HONORABLE THOMAS P. GORE: THE BLIND SENATOR

By Monroe Billington *

Oklahoma's first Senators began their official duties in Washington, D. C., after they were administered the oath of office on December 16, 1907. The two men caused much comment upon their appearance in the nation's capital. The new state had elected as its first United States senators Robert L. Owen, part Cherokee Indian and Thomas P. Gore, a totally blind white man. Mr. Gore's interesting senatorial and political career cannot be accurately assessed without a full understanding of the role of his physical handicap.1

Tom Gore had lived eight years of normal boyhood on a Mississippi farm when, one day while he and a young friend were playing near where the family's work oxen were grazing, Tom was struck in the left eye by a stick thrown by his playmate. The vision of his eye was partially impaired, but his parents were hardly aware of the fact at the time, and no medical attention was given after the accident. Three years later Tom purchased a toy crossbow for his brother's birthday. Before making the presentation, Tom decided to shoot the bow once to be sure that it would work. The arrow lodged in the bow and when he tried to get it out, it came loose and struck him in the right eye. The wound was so bad that the youngster was taken to New Orleans where the eye was found completely damaged and had to be removed.2 With the loss of one eye, the boy was compelled to depend upon the injured one to which delayed medical attention was given. He was able to use the remaining eye to play the usual children's games, and he could diagram sentences on a blackboard but by the time he was twenty years old he was totally blind.3

With darkness slowly enveloping the boy, his father suggested that he be sent to an institute for the blind. Tom rebelled at this idea. His father did not insist upon his suggestion, so the blind

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boy continued to attend school with other children. His classmates, his sister, and his mother read his lessons aloud to him. Treated like an ordinary child, the boy had an almost normal childhood. He later attended the law school of Cumberland University in Lebanon, Tennessee and after receiving a bachelor of law degree, he assisted in his father's law office at Walthall, Mississippi, practicing throughout the county.

Young Gore's interest centered in the political field as a public speaker not law, and he was soon giving most of his attention to politics. He became one of the most important of the Populist orators in Mississippi during the early years of the 1890's. Although he never won a public office in his native state, his was an important voice in the "dirt farmers' revolt."

Gore moved west from Mississippi to Texas, and tried his luck in politics, after going to Corsicana in December, 1895. Two years later, he was the victim of a political frame-up when character charges were made against him in connection with his friendship for a blind girl whom he visited occasionally. During the trial that resulted in July, 1898, the District Attorney requested the jury to return a verdict of not guilty because the evidence was insufficient to sustain a conviction. The Texas Populists nominated Gore for Congress in 1898, and he was defeated but there is no evidence that the recent trial influenced the election.

In 1900, Gore married Miss Nina Kay, whom he had met four years earlier at a Populist picnic. Miss Kay won the heart of the blind man at their first meeting. She offered to serve his plate, and asked what of the chicken he liked best. When he answered that the gizzard was his favorite piece, she returned with a plateful.

4. Charles H. Pittman, a distant relative, at one time lived in the Gore household, and for reading lessons to the blind youth he received his room and board free for over two years. Pittman later recalled that Gore "liked Math, disliked Latin, loved the natural sciences, and was especially fond of the social sciences." C. H. Pittman, "Oklahoma's Blind U. S. Senator," Sturm's Oklahoma Magazine, Vol. V. (November; 1907), pp. 42-43.


7. District Court, Navarro County, Texas, No. 4, October 7, 1895 to December 18, 1902, p. 233.

8. Personal interview Corsicana residents, Pierce Colquitt and Marion Martin, August 15, 1958.
of them. Gore later recalled. "I couldn't get that brown-eyed girl out of my mind so I married her." When asked years later how she felt marrying a blind man, Mrs. Gore replied, "The blindness was so unimportant that I never gave it a second thought." The Gores moved to Oklahoma Territory a few months after their marriage, and it was in the Oklahoma senatorial race in 1907 that Gore was at last successful in his bid for public office.

As a member of the Democratic minority during his first years in the Senate, Gore spent most of his time opposing measures sponsored by Republicans. Following the advance publicity over his being the first totally blind man to enter the United States Senate, the new Senator came into public notice again when he joined a filibustering action in 1908 against the bill which ultimately became known as the Aldrich-Vreeland Emergency Currency Act. This bill, confessedly a makeshift measure, was coaxed through Congress only after the failure of the famous La Follette filibuster which temporarily delayed its passage and the adjournment of Congress. During the filibuster, La Follette held the floor continuously for over eighteen hours, sustaining himself by drinking an egg and milk mixture and eating an occasional sandwich during quorum roll calls. William J. Stone of Missouri at last came to the aid of La Follette, and Stone was relieved by Gore as the blind man took up the cudgels for the obstructionists.

Before joining the marathon, Gore had laid careful plans. He was to be relieved by Stone, then La Follette was to take his place again after resting through the night. Stone left the Senate chamber for a rest during the Oklahoman's speech. When he returned Gore was informed that the Senator from Missouri was present, and ready to speak. After speaking for two hours, Gore concluded his first long speech in the Senate, turned his sightless eyes toward Stone's seat, and sat down, expecting to hear the Missourian claim recognition. Much to the chagrin of those carrying on the filibuster, Stone had stepped out of the Senate chamber after Gore had been informed of his return. Unaware of Stone's departure, the blind obstructionist surrendered the floor when no collaborator was present to claim it. It was a costly mistake, and many suspected that Stone had been called out of the Senate chamber in order to trick the blind man, but this was never proved. A popular rumor had it that Gore had been forced to sit down by a Senator pulling at his coattails, but Gore later discounted this version of the incident.

Seizing the opportunity, the chairman of the Finance Commit-

11. Gore to Franklin L. Burdette, August 18, 1939, in Gore Papers.
The Congressional Record shows that Heyburn had asked for recognition before the beginning of the roll call, and there is no question that the filibuster was overcome by doubtful practice. The obstructionists had hoped to talk until general congressional demands for adjournment forced the abandonment of the legislation. With this hope lost, the conference report was accepted, and the President signed the bill within a few hours after Gore's fatal error.

Senator Gore received further national attention a year later during the debates on the Payne-Aldrich tariff law. The blind man's "remarkable wit, prodigious memory, and real intellectual forces" revealed in those debates added a good deal of public respect for his ability. It was at this time that Gore amazed his colleagues with his retentive mind. Citing from memory a long list of New England cotton and woolen manufacturing companies and giving their gross earnings, capital stock, profits, dividends, and surpluses in an effort to show that such corporations were making large earnings and thus did not need tariff protection. Gore reeled off the statistics with such ease that he astonished his listeners, both friend and opponent.

When Senator Gore allegedly thwarted the efforts of Robert A. Rogers of Oklahoma City to become Woodrow Wilson's Secretary of Interior, Rogers' proponents, who stood to profit by the appointment, conspired to ruin Gore politically by an attack on his

12. Congressional Record, 60 Congress, 1 Session, p. 7259.
personal integrity. A suit was filed against Mr. Gore in 1913, and in the trial, the defendant’s attorney held that the charges had been made by a person by the name of Bond and others who were disappointed office seekers and that their efforts were nothing more than a conspiracy to smear the blind senator. The facts as they came out during the trial supported the defendant’s position. It took a jury of nine farmers, a grocer, a banker, and a broker only two and one-half minutes to take one vote completely exonerating Gore. So overwhelming was the verdict that the jury stated: “Had the defendant at the conclusion of the plaintiff's evidence announced that he desired to introduce no evidence rested his case, our verdict would have been the same.”

The nature of the charges, the prominence of the parties involved, and the determined efforts of each side made the Gore-Bond case a much discussed topic of conversation and print all over the nation. It attracted more attention in Oklahoma than any other political event since statehood. Beginning with The New York Times on to the lowliest Oklahoma weekly, the press agreed that Gore's vindication was fully warranted. Gore had charged during the trial that the conspiracy was instigated to bring him into disrepute, and wreck his chances for renomination in the Oklahoma Democratic primary in August, 1914. If this were true, the attempted character assassination boomeranged. Not only did Gore have the solid backing of the press in Oklahoma but also the sympathy and support of most of the voters. The people of Oklahoma were convinced that the cheapest of political tricks had been instigated with the sightless man as the victim. Politically, it was good medicine. Basking in the sunlight of the dismissed damage suit, Gore received in the primary race a majority in every county in the state, riding to a three-to-one victory over Samuel W. Hayes. In the general election in November Gore's popularity was at an all-time high as he carried all

16. Oklahoma newspapers which risked editorial comment on the story immediately defended the Senator. Typical was the attitude of The Democrat (Tulsa) April 5, 1913; “Suspend judgment on the story from Washington. There have been frame-ups of this sort, and Oklahoma has some frame-up artists who are not dead.” The New York Times, February 13 and 17, 1914.

17. Harlow's Weekly, Vol. V (February 21, 1914, p. 3. For a full account of the trial, sympathetic to Gore, see the autobiography of one of the defendant's lawyers, Moman Pruiett, Criminal lawyer (Oklahoma City, 1944), pp. 305-35. A bitter attack against Gore can be read in a highly prejudiced pamphlet entitled “The Bond-Gore Case,” in C. B. Ames Papers. This anti-Gore brochure was so malicious it was reportedly barred from the mails by federal postal officials, The Weekly Free Press, (Kingfisher) July 30, 1914.

18. February 20, 1914.
but three counties in the state, the Senator winning over Republi-
can John H. Burford.

After his election to the Senate in 1907, Gore had drawn a
short term, and had to be re-elected in 1908. The 1914 victory was
therefore the beginning of his second six-year term. He was un-
seated in the Republican sweep of 1920, but he was returned to the
Senate by the Oklahoma voters in 1930 for a final six-year period.

Although his physical handicap became a political asset when
the marginal farmers of Oklahoma associated his blindness with
their own nearly poverty-stricken condition, Gore never directly
played on the Oklahoma voters' sympathy because of his handi-
caps. An occasional opponent complained that Gore took advan-
tage of his blindness during his early political career in Mississ-
ippi, but if the charge were true, he rose above such methods in
Oklahoma. As a matter of fact, he minimized his sightless eyes to
the extent that many people often thought of him as a physically
normal individual. The Senator was admired for overcoming his
handicap, and this admiration was undoubtedly expressed at times
with sympathy votes. Developing a keen sense of hearing, Gore
could associate names and voices with uncanny accuracy, even to
the extent of recognizing the voices of many people whom he knew
only slightly several years previous. Called upon to preside over
the Senate on one occasion, Gore without erring recognized each
Senator by his voice when he asked for recognition. All good
politicians develop the ability to associate names and faces, and
by associating names and voices Gore exploited for political pur-
poses his unusual ability.

When the Senator had an important speech to prepare, he
would sit alone in his favorite rocking chair and organize the speech
in his mind, often holding a cherished book in his hand while medi-
tating. His speeches were extemporaneous with small passages
memorized, although he developed a habit of holding a piece of
paper in his hand which he often appeared to consult as his speech
progressed. He seldom used gestures, and he never had his speech-
es read by another person. When he spoke on the floor of the
Senate, he turned slightly in the direction of the Senator being ad-
dressed as if to look at him. Gore had the uncanny ability to an-
ticipate a question or remark from another member when he held
the floor, often pausing to turn in the direction of a Senator about
to speak to recognize him before the colleague had time to rise com-
pletely from his seat. If his remarks were not directed toward any

19. James Sharbrough Ferguson, "Agrarianism in Mississippi, 1871-
1900 A Study in Nonconformity" (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Uni-
particular colleague, the blind orator faced the speaker’s desk. With his head tilted slightly backward and with his finger tips lightly touching his desk in front of him as he emphasized his remarks, he spoke out clearly and distinctly in sonorous tones. Even though his hearers might not agree with what he was saying, they were attentive when he spoke.21

The Senator’s speeches were filled with references to history and literature and this is evidence of his wide reading. Not concerned with light or darkness and often unable to sleep, Gore sat for hours having important books read to him by his wife, his secretary, or any other person available and willing to be pressed into service. If he owned the book being read to him, he sometimes requested that sentences which he considered important be underscored with a pencil. Upon a second reading of the underlined words, he could remember quite clearly the significant portions of any volume. Gore enjoyed visiting secondhand bookstores and browsing among the volumes with his secretary or wife reading occasional passages from books with titles that appealed to him. He rapidly acquired a large and valuable library, a tribute to his love for books.

Mrs. Gore was her husband’s constant companion and was often pictured as the “eyes” of the blind man. The devoted couple traveled a lot with Mrs. Gore driving their automobile on numerous pleasure and business excursions. When the Wright brothers were experimenting with the airplane at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, in the summer of 1909, Senator and Mrs. Gore were among the observers, the Senator witnessing the flights through his own imagination and the expert description and explanations given by his wife.22 In the same way he enjoyed watching football and baseball games and other sports. At county fairs, Gore touched the different animals on exhibit, and judged them by this method.

Nor did the blind man’s handicap present insurmountable difficulties in his personal habits. He bought only white shirts, thus preventing the problem of a colored shirt clashing with his suit. Every year his wife bought him a dozen pairs of socks of the same style and color, which also solved a color problem. The Senator always dressed himself, and before having access to the Senate barber shop, he shaved himself. He carried different denominations of coins in separate pockets to facilitate handling, and he never erred in counting change. On his numerous campaign tours, most of which were made without his wife, Mr. Gore carried a large grip

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with only the essential articles of apparel in it. When spending a night in a strange room, before he retired he would ask to be led to the bathroom, the door of which he requested to be left open. After tapping around the bedroom and the entrance to the bathroom with his cane and placing his grip on a stool at the foot of his bed, he then retired. The following morning he would be fully dressed and ready for breakfast when others of the party called upon him. When dining he would permit no glasses near him on the table for fear of upsetting them.23

Senator Gore’s opinion was often sought by parents who wanted him to recommend ways for handling their sightless children. Writing countless letters of encouragement to parents of handicapped youngsters, he freely related his philosophy concerning the blind. He believed that handicapped children should not be isolated from physically normal ones nor placed in an institution surrounded by other blind children. Knowing that blind children would be in competition with those who had sight when they grew up, Mr. Gore believed that they should be made aware of that competition very early in life. He advised that the handicapped child be treated as the other children in the family as far as was practicable with as little distinction as possible because of the deficiency. Of course, he advised that the children should not be permitted to develop self pity.24

He recommended that blind children begin studying braille not later than the age of seven, although he himself seldom had occasion to use the braille he had learned as a youth. Since he preferred to read up-to-date news rather than the classics or the Bible—the traditional subject matter of braille writings—the Senator soon lost his braille ability. He recognized the value of phonograph records for blind education, and when the radio came into prominence, he was quick to realize its educational possibilities for the blind.

Because he did not advocate segregation of the blind, the Senator recommended that institutions for the sightless be placed in urban rather than in rural areas.25 When Oklahoma entered the Union, he wanted the State’s institute for the blind located in an urban center containing a university so that the blind would have the benefit of lectures, classes, and library facilities of the institution of higher learning, as well as increased contacts with normal people. He was disappointed when the State’s leaders placed the institute in an isolated area.26 Senator Gore never used seeing-

eye dogs and did not recommend them for other blind persons. He felt that the blind tended to become too dependent on the animals.\textsuperscript{27} Summing up his philosophy, he wrote, "The greatest service which the sighted can render the sightless is to help them to help themselves."\textsuperscript{28}

Senator Gore never withheld his support when he was asked to aid the cause of the blind. He gave advice to a young sightless attorney, seeking election to office, who had requested a statement from the Senator to help refute those attacking him in the campaign upon the grounds that a blind man should not hold public office.\textsuperscript{29}

After his rise to national prominence, Senator Gore lent his assistance and prestige to many organizations established to aid the blind. From 1912 to 1914, he served on the advisory board of the New York Association for the Blind. When the National Library for the Blind was established in 1911 to make available embossed books and music for loan to the blind and to employ blind persons for the copying of books into raised print for the library, Thomas P. Gore was appointed its first vice-President. During the First World War, he offered the services of this library to the government in preparing printed matter for blind soldiers if the need arose.\textsuperscript{30} The Senator became president of the organization in 1936, retaining that position until 1946 when the independent library was merged with the Library of Congress, Division for the Blind.

Although Tom Gore was totally blind by the time he was twenty years old, he allowed several attempts to restore the sight of his left eye. In 1908, he underwent treatment for the eye with the hope of restoring partial sight,\textsuperscript{31} and a few years later he indicated interest in the methods of a faith healer who claimed divine

\textsuperscript{27} T. L. Terry to J. Edgar Pew, October 17, 1945, \textit{ibid}.
\textsuperscript{28} Gore to Albert A. Barnhard, August 31, 1928, \textit{ibid}.
\textsuperscript{29} Albert Barnhard to Gore, August 25, 1928; Gore to Barnhard, August 31, 1928, \textit{ibid}.
\textsuperscript{30} Mrs. Thomas P. Gore to Woodrow Wilson, July 2, 1917; Wilson to Mrs. Gore, July 2, 1917, in Woodrow Wilson Papers (Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress).
\textsuperscript{31} Gore to R. L. Williams, June 6, 1908, in R. L. Williams Papers in Library, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City. (Thomas P. Gore, of Lawton, was elected U. S. Senator from Oklahoma, by the First State Legislature in December, 1907, to serve until March 3, 1909; and was re-elected by the Second State Legislature for the term, 1909-15. He was elected as U.S. Senator by a vote of the people, for the term, 1915-21; and was elected and served a fourth term as U. S. Senator from Oklahoma, 1931-35.—Ed.)
powers. He also submitted himself to a relaxation method of treatment in 1921, but all efforts to restore his vision were in vain.

Senator Gore's eyes were medium blue, his right glass eye matching the other almost perfectly. They were accentuated by his blonde hair which prematurely turned silvery white. With blue eyes, white hair, and fair complexion, the six-foot, two-hundred-pound Senator was a figure of striking dignity as he walked hurriedly and erectly, his ever-present cane swinging from an arm with the other arm locked in that of his young man secretary.

Senator Gore's lasting contribution was the inspiration that he gave the blind. Refusing to allow his handicap to discourage him, he reached the pinnacle of success when he was elected from Oklahoma to the United States Senate. His life will remain a challenge to others who may be handicapped like him in this world of those who are blessed with sight.