an honorary but at the same time, a demanding position which required much of his time and thought, freely given, however, for the advancement of his adopted State and the preservation of the history of its past.

Before we discuss the life of this truly great man, let us delve for a moment or two in the background from whence he came. In an area located in the northeast corner of the State of Tennessee, which includes the great Smoky Mountains and the valleys of the Watauga, Holston and Nolachucky Rivers, lies Happy Valley. It is a region alive with memories of Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, Andrew Jackson, John Sevier and James Carter, the latter an ancestor of Judge Taylor. It was in this region that Daniel Boone killed the "bar" about which he carved the inscription on a tree near the Jonesboro-Bluntville stage road in the year 1760.

In the town of Jonesboro, the oldest town in Tennessee, Andrew Jackson first settled when he left the Carolinas and came north. There he engaged in the practice of law, for awhile, and thereafter this great man, who was to become a General of the Armies and President of the United States, presided over the Circuit Court. Here in this area was formed what was known as the Watauga Association in 1772. Written articles were drawn for the management of general affairs, and chief among commissioners chosen to administer the new government were James Carter, John Sevier and Charles Robertson.

It was in this area that an independent state was formed called the State of Franklin, and it was here that troops were organized and assembled, some 800 of them, and on the 25th day of September, 1780, those riflemen marched south to Kings Mountain where on October 7th the British Army, under Colonel Patrick Ferguson, was routed and defeated. Historians tell us that this was the turning point of the Revolutionary War.

Here was born General Nathaniel G. Taylor, who fought with Jackson and commanded a regiment of Tennesseans in the battle of New Orleans, and thereafter fought with Jackson in the Indian Wars.

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Here was born another Nathaniel G. Taylor, grandfather of Baxter Taylor, who became a Methodist minister of great renown, and who served his state in the halls of Congress and his nation as Commissioner of Indian Affairs under Andrew Johnson, President of the United States after the death of Abraham Lincoln.

Among the sons of Reverend Nathaniel G. Taylor were James, the father of Judge Baxter Taylor, and Alfred Alexander Taylor and Robert Love Taylor. Biographers tell us that James Taylor was probably the most profound of the Taylor boys, but he paid little attention to politics, preferring to be a farmer, although he did serve one term as Adjutant General of the State of Tennessee.

The history of two of these brothers, uncles of Judge Taylor, is replete with great political accomplishments. Each of them were lawyers, born in Carter County, Tennessee, which said County was named after the James Carter about whom we have spoken. Each were elected to Congress. Bob Taylor served three terms as Governor of Tennessee and was then elected to the United States Senate in 1907. He died in Washington in 1912. Alf Taylor served also in the House of Representatives of the State of Tennessee, and was elected Governor of Tennessee.

These two men, affectionately known as Bob and Alf Taylor, established great reputations for themselves in law, in politics, as orators and as lecturers. Both were efficient fiddlers and they interspersed their famous lectures with tunes played on their violins. To read their lectures and observe the wonderful command they had of the English language explains, in part, from whence came the eloquence of our beloved friend, Judge Baxter Taylor.

In the gubernatorial campaign of 1886 these remarkable brothers, Bob and Alf Taylor, were pitted against each other in the campaign for Governor, Bob a Democrat—Alf a Republican. Bob, and his followers, wore white roses. Alf, and his followers, wore red roses. The campaign became known as the War of the Roses. It was bitter to the end. Bob won. Alf lost.

Their last speeches are most significant. Alf concluded his by saying:

My countrymen, a few words and I will end my connection with the most remarkable contest which our country has witnessed. It has been a War of the Roses, but, thank God, it has been bloodless. My brother has been my foeman but, although our blades have often flashed steel, they are not stained. We have striven with all our might in the defense of the principles which each believed to be right, although they differed as do the poles. I say to you now that after all these eventful struggles I still love my brother—love him, as of old, with an undying affection—but politically, my friends, I despise him.

And, immediately, following Bob concluded his campaign as follows:

I thank God that it has been reserved for Tennessee to declare to the world that even two brothers can debate principles without descending to the level of personalities or abridging in the least the tender relations of brotherhood. The memorable campaign of 1886 will, indeed soon be closed but let me assure you that I today love the man who has borne the Republican banner as dearly as when, in the good old days long ago, we slept side by side in the trundle-bed and shared our youthful joys and griefs. I have never seen the hour when I would not willingly lay down my life to save him, nor have I seen the dawn of the day when I would not lay down my life to destroy his party. Fellow citizens, I am done.

Another famous relative and orator of great renown was Landon C. Haynes who became a Confederate Senator from the State of Tennessee, and whose renown as an orator still lives in the hearts of Tennesseans everywhere.

Here is a land about which poems and songs have been written and over which battles have been fought, a land where its inhabitants always have and always will retain a spirit of fierce independence. Would time permit, much more could be said about the background of the achievements of the Taylor family, of which Judge Baxter Taylor was a part. It can be safely said that in all of the galaxy of States there is none where a single family contributed so much for so long in the formation and development of a sovereign state. It is little wonder that this area of romance and history early became known, and still is known as "Happy Valley."

It was here, near the town of Jonesboro, where Judge Baxter Taylor was born in 1877, a son of James T. and Mary George Taylor. Here in this beautiful land he grew to manhood, absorbing its culture and imbued with its history and spirit of independence.<sup>1</sup>

It was from this background of history, tradition, romance, blood and training that Judge Taylor, leaving the state of his birth, came first to Indian Territory in 1906, a courtly and courteous gentleman, which attributes would follow him all of the days of his life.

He first started his career as Editor of the *Atoka Indian Citizen* and then engaged in the practice of law. On October 9, 1907, his residence was interrupted while he went to Holston Valley, Tennessee, where he married the girl of his choice, Love Thomas. He is survived by his wife and his three sons; James Catton Taylor of San Antonio, Texas; Baxter Taylor, Jr., of Dallas, Texas; and Robert Love Taylor of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma together with seven grandchildren and one surviving sister Mrs. James A. Poudler of Johnson City, Tennessee.

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<sup>1</sup> Baxter Taylor was born on January 20, 1877. He was a graduate of the Cumberland School of Law in Tennessee.

The name of Judge Taylor is indelibly written as a part of the history of his adopted state. He served two terms as County Judge, and two terms as County Attorney of Atoka County, Oklahoma. He was Assistant Attorney General of the State of Oklahoma, Chairman of the State Industrial Commission, Attorney for the School Land Department, and served in various legal capacities in the offices of three Governors of Oklahoma: Martin E. Trapp, William J. Holloway and William H. Murray.

For Judge Taylor, education and mental development did not cease at the college door. His was an inquisitive mind, and throughout his life he was ardent in his quest of knowledge. He could discuss with you knowingly many of the finer arts, music, history, literature, biographies, and always the current issues of the day.

As a lawyer, Judge Taylor in my honest judgment, never sought to practice for material gain alone. He was a lawyer's lawyer, and this is the greatest compliment that can be paid to any lawyer. It means, in substance, that he was a man with whom lawyers liked to deal, a man whose word was as good as his bond, and a man who never resorted to chicanery or trickery, who would do anything that he could honorably do for a client. To him his religion, his profession, and his politics were matters of sacred concern and he left them all at the end of a long and useful life, untarnished and unsullied.

In the practice of his profession Judge Taylor was always the most courteous of lawyers. It so happens that in one rather famous case, the "Fire Bells Campaign" of the Bill Murray administration in Oklahoma, we were cast on opposite sides. The battle was fought in the Blue Room of the State Capitol before Colonel Sneed, Secretary of State, and in the corridors, in the courts, and finally, as Judge Taylor would say himself, the issues were debated "in the hustings." Throughout the entire progress of this bitter legal battle and political campaign, no word was ever spoken by him that in any manner could be offensive to the feelings of his opponents. It can be truly said of him, as Abraham Lincoln once said of himself, that he never wittingly or willingly planted a thorn in the bosom of any man.

In politics Judge Taylor was an ardent Democrat. He believed in his party, and he fought for it with great zeal. His reputation as an orator was widely known, and he was in great demand all over the state wherever oratory was needed to advance the principles of the party he loved so well. It was in this field that the writer was first privileged to know him in 1920, and that acquaintance continued intimately throughout the balance of his

life and until he laid aside its cares and burdens in the month of April, 1961.<sup>2</sup>

Judge Taylor was a profoundly religious man and he believed most fervently in the pronouncements and the promises of his God, his Bible and his church. He made no claim to being a musician, but he was a fiddler of great ability. He could be serious and unyielding where a principle was involved, but he could also be kind and humorous, and some of the pleadings which he filed and the speeches which he made in a humorous vein will live forever as classics in the annuals of Oklahoma legal history.

Though he loved his adopted state he never forgot nor permitted his love for his native state and its hours of greatness and glory to diminish or abate. The writer has listened by the hour enthralled at his discussion of the era long vanished, where men sought to make use of the spoken word, euphonic and enchanting, untrammled by the use of cold statistics or mathematical analysis which had for their purpose enriching the pocket book instead of the mind. He was truly a link between the old South and the modern age and breaks another chain with which we who knew him were linked to the past and leaves us now to resort to history rather than to his recollections of the passing of a beautiful age. Though he may or may not have accumulated greatly in material gains, he has bequeathed to all of us a library of memories having a value beyond description and which we would not part with for any price.

And now, as we bid bon voyage and safe landing to the spirit of our beloved friend, may it be that at his journey's end he shall find prepared for him, as a just reward for the life that he lived, another "Happy Valley," a land where happiness abounds, where there is fiddling and singing, with dinner on the ground, and where the oratorical gladiators foregather to discuss and debate the issues of the ages, and where, when the enchanted spell of evening casts its shadow there may be heard the lyrics of the chase, the bugle and the bass of racing hounds, whose music is understandable to only those who love it. May he find a land where the soothing caress of the mountain breeze, the lilting song of the mocking bird, and the restful murmurs of the rippling streams bring peace—peace, tranquil and sublime, where the burden of the years is lifted, so that he can enter Happy Valley once again in the fullness of eternal youth, untroubled and unburdened, re-united with the faces and the friends that he has known, and to be joined in just a little while by those he left behind.

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<sup>2</sup> Judge Baxter Taylor died at his home in Oklahoma City on April 2, 1961. Funeral services were held in the First Presbyterian Church, and interment was in Memorial Park Cemetery, Oklahoma City.