

POLITICAL LEADERSHIP OF ROBERT L. OWEN

*By Wyatt W. Belcher**

Senator Robert L. Owen has become generally recognized as one of the best-known political leaders the state of Oklahoma has contributed to national politics. The political leadership of Owen is interesting as well as instructive, for he was in a key position to help mold political developments in Oklahoma before and after statehood. Both his personal characteristics and the issues he championed gave him an excellent chance to develop his positive talents for leadership in his adopted state.

His mother, Narcissa (Chisholm) Owen of Indian, Scottish, and English ancestry, was born at Webbers Falls in Indian Territory, October 4, 1831. Her father, Thomas Chisholm, was a hereditary war chieftain of the Cherokee Indians, who achieved prominence in helping to direct the affairs of his people. Despite the fact that she was born on the outskirts of civilization, Narcissa Chisholm received a fairly good education. She was a talented woman of artistic temperament and later went to Tennessee to teach in the Masonic High School at Jonesboro. Here she met and married Robert Latham Owen. Her husband of Scotch-Irish ancestry was a civil engineer and a well-known railroad man, who served as president of the Virginia and Tennessee Railway for a number of years. He also achieved distinction as an engineer and soldier in the Confederate Army during the Civil War.

The Owens had two children: William Otway was born July 6, 1854, and Robert Latham, February 2, 1856, in a beautiful home, called "Point of Honor," situated on the crest of a high hill overlooking the James River at Lynchburg, Virginia. Fortune smiled upon young Robert L. Owen by placing him in such a home. The parents believed that a first-class education was the best legacy they could give the boys. When he was ten years old, Robert entered a classical school, Merillat Institute, in a suburb of Baltimore. He soon proved to be an ambitious youth, capable of acquiring a fine education. Robert attended this school for five years and received thorough training in classical languages and mathematics. He spent his college years at Washington and Lee University and received a Master of Arts degree with honors.

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Owen was an outstanding student and leader in college and was elected valedictorian by the members of his class.¹

While Robert was in school, his father died and the family fortune was swept away. Colonel William Penn Adair, a prominent Cherokee, suggested to Mrs. Owen that she return to her kindred in Indian Territory, where she and her two sons were entitled to their per capita share in the tribal property. Thinking that fortune might better his lot, Owen went with his mother to Indian Territory in 1879.²

Owen's keen mind sensed the opportunities for quick personal advancement with the fast economic growth and development of Indian Territory. His blood relationship with the Cherokee Indians furnished a bond of contact that admitted him readily to the political and economic fortunes of the Cherokee Nation which provided an excellent springboard for his ventures in territorial and state politics. In addition to this important connection, the newcomer possessed other qualifications that augmented his political availability. He was a Southerner by birth, the son of a Confederate Colonel, a sincere believer in Jeffersonian democracy, and a loyal Democrat. These qualities were marked attributes in his favor when he began his active political career in a state that was controlled by the Democratic party.

Robert L. Owen looked the part of a political leader. He was a man of tall and striking appearance, with black hair, dark eyes, and swarthy complexion—no doubt his Indian inheritance. His aggressive personality was tempered with a pleasant manner. He was invariably composed and seemed to be at home with everyone. His voice, liquid, soft, and resonant, was one of his greatest political assets. On the platform he had a logical and forceful style of speaking that was convincing. Owen had the happy faculty of seeking and taking advantage of opportunities. If the opportunity did not come along on its own accord, he worked hard to force it to pass his way. His persistency gave him the necessary driving power to accomplish most of his main objectives in life.

After serving as principal teacher in the Cherokee Orphan Asylum at Grand Saline for eighteen months, Owen decided in 1880 to take up the more promising practice of law. He quickly proved to the Cherokee Nation that he had definite ideas which he could support with surprising vigor. Finding the small politics of the Cherokee Nation conducive to graft and corruption, the

¹ Narcissa Owen, *Memoirs of Narcissa Owen*, privately published at Washington, D. C., in 1907, gives a good background for the personal history of the Chisholm and Owen families.

² O. P. Sturm, "Oklahoma's Accomplished Senator," *Sturm's Oklahoma Magazine*, V (1907), p. 38.

young attorney courageously fought against these conditions and won his first battles in the interest of good government. These activities also won for him a reputation for integrity which later on was of incalculable value in his political career.

Before long Owen became one of the most enterprising citizens of Indian Territory. He was secretary of the Cherokee Nation Board of Education from 1881 to 1884. In 1882, 1883, and 1884 he was president of the International Fair at Muskogee, the only fair then held in Indian Territory. This fair served to bring the people of the Territory together and furnished good publicity for his future career. Owen realized the importance of controlling a newspaper to get his views before the public. In 1884 he became editor and owner of the *Indian Chieftain* at Vinita. His newspaper work increased his acquaintances and extended his influence. Owen was a good mixer, but he used discrimination in selecting his associates, taking care to build up influential friendships.

Owen was elated when the Democratic party under President Cleveland gained control of the national government in 1885. Eager to participate in the fruits of this victory, he sought an appointment as the United States Indian agent for the Five Civilized Tribes. With characteristic energy he secured the endorsements of several United States Senators, all of whom were strangers to him, by merely presenting himself and his case to them. He won the appointment which was the most important position to be held in Indian Territory. Owen served as Indian agent until 1889 and handled the affairs of this troublesome office adroitly. In connection with his interest in Indian affairs, he helped to draft and worked for the Act of Congress, passed March 3, 1901, that conferred citizenship of the United States on every Indian in Indian Territory. This act gave full citizenship and political status to over seventy thousand Indians and greatly increased his political prestige and influence.

Business and agricultural interests also attracted his attention. Through his efforts the National Banking Act of the United States was extended to include Indian Territory. In 1890 he organized the First National Bank of Muskogee, the first bank of its kind in the territory. He also acquired wide business experience in real estate, farming, and stock raising. These various enterprises and his many contacts with farmers, ranchers, and businessmen identified his name with the growth and progress of Indian Territory.³

³ A summary of the principal events in Owen's life before he was elected to the Senate is given by Theo. F. Brewer, "Biographical Sketch of Robert L. Owen, Candidate for the United States Senate," *The Daily Oklahoman*, March 14, 1907.

Owen had marked success as a lawyer. He served as secretary of the first Bar Association in Indian Territory, organized in 1889. In a series of difficult cases, he recovered for the Choctaws, Chickasaws, Western Cherokees and Eastern Cherokees several millions of dollars in claims against the United States government. Victory in these difficult cases enhanced his reputation as a lawyer, and this achievement was a valuable asset.⁴

His many endeavors were capped by an active interest in politics. The Democrats of Indian Territory tried to effect a party organization in 1892, but political unity was threatened by serious internal divisions. Two chief factions vied with each other for political control, and a party split seemed imminent when one faction held a convention at McAlester in March and delegates of the other group met at Muskogee in June.⁵ Owen took a leading part in the Muskogee convention and emerged from that meeting as National Committeeman for Indian Territory. The two sides, however, joined forces in a fusion convention held at McAlester in October. Since Owen had been instrumental in healing the party breach, his appointment as the Indian Territory member of the National Democratic Committee was confirmed.⁶ This fortified his position politically and made him a logical contender for any major office Indian Territory had to offer. It is perhaps well to note that there was no elective county or territorial setup through which he had to graduate in order to be politically available for a statewide electoral contest when the state of Oklahoma came into being. Thus he was able to make a direct bid in Oklahoma politics for any choice position the state had to offer.

Owen was naturally interested in the struggle for statehood. At first he was a firm supporter of separate statehood; but when Congress definitely defeated this proposition, he did not engage in any activities that would make the joining of the two territories into a single state more difficult. Almost immediately upon passage of the statehood bill, he became a candidate for the United States Senate. In a statewide primary, June 28, 1907, Owen had the honor of receiving the largest number of votes cast for United States Senator over a field of seven candidates. The first State Legislature, controlled by the Democrats, confirmed the vote of the primary and selected him and Thomas P. Gore the United States Senators from Oklahoma. The two Senators had to draw lots for the long and short terms. Owen drew the long term, which entitled him to a seat in the Senate until March 3, 1913.

⁴ Ora Eddleman Reed, "Great Work of an Indian," *Sturm's Oklahoma Magazine*, II (1906), p. 7.

⁵ *The Purcell Register*, June 17, Sept. 2, 1892.

⁶ Joseph B. Thoburn, *A Standard History of Oklahoma*, (New York, 1916), Vol. II, p. 694.

This was fortunate for Owen, because it gave him sufficient time to consolidate his political gains before coming up for re-election.⁷

Senator Owen soon became an active member of the United States Senate. His support of progressive measures clearly indicated that his sympathies were with the people. All was not clear sailing, however, for attempts were being made at home to dim his newly-acquired political prestige. Rumors were out and sordid tales were being circulated about the large fees Owen received from his Indian clients. The *Oklahoma City Times* featured an article on "How Owen Grew Rich Quickly," in which he was accused of having employed unscrupulous practices in his dealings with the Indians.⁸ Nothing ever came of these charges which indicated that, in all probability, they were made to hamper him politically and prevent his re-election.

In 1912 Senator Owen announced his candidacy for the nomination to succeed himself as United States Senator. Former Governor Charles N. Haskell was also a candidate, and the race was a heated contest until the finish. Senator Owen won the nomination by a substantial majority and staved off the most determined effort to oust him from the Senate. He won an easy victory over his Republican opponent, Judge Joseph T. Dickerson, and had the honor of leading the national ticket in the state by 14,619 votes.⁹

When the Democrats returned to power in 1913 under President Wilson's leadership, Senator Owen was prepared to assume a more prominent rôle in national politics. Few men were more loyal to the high ideals of President Wilson than Senator Owen. He supported the President's liberal program as well as his important war measures. These policies made Senator Owen such a popular leader at home that he encountered no serious opposition in 1918 to his re-election for a third term as Senator.

Throughout the state, Senator Owen was acclaimed as Oklahoma's first citizen. In 1920 his name was presented to the country as a Democratic candidate for President of the United States. Although there was little chance for his nomination, Senator Owen's backers asserted that his candidacy would be acceptable to all factions within the party and, in addition, would attract considerable progressive support. The fact that he had helped to organize the National Popular Government League and served as its president for a number of years was given wide publicity. His name was the first of seventeen presidential aspirants to be

⁷ Clarence B. Douglas, "Senator Robert L. Owen," *The Wide West*, Vol. IV (1911), p. 5.

⁸ *Oklahoma City Times*, Dec. 11, 1908.

⁹ Edward Elmer Keso, *The Senatorial Career of Robert L. Owen*, (Nashville, 1938), p. 21.

presented to the Democratic National Convention at San Francisco. He received thirty-three votes on the first ballot, and his support increased to forty-one on the twentieth. The Oklahoma delegates supported him loyally until he released them in order to make the vote on the forty-fourth ballot unanimous for Governor James M. Cox.¹⁰

In a dignified letter to Governor Martin E. Trapp in the spring of 1924, Senator Owen announced that he would not again be a candidate for the United States Senate. Thus, he laid down the senatorial toga on March 3, 1925, and had the distinction of retiring from public office without being defeated.

After his retirement from the Senate, Owen maintained a law office in Washington, D. C. for many years. Although he was never a candidate for another office, he retained an active interest in politics. Like many other lifelong Democrats, he found himself unable to support Alfred E. Smith for the Presidency in 1928. He later regretted the stand he had taken for Herbert Hoover and stated that "Hoover's administration has been the most colossal failure in history and no apology can explain it. I feel like publicly apologizing for having supported him."¹¹ He returned to the Democratic fold and with advancing years, his interest in political matters gradually subsided until his death July 19, 1947.

From the standpoint of personal qualities, Owen was well qualified for political leadership. There was also ample opportunity for the bud of this leadership to flower. He had been connected with the agricultural, business, and political life of the state from its early territorial days. His varied interests furnished him contacts with the leading individuals of each interest. These many pursuits took him to every section of the state, where he made valuable acquaintances and could see the needs of the people firsthand. Senator Owen was more than a mere political figure, for he entered earnestly into the development of the resources of Oklahoma. In his case, at least, these business connections tended to give him more prestige and a larger following as a political leader.

The life of Robert L. Owen also presents an interesting study of political leadership from the viewpoint of the issues he championed. He reflected rather well the principles that were popular in the political mirror at home. Both Oklahoma and Indian Territories contained a large number of Populists who later merged with the Democrats under the banner of Bryan. The exponents of this rather restless democracy were tremendously interested

¹⁰ The part that Owen played in the proceedings of the Democratic National Convention are reported in *The Daily Oklahoman*, July 1, 3, 6, 7, 1920.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Oct. 8, 1933.

in measures that would increase and stimulate popular government. These tendencies are well illustrated by the old territorial Populist and Democratic platforms as well as in the State Constitution.

The people found an able and liberal leader to present and defend their issues in the personage of Robert L. Owen. During his eighteen years in the Senate, he vigorously promoted the popular measures of the day, such as the initiative and referendum, the mandatory primary, the short ballot, the publicity pamphlet, the direct election of United States Senators, and a corrupt practices act. He sincerely believed that the American intelligence and conscience were capable of establishing a better form of government through these means.¹² His speeches and writings both in and out of the Senate afford a good criterion for his views on these issues. While many of his arguments may seem stilted, they found favor with the voters and caused them to look upon Senator Owen as a champion of popular government.

He heartily endorsed the initiative and referendum and justified their adoption by claiming that sovereign power resided in the people. The initiative enabled the people to enact the laws necessary for good government which elected representatives failed to adopt; while the referendum permitted them to nullify objectionable acts of the legislature. In this way the legislature was compelled to enact the laws necessary for good government. It was useless for special interests to buy a legislature which could not deliver the needed laws for protection. By this simple method the legislature could be made responsible to the will of the people. Thus sovereignty was restored to the people and caused them to have a greater confidence in the government.¹³

Senator Owen championed a thorough-going direct primary system covering local, state, and national offices, direct election of party committeemen, and a means whereby the voters in each party could directly instruct their delegates. Although it was possible for corrupt influences to creep into the direct primary system, yet the fact remained, it was much easier to purchase a few votes than to buy a large number. The same arguments could be applied with equal facility for the direct election of party committeemen, delegates to party conventions, and instruction of candidates to national party conventions.¹⁴

He was an early proponent of the short ballot. Experience, he often stated, has demonstrated that it is necessary to have a

¹² Cong. Rec., 61 Cong., 3 sess., XLVI, pt. 5 (1911), p. 4297.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 4297, 4301.

¹⁴ Robert L. Owen, *The Code of the Peoples' Rule*, 61 Cong., 2 sess., S. Doc. No. 603, LXI (1910), pp. 34, 54, 57.

short ballot in order for the best results to be obtained in the direct nomination of candidates by the voters. The number of candidates must be sufficiently reduced and the offices be of such importance that the voters would know about them and be in a position to judge the merits of the candidates for each office. Only those public servants who were concerned with the formulation of public policies should be elected. Ministerial officers should be appointed by those who formulated the public policies, because only the latter could take the necessary time and have sufficient knowledge to make the proper appointments. An appointed official could be discharged promptly whenever the public welfare required it. When an official was made responsible for the conduct of his department, he was unable to shift the blame to a subordinate who was his appointee and not elected by the people.¹⁵

As an example of his further interest in popular government, he advocated a publicity pamphlet. He contended that it was necessary for the people to have knowledge concerning the issues and candidates before they could vote intelligently. This publicity pamphlet should be issued at government expense and delivered to every voter. It should contain accurate information about the claims of the candidates and the content of the public measures upon which they voted.¹⁶

Senator Owen took a leading part in the struggle for the direct election of United States Senators, a movement that culminated in the Seventeenth Amendment to the Federal Constitution. His reasons for urging such an amendment were clearly stated: It would make the Senate of the United States more responsive to the desires of the people; it would tend to lessen the corruption of state legislatures; it would serve to check the improper use of money in the campaigns by candidates seeking election to the state legislatures pledged to support the selection of United States Senators backed by corrupt interests; and it would prevent the turbulent contests of senatorial candidates that tended to embroil the state legislatures and interfere with needed state legislation. Furthermore, it would compel candidates for the United States Senate to exhibit their merits before the scrutiny of the people and to abide by their decision at the polls; it would eliminate deadlocks, because of extended political contests which in the past had denied various states from time to time their full representation in the Senate; and it would popularize government and tend to increase the confidence of the people in the United States Senate.¹⁷ The Amendment has, at least in part, justified these arguments.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

¹⁶ *Cong. Rec.*, 63 Cong., 2 sess., LI, pt. 11 (1914), p. 10789.

¹⁷ *Cong. Rec.*, 61 Cong., 2 sess., XLV, pt. 7 (1910), p. 7109.

Believing that reason was the only safe influence in the politics of a free people, Senator Owen insisted upon a corrupt practices act. An act of this nature, he thought, should provide for the limitation of the use of money by candidates and all others interested therein to the absolute necessities of the campaign. These campaign expenditures should receive publicity before the nominating primary and again preceeding the election. The lavish spending of money in primaries and elections, he argued, tended to make the government corrupt and inefficient, because graft was necessary to repay the successful candidates and their friends for large campaign expenditures.¹⁸

His views on economic and social subjects such as the Federal Reserve System, tariff reduction, prohibition, and woman suffrage were also representative of those held by his constituency. When the Democrats took charge of the national government in 1913, Senator Owen became chairman of the Committee on Banking and Currency. This placed him in a position of influence and leadership in the Senate, for the Democratic platform of 1912 promised a rather sweeping reform in banking and currency. His greatest work and outstanding achievement was in connection with drafting and directing the passage of the Federal Reserve Act. The qualities he exhibited as a leader in the successful contest for currency reform raised him to the rank of a statesman, at least in the minds of Oklahomans.¹⁹ Perhaps the greatest disappointment in Senator Owen's political life was his failure to gain general recognition as the chief sponsor of the Federal Reserve System, since most of the credit went to Carter Glass.

In reference to the tariff problem, Senator Owen favored the tariff commission, reciprocity, and a moderately low tariff which should be adjusted to raise revenue and afford incidental protection. The tariff should be placed on a scientific basis, thus reducing it to a mathematical and commercial proposition that would ultimately lead to reciprocity. In no case should a tariff shelter private monopoly. He contended that the acquisition of property by profiteering, monopoly, extortion, and the unfair exercise of overwhelming commercial and financial power should be restrained and moderated by the government in order to distribute more equitably the proceeds of human labor and give the common man his just participation in the affairs of the government.²⁰

¹⁸ Owen, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

¹⁹ Parker La Moore, "Robert L. Owen Given First Place Among U. S. Statesmen from Oklahoma," *The Daily Oklahoman*, July 28, 1929.

²⁰ *Cong. Rec.*, 66 Cong., 1 sess., LVIII, pt. 6 (1919), p. 6316; *ibid.*, 66 Cong., 2 sess., LIX, pt. 9 (1920), p. 8957.

In Congress and on the public platform Owen always vigorously supported prohibition as a means of conserving human life and promoting human happiness. Alcohol, he contended, not only lowered efficiency of the human organism, but also degraded moral character. Great properties had been built up from the liquor traffic; grogeries were the centers of nefarious political activities. These were so persistent in their practices as to defy even the sovereign power of the United States government. When it came to an issue of that character, the government should grapple with the force that defied the law and determine where the true sovereignty resided.²¹

As a true liberal, Senator Owen was a firm believer in the political equality of men and women. The Constitution uses the word "people" which means both men and women. Political rights for women, he argued, were essential to the full development of national sovereignty.²²

The foregoing issues were only representative of the policies included in his legislative program. He also gave full attention and support to measures such as the recall, preferential ballot, income tax, good roads, Farm Loan Act, vocational instruction, labor legislation, prevention of child labor, health legislation, and the League of Nations. Always a Jeffersonian, Owen believed that a well-informed citizenry was the only sure foundation for a democracy. He agreed with Abraham Lincoln that "all the people know more than some of the people." It was obvious, however, that the people needed better tools of government to make their will more effective. He devoted a lifetime of service to supporting measures that would give the people increased participation in their government. When the people knew all the facts, Owen asserted, they would verify the biblical statement, "Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make ye free."²³

While the reassertion of democratic rights failed to remedy all the evils in government, there is no doubt that the basis of democracy had been strengthened and broadened. Scheming politicians and special interests still found devious ways to circumvent the clear intent of these popular measures, but the progressive movement had succeeded in introducing a new spirit of social responsibility into government. Undoubtedly, these measures awakened a public consciousness that focused more attention on candidates and insisted on a higher morality in government. Senator Owen in supporting these measures convinced the people

²¹ *Cong. Rec.*, 63 Cong., 2 sess., LI, pt. 1 (1914), 618; *ibid.*, 63 Cong., 3 sess., LII, pt. 2 (1915), p. 1624.

²² *Cong. Rec.*, 64 Cong. 1 sess., LIII, pt. 7 (1916), p. 6781.

²³ *Cong. Rec.*, 62 Cong., 2 sess., XLVIII, pt. 2 (1912), p. 1573.

of Oklahoma that he was representing their best interests by taking a leading part in helping to develop "The Code of the Peoples' Rule."

Although Owen may be classed as somewhat of an idealist, yet he was a practical politician. He took care that none of his opponents caught him unawares, especially at election time. He maintained a mailing list of some three hundred thousand names of Oklahomans, whom he kept informed of his views and services. Senator Owen's co-operation with and admiration for both Bryan and Wilson, the idols of the majority of the voters of Oklahoma, increased his political popularity at home. In short, he was able to present his record in such a manner to the voters as to establish the belief that no one could represent the state with more conspicuous ability.