



William Ross Bigham

William Ross Bigham: Entrepreneur, Diplomat, and Traveler

by
R. Alton Lee

Ross Bigham was typical of those settlers who migrated to the Great Plains following the Civil War. Born in Hamilton, Ohio in 1842, he enlisted in the Fourth Volunteer Cavalry in Ohio, established a good war record during his three-and-a-half years of service, and located at El Paso, Illinois, following hostilities. He became a Mason, a Presbyterian, and a Republican and served as Mayor of El Paso for three terms. While there he married his wife, Margaret, and established a lumber yard and wagon factory. As mayor he enforced the local option law vigorously, incurring the wrath of the saloonists and liquor element. They employed a thug to burn his wagon factory, which was only partially covered by insurance, and he used the remainder of his resources to track down his enemies and see them go to the penitentiary. In financial straits, he and Margaret decided to migrate to East Central Kansas, then attracting Civil War veterans in great numbers.¹

He became an immigration agent for the Missouri Pacific, Southern Branch (later called the Katy), then building south from Junction City and Fort Riley to Texas, and located a number of settlers along the line in the Neosho Valley. The Bighams bought a farm at White City, a newly constructed town between Junction City and the old Santa Fe Trail town of Council Grove, both soon to be the county seats. The area was bustling with the boomer activity of a raw frontier being tamed by civilization, building homes and businesses on the rolling prairie. The lumber business was a key element in this development and it was here that Ross found his finances improving.²

A muscular man, rather stoop-shouldered from heavy labor, and

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sporting the popular handle-bar moustache, Ross hit upon a key to success in this developing frontier. The treeless Great Plains required the importation of all building products. In 1880, he joined with friends to organize the Badger Lumber Company, located in the central forest areas of Wisconsin. Ross supervised the lumber operations in Kansas and Oklahoma while personally operating the yards in White City, Hope, and Gypsum City for a time. He was also instrumental in organizing the First National Bank and Farmers' State Bank in his hometown. When the first great flush of building, and enormous profits ended, the Badger Company would sell its yards, often to the local operator, and move on to virgin territory. Ross bought the yard in White City in 1884 and settled down. The Badger Company was eventually absorbed into the giant Weyerhaeuser conglomerate that dominated the Great Lakes region. Bigham sold his yard two years later and successfully engaged in banking, real estate, and cattle.³

This was a great boom period for the area. The Katy railroad was bringing in trainloads of English, German, and Swedish settlers, along with their farm implements and sometimes livestock. The soil was gumbo, or Benfield, but productive if rains came properly, but first they had to break the tough sod. Settlers hired this done by those who owned six oxen and a special steel plow. It took a day to break two acres with one man guiding the plow and one riding the beam to hold the plow in the soil. The cost ranged from \$2-\$5 per acre, making even subsistence farming an expensive proposition at about \$150 per farm. The more hilly areas, and there were many around White City, were left intact for cattle grazing and "putting up" prairie hay for winter livestock feeding.⁴

An enterprising young man could take advantage of the relatively cheap frontier prices and acquire sections of land for cattle grazing at sometimes less than \$5 per acre. Billy Dodderidge, fresh from England and New York, was a good example; he owned the grain elevator on the Katy siding and was rapidly adding to his holdings, shipping several carloads of cattle to market annually. He and Bigham accompanied their shipments to the Kansas City stockyards, where they enjoyed the sights and sounds of the big metropolis before returning home to another year of hard work and smart investments.

Like his neighbor Billy, Ross Bigham was industrious and frugal,

but unlike Billy in the grain business, Ross invested in a local bank. After milking the lumber and hardware business during their boom years, Bigham accumulated sufficient cash to venture into real estate and cattle during its early development. The town was booming and settlers rapidly moved in to open various enterprises in general merchandising, restaurants, a second hotel, blacksmithing, hostelry, and, of course, a local newspaper to promote the area and record its development. In 1885 the editor reported fifty new buildings in the previous two years. He invariably exaggerated the village's economic potential but it kept the settlers coming, and wise speculators like Bigham continued to prosper. Immigrants came in on one of the two railroads, ate and slept in one of the two hotels, consulted Bigham about the availability of a farm or ranch site, and rented a team and buggy at the local livery stable to scout the possibilities. The Davis Hotel reported 717 arrivals in May 1886, "besides regular boarders." The dining room charged \$.35 for locals and \$.50 for visitors and drummers.⁵

There were setbacks, of course. The local editor, George Simpson, was a promoter of first rank until he grew too greedy. Citizens voted the usual several thousand dollars per mile to help with railroad construction and as the second railroad approached White City, Simpson platted several acres for an addition to the town. He erroneously reported that the Rock Island had purchased fifteen acres from him to build its division point there. This would assure definite growth for the town as the turntable and repair shops would employ hundreds of men. A week later his newspaper announced that the price of property in his addition had shot up "100 per cent in the last thirty days." The speculator also began construction of a large two-story limestone building for offices, perhaps another bank, and cultural entertainments. But he proved too avaricious. Twenty miles to the southwest, Monroe D. Herington, a rancher with large land holdings had a small village named after him. He approached Rock Island officials with an offer they could not refuse. He would donate them a right-of-way through town, plus enough acreage for their division point, which they accepted with alacrity. While the town of Herington boomed, Simpson's home sites never developed and his "white elephant" was never completed. In a short time the division center boasted a population of 8,000 while White City stagnated at

500. It was a definite setback for Bigham, especially when a number of merchants moved to Herington. Both Simpson and Bigham were typical of Great Plains frontier entrepreneurs, one a greedy booster, the other a steady businessman who succeeded through wise investments.⁶

Bigham was active in the political life of his community, serving on the city council with his friend Dodderidge and Mayor Robert Farmer, one of the earliest settlers and owner of a general merchandise store. Hard times struck the Great Plains in the late 1880s and early 1890s. Economic issues, such as high railroad rates, bank rates, insufficient currency, and “trust” prices on farm machinery, led farmers to form alliances to buy and sell cooperatively. As economic conditions continued to worsen, agrarians began joining the Populist party, first formed in South Dakota and Kansas in June 1890. Newspapers quickly labeled the party members as “radicals.” This massive organization of discontented farmers frightened solid Republican leaders, such as Bigham, especially when they were joined by agrarian Democrats who began winning elections and capturing control of state legislatures and governorships after 1890.⁷

As the town grew, the city council built sidewalks, encouraged town baseball teams, formed bands for both genders, built schools, and supported the introduction of telephones; these developments improved Bigham’s business in town. But his investments in land and livestock continued to constitute his primary source of wealth. The telephone made rural life more acceptable and improved roads made urban luxuries more available for his potential customers. The Great Plains economy rebounded after the Panic of 1893 and was reflected in Bigham’s fortunes. His family was able to travel, for business purposes and occasionally outside the United States for pleasure.

As befitting a former lumber baron, Bigham built an attractive mansion on his farm on the southern edge of White City. Ross became a civic leader and a political figure in the local and state Republican party. When the Populists, with William Jennings Bryan as their standard-bearer, posed a threat to the dominant party in 1896, Ross rallied his fellow Republicans to organize a McKinley Club with him as president. With his increasing affluence, Bigham was able to indulge in his favorite

avocation, traveling to South America, Europe, and Northern Africa on numerous occasions. In 1888, for instance, he was reported on his way to Dakota Territory, then to South America via Liverpool.⁸

He also was persuaded to run for political office. He served two terms in the state legislature and “made acquaintances” and friends all over the state. When he first appeared in Topeka to take his seat in the lower house, a reporter asked him what legislation he would “favor.” He responded that he had not given “this matter sufficient thought to have formulated any thoughts.” Then he proceeded to unburden himself of this conservative philosophy:

I expect to give earnest support to all laws which in my judgment are necessary to protect the morals and good reputation of this state. I shall also favor all laws which in my judgment will further all productive and business interests of the people of Kansas with a firm desire that such legislation be conservative, based on sound business judgment and tempered with firmness and justice to all.

This was music to the ears of sound Republican leadership, which was currently bedeviled by those “cranky” and “anarchist” Populists who threatened their way of life and domination of Kansas government.⁹

Bigham was not a particularly successful legislator. He introduced three or four bills that failed to impress the House leadership but he did nurse a measure through the legislature that appropriated \$8,000 for the Morris county commissioners to complete an addition to their magnificent courthouse. It involved a 50x80 feet wing to house the county sheriff’s office and the official surveyor. Bigham also threw his support to the traveling library, a relatively new concept promoted by that famous Populist writer, Annie Diggs, currently serving as the state librarian. Bigham’s major achievement that year proved to be the numerous powerful friends he made in Republican circles that would soon stand him in good stead.¹⁰

Creating a county high school was the latest education fad at the end of the nineteenth century and Bigham proved himself to be a shrewd politician who could successfully maneuver around his various constituencies. Citizens of White City formed a committee to persuade

their representative to press for a county high school to be located in their community. Because he had successfully acquired an appropriation for expansion of the courthouse, he should therefore benefit his hometown by bringing the proposed school to White City.

Bigham cleverly wrote a letter to "The Citizens of Morris County." He wanted to help his community in any way possible, but he was elected to represent "the whole of Morris County" and he had "to treat all parts of the county fairly and with justice to all." The county voters were to determine the location but if he were to force the building at White City, this would amount to "taxation without representation" because county taxpayers would have to support the school without voting on the site. Taxpayers had already determined the location of the county seat and this was a different issue from helping with the courthouse. All county taxpayers would benefit from use of the courthouse, not just those living in Council Grove.¹¹

This defense of his stance on the issue struck the right chord with taxpayers and they returned him to Topeka for the next term. In his second session, Ross introduced a half dozen measures dealing with defacing monuments or moving some sections of land in Lyon County to Morris County, all of which failed to gain any support from his fellow solons. He managed to push a minor one through to regulate the recording of titles and conditional sales of real estate, which passed and the governor signed in March 1901. His brief foray into the legislative realm was not a brilliant success, except for the powerful political friends he made while in the state capital.¹²

His second legislative session had hardly ended when Bigham learned that President William McKinley had appointed him consul-general to the Republic of South Africa. This appointment came through the combined efforts of Congressman Charles Curtis and Senator Joseph Burton in bringing pressure on McKinley to appoint their fellow Kansan. Bigham "was always a hard worker for . . . Curtis while Shawnee was in the Fourth congressional district" and had been "for years . . . a staunch supporter of Burton . . . and was one of the hardest workers in the Burton crowd last winter" when the legislature elected Burton to the U.S. Senate.¹³

This was not a particularly choice diplomatic plum, but Bigham was pleased over the opportunity to travel and serve his country and to experience new adventures. He served successfully for four years, during the time of the Boer War. This conflict arose when Dutchman Paul Kruger became convinced the British were intent on acquiring the Transvaal and the British concluded that Kruger planned on driving the British out of South Africa. At the conclusion of hostilities, the British were able to expand through the Transvaal but the Boers countered with guerilla warfare similar to that being conducted contemporarily by the Aguinaldo insurrectionists in the Philippines against American forces. Margaret joined him in South Africa for two years before they returned home.

There was considerable correspondence between British and American officials concerning the war, especially over those American fortune hunters who served the Boer forces and were captured by the British, but Bigham's name does not appear in *Foreign Relations of the United States*. This is not surprising as these negotiations were conducted by the diplomatic corps and he was in the consular service that promoted trade and commerce between the two nations.

At the conclusion of his term, Bigham discovered his appointment would not be renewed. President Theodore Roosevelt had a friend, Horace L. Washington, he wanted to promote in the consular service and when he looked over the list he discovered Senator Burton had obtained the appointment for Bigham in 1901. The President was conducting a personal vendetta against Burton, eventually sending him to prison, and he and Secretary of State Elihu Root wiped Bigham's name off the list and appointed Washington instead. Bigham traveled to Washington to assist Curtis and Kansas Senator Chester Long in seeking vindication for his superior service by re-appointment to the post. Roosevelt remained adamant, using the excuse that Bigham had served his normal four-year tour of duty and that was the end of it.¹⁴

When Long and Curtis called on Roosevelt at the White House he remained inflexible against any friend of Burton, saying his decision was irrevocable but he did promise, if possible, "to find an equally good place" for Bigham. He had just been elected president in 1904

and was no longer worried about political support in Kansas. Roosevelt and Root used their new regulations that people between ages twenty-one and fifty would not be appointed to the consular service. Bigham was unaware of Roosevelt's vendetta against Burton and pursued re-appointment in part because the salary for the post had increased from \$3,000 to \$5,000 annually. Bigham believed the presidential decision reflected poorly on his performance but his pleas were in vain. He was reported as determined to remain in Washington "until his application is acted on," but he eventually came home empty handed. As the *Kansas City Journal* noted, to be appointed one had to undergo a civil service examination and speak three languages—"English, Roosevelt, and one foreign."¹⁵

Bigham continued to expand his financial domain while he waited another four years for a significant appointment. Governor Walter Stubbs named him as a delegate to the National Peace Conference in Chicago in May 1909. The White Citizen might have felt slightly out of place here as he reported mingling with Count Johan von Bernstorff, German ambassador to the United States, Herman de Lagerhrantz, ambassador from Sweden, Dr. Wu Ting-fang of China, Alfred Mitchell, representing the British Embassy, the famous historian Halvdahn Koht of the Norway Peace Conference, Dr. Benjamin F. Trueblood, secretary of the American Peace Society, "and many ministers and college professors."¹⁶

Bigham reported on what he had learned of various world peace efforts. In the previous century 167 international disputes were settled by arbitration. Currently the fishing controversy between the United States and Canada was pending at The Hague. Eighty arbitration treaties had been signed by nations, twenty-four of them by the United States. The court of The Hague was now recognized by forty-four nations (this included almost all in the world at the time). Two-thirds of the American budget was applied to war debt (mostly the Civil War) and for preparing for future wars. This conference was part of a series of international meetings designed to end wars, which, unfortunately, deluded many into believing that war was outmoded in the twentieth century, until hostilities erupted in August 1914.¹⁷

Bigham never held another significant political office. His grandson,

Lt. Ross Wallace, served in the AEF in France and soon after the war Bigham died in California where he had been spending his winters seeking relief from being “badly crippled” by rheumatism. The Bigham’s only child, Mrs. A.R. Wallace, inherited the family mansion and lived there until her death.

How does one account for this conservative businessman, whose hometown seldom exceeded a population of 500, and his fascination with foreign travel? Perhaps the local newspaper stimulated an interest by carrying weekly stories on “Ancient Ruins,” “Granite Statue Found in Egyptian Desert,” “Christmas in Norway,” “London Street Life,” or the periodic “Foreign Gossip.” Possibly he felt challenged by the frequent foreign travel of rival Paul Taggart, a real estate agent who was reported in May 1886 as having completed his sixth trip to Europe.¹⁸

It was this interest in traveling, in addition to his outgoing personality and work for his party, that led to his experience with a consular position and as a delegate to a significant peace conference. His business expertise, of course, also helped in financing his extensive travels and his not-so-lucrative diplomatic ventures. He was truly an unusual and talented settler on the frontier Great Plains.

NOTES

(Endnotes)

- 1 *White City Register*, 17 April 1919.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 *White City Whig*, 31 October 1885; R. Alton Lee, *T-Town on the Plains* (Manhattan, Ks: Sunflower University Press, 1999): 28.
- 4 Clarence H. Danhoff, *Change in Agriculture, 1820- 1870* (Harvard University Press, 1969): 123-25.
- 5 R. Alton Lee, *T-Town on the Plains* (Manhattan, Ks: Sunflower University Press, 1999): 35.
- 6 *Ibid.*, pp 47-48.
- 7 For this movement on the northern Plains see R. Alton Lee, *South Dakota Populism* (Pierre, South Dakota State Historical Society, 2009) and for Kansas, O. Gene Clanton, *A Common Humanity* (Manhattan, Ks.: Sunflower University Press, 2004).
- 8 *White City Register*, 10 July 1896; 10 August 1888. His steamer trunk for these travels is on display at the Katy Park museum in White City, courtesy Judi Wildman.
- 9 *Topeka Daily Capital*, 16 November 1898.
- 10 *Council Grove Republican*, 17 February, 3 March 1899.
- 11 *Ibid*, 24 February 1899.
- 12 *House, Journal*, 1901, p. 1540.
- 13 *Kansas City Star*, 28 August 1901.
- 14 *Topeka Daily Capital*, 7 June 1905.
- 15 *Journal*, 9 June 1905; *White City Register*, 14 March 1907.
- 16 *Topeka Daily Capital*, 18 May 1909.
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 *Morris County News*, 8 May 1886.