



Murray family portrait at their home near Tishomingo, 1905.
Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

“Hard to Compare to Anyone but Himself:” Alfalfa William Murray and his “Advance” in Oklahoma History

by
Jeffrey Widener

On November 21, 1869, in Toadsuck, Texas, one of the most colorful, big-mouthed, belligerent men ever to call himself an Oklahoman, “Alfalfa” William Henry David Murray, was born to Uriah Dow Thomas Murray and Bertha Elizabeth Jones Murray (Figure 1).¹ Growing up in Texas, William Murray and his two brothers, John Shade, the oldest, and George, the youngest, had a rough childhood.² To explain, their mother passed away shortly after giving birth to George.³ As a result, Uriah took the boys to live with their grandparents.⁴ Shortly afterwards, Uriah married a widow, Mary Jane Green; the boys, forced to leave their grandparents, moved with their father and stepmother to Montague, Texas, in 1873.⁵ Mary, a very religious woman, “believed in strong punishment and often whipped them,” and, when his father and his new wife had seven children of their own, William Henry and his brothers often felt ignored.⁶ Fed up with the mistreatment, John Shade ran away but returned after a short time, only to leave again and take William and George with him in search of employment and housing.⁷ The three brothers ended up in Keeter, Texas, where William, having had very little

1 Keith L. Bryant, Jr., *Alfalfa Bill Murray* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968), 3 [Hereafter cited as Bryant]; Gordon Hines, *Alfalfa Bill: An Intimate Biography* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Press, 1932), 9. [Hereafter cited as Hines].

2 Bryant, 3-10.

3 Hines, 13.

4 Bryant, 3,4.

5 William H. Murray, *Memoirs of Governor Murray and True History of Oklahoma: Together with his Biography, Philosophy, Statesmanship, and Oklahoma History Interwoven*, vol. 1 (Boston: Meador Publishing Company, 1945), 123. [Hereafter cited as *Memoirs of Governor Murray*, vol. 1].

6 Bryant, 3-4.

7 Bryant, 3-4.

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education prior to this, attended the local school and worked to pay his way.⁸ When William learned of a new school in Springtown, the College Hill Institute, founded by John McCracken and D. P. Hurley, he sold his possessions and moved ten miles up the road.⁹ Luckily, McCracken “took the awkward backwoods boy into his home.”¹⁰ At College Hill and later at Mineral Wells, Murray received the experience and education he needed to pursue a short political career in Texas.¹¹ In 1898, Murray left Texas and moved to Oklahoma where he would represent the state politically as governor, congressman, and presidential candidate and, after retiring from Oklahoma politics, excel at being an Oklahoma celebrity, “hard to compare to anyone but himself.”¹²

As early as two years before he received his bachelor’s degree in science in Texas, Murray became intrigued with life in the public eye; and, in 1891, he joined Jim Hogg, his political idol and the leader of the Democrats of Texas, and began speaking at rallies against the People’s Party.¹³ One newspaper reported William Henry Murray was “a fine speaker who always hit the nail on the head and is always ready to support any parliamentary position he takes on any questions.”¹⁴ Even though his first rallies were with nonpolitical organizations, his speeches put his foot in the door for rallies to follow.¹⁵ In the fall of 1891, Murray spoke at his first national platform event, playing an active part in the Interstate Convention of the Anti-sub Treasury Farmers Alliance meeting held in St. Louis, Missouri.¹⁶ Murray became secretary and then chairman of the Farmers Grand Alliance, aiding them in writing the alliance’s new constitution.¹⁷

Two years later, at age 23 and now ready to enter the “political wars” as a candidate, Murray announced his candidacy for a senate

8 Bryant, 5.

9 *Memoirs of Governor Murray*, vol. 1, 163.

10 Bryant, 5.

11 Bryant, 10.

12 Anson B. Campbell, introduction to *Uncle Sam Needs a Doctor* by William H. Murray (Boston: Meador Publishing Company, 1940), 12. [Hereafter cited as *Uncle Sam Needs a Doctor*].

13 Bryant, 8, 10; Hines, 81; *Memoirs of Governor Murray*, vol. 1, 168.

14 Bryant, 11.

15 Bryant, 13.

16 Bryant, 13.

17 Bryant, 13.

seat in Navarro, Kaufman, and Henderson counties.¹⁸ Although he made appearances and speeches all over the rural counties, he lost the nomination in the three way race.¹⁹ After the loss, Murray reverted to teaching to support himself, just as he had done while he worked on his bachelor's degree. One year later, Murray left teaching again, to pursue a journalism career with his brother George.²⁰ By 1894, the Murray papers, *The Corsicana Daily* (city paper and daily) and *The Navarro County News* (rural and weekly), became active political agents, just as Alfalfa Bill hoped.²¹ In fact, one opponent he bashed in his paper ran into Alfalfa Bill at a post office and stated, "The next time you put my name in that paper, I will whip Hell out of you." Alfalfa Bill held his own, knocked the man to the ground, and, as Murray put it, "lit on him and stuck one finger in his ear, one in his eye, and one in his nose, and with this hold on him, I commenced beating his face."²²

Even as his viewpoint began reaching and influencing others, Murray became interested in another field—law. Depending on his papers for financial support, Murray studied with Judge John Rice; and, after he passed the bar exam on April 10, 1897, he and George agreed to sell the papers. As a result, he started his own law firm with two of his College Hill classmates and continued to study law, focusing on municipal law and "living off coffee and five cent fruit pies." He won his first case, representing a Negro widow and soon attracted a plethora of Negroes turning to him for help.²³ Then, in August 1897, Murray traveled to Indian Territory to visit his father; and he became "impressed by the territory" and "decided it held a promising future." Seven months later, he acquired some cash, compiled his assets, gathered letters of recommendation noting his charisma, purchased a train ticket, and, in March 1898, made his way into the territory.²⁴

Murray settled in Tishomingo, the capitol of the Chickasaw Nation, and quickly became involved in the community by serving as confidential legal adviser to Douglas H. Johnston, Governor of the Chickasaw Nation, and later as chairman of the Sequoyah Convention

18 Bryant, 14.

19 Bryant, 15.

20 *Memoirs of Governor Murray*, vol. 1, 183.

21 Bryant, 19.

22 *Memoirs of Governor Murray*, vol. 1, 191.

23 Bryant, 20.

24 Bryant, 20.

and one of the authors of Oklahoma's state constitution.²⁵ One year later, Murray married Johnston's niece, Miss Alice Hearell, a Chickasaw; and, in 1901, she gave birth to their first son, Massena Murray.²⁶ The family then moved to a farm on Twelve Mile Prairie where their other children, Johnston Murray, William Henry II or Billy, Jean Murray, the only girl, and Burbank Murray were born.²⁷ About two years after his first farm purchase, Murray made another purchase in the Washita river bottoms and, because of his marriage, received allotments from the Chickasaw Nation.²⁸

Farming and the law practice, by now consisting mostly of helping Indians who were charged with crimes, allowed the Murrays financial security.²⁹ Furthermore, this gave Bill the chance to continue to study law—an advantage for his future work in both the Sequoyah Convention and in helping prepare the Oklahoma Constitution.³⁰ In 1902, Indian delegates, realizing Oklahoma would eventually join the Union, began meeting and discussing terms for a new constitution.³¹ Then, when the Enabling Act passed in June 1906, ideas for the outline of the Oklahoma Constitution began to take shape.³² The Republicans, led by Frank Frantz, and the Democrats, led by William Murray, met in Guthrie in November; and Murray, the more effusive of the two, was elected president of the convention.³³ By the spring of 1907, Murray and Charles N. Haskell, with the help of others, submitted the constitution; however, United States President Theodore Roosevelt thought it needed more work and made recommendations encouraging progressive reforms.³⁴ Consequently, Murray followed the recommendations of Roosevelt, used the Enabling Act as a guide, and constructed an Oklahoma constitution

25 *Memoirs of Governor Murray*, vol. 1, 12-13, 234-35; Odie B. Faulk and William D. Welge, *Oklahoma: A Rich Heritage* (Sun Valley, CA: American Historical Press, 2004), 153.

26 Bryant, 29-30; *Memoirs of Governor Murray*, vol. 1, 274.

27 Bryant, 29-30; *Memoirs of Governor Murray*, vol. 1, 274.

28 Bryant, 32-33.

29 Bryant, 33.

30 Keith L. Bryant, "William Henry David Murray," *The Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/MM/fmu16.html> (accessed April 19, 2007). [Hereafter cited as "William Henry David Murray"].

31 Arrell Morgan Gibson, *Oklahoma: A History of Five Centuries*, 2nd ed. (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981), 196. [Hereafter cited as Gibson].

32 Gibson, 197.

33 "William Henry David Murray."

34 Gibson, 200.

that he thought no individual could disapprove.³⁵ On November 16, 1907, Charles N. Haskell took the oath and became the first governor of Oklahoma; Murray became the Speaker of the Oklahoma House of Representatives and served in that position for one year.³⁶

Subsequently, Murray served the state as a representative in the sixty-third and sixty-fourth sessions of the United States Congress; but, following that, Murray lost two consecutive attempts at running for governor of the state.³⁷ Saddened by his losses, Alfalfa Bill and his family—his wife, his four sons, and two daughters-in-law—packed up, traveled to South America, and settled in Bolivia for four years.³⁸ While in Bolivia, they developed a colony that, unfortunately, failed due to a change in government; and, instead of making a profit, the Murrays lost \$84,000 and an additional \$10,000 in travel expenses.³⁹ Nevertheless, they financed a return to the United States; however, Murray paid only for himself, his wife, and his two daughters-in-law, leaving his sons to work until they made enough money to return. After their return, the family stayed with another family member, and Alfalfa Bill's political career began to enjoy some success.⁴⁰ He became bombarded with requests to give speeches.⁴¹ During these speeches, Alfalfa Bill never mentioned politics, but many people told him he should run for a senate seat or for governor.⁴² Murray determined that the ones who wanted him to run for a senate seat were his "enemies," and the ones who asked him to run for governor were his "friends."⁴³ Murray decided to take the advice of his friends and began his campaign for governor in March 1929; and, by the close of the campaign, Alfalfa Bill was "canvassing

35 Gibson, 202.

36 William H. Murray, "Biographical Note," http://www.crossroads.odl.state.ok.us/cdm4/meta_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/governors&C... (accessed April 19, 2007). [Hereafter cited as "Biographical Note"].

37 "William Henry David Murray."

38 William Krohn, *Alfalfa Bill Murray: Governor of Oklahoma* (Ardmore, OK: Krohn Oil Review, 1931), 3; William H. Murray, *Memoirs of Governor Murray and True History of Oklahoma: Together with his Biography, Philosophy, Statesmanship, and Oklahoma History Interwoven*, vol. 2 (Boston: Meador Publishing Company, 1945), 245. [Hereafter cited as *Memoirs of Governor Murray*, vol. 2].

39 *Memoirs of Governor Murray*, vol. 2, 263, 265.

40 *Memoirs of Governor Murray*, vol. 2, 265.

41 *Memoirs of Governor Murray*, vol. 2, 361.

42 *Memoirs of Governor Murray*, vol. 2, 361-363.

43 *Memoirs of Governor Murray*, vol. 2, 364.

the southwest where the crowds covered acres.”⁴⁴ His detractors charged him with being Red, with being an atheist, and with being a Jew lover and accused him of marrying a Negro; but Murray won the election “with a record majority of 100,000 votes” and served from January 12, 1931 to January 15, 1935 (Figure 4).⁴⁵

Taking office right after the stock market crash and at the beginning of the Dust Bowl, Murray quickly “attacked the \$5,000,000 deficit, mass unemployment, mortgage foreclosures, and bank failures.”⁴⁶ To help with the poverty problems caused by the Depression, Murray planned to construct a toll-free bridge across the Red River into Texas, but Texans pestered the travelers for tolls on their side of the river.⁴⁷ As a result, Murray called out the National Guard to oust the Texas Rangers; and the case ended up going before the Supreme Court.⁴⁸ Later, Murray shut down 3,106 oil wells in Oklahoma fields in an effort to “curtail output to raise the price of oil,” and, once again, Murray had to call out the troops.⁴⁹ These were not the only times Governor Murray called out the Guard; in fact, “he called out the National Guard so frequently that the late Will Rogers, his political opponent in one election campaign, said he sent for troops as someone else might ‘ring for ice water.’”⁵⁰ During the middle of his term as governor, in 1932, Murray tried his hand at running for president under a “Bread, Butter, Bacon, and Beans” campaign (Figure 5).⁵¹ Unfortunately, Murray failed in the presidential race, although an Oklahoma candy company did recognize him with a “5-cent candy bar” named *Alfalfa Bill*.⁵² One of the most interesting things Bill did before he left the governor’s office was authorize two attorneys to sue the United States for \$100,000,000 because “the Governor’s executive order declared Oklahoma could not legally barter its sovereignty in accepting the terms of the Enabling Act which made

44 *Memoirs of Governor Murray*, vol. 2, 365, 373.

45 “Biographical Note.”

46 “Biographical Note.”

47 “William Henry David Murray.”

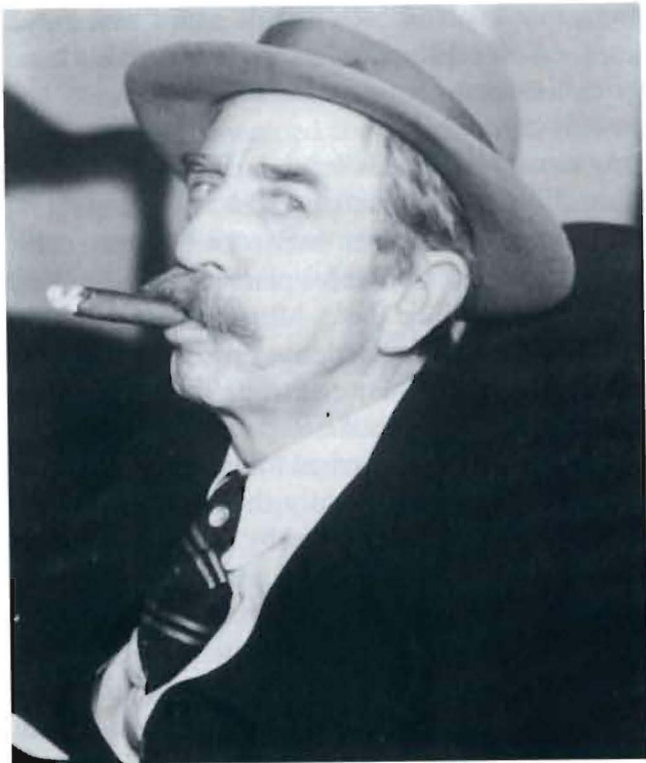
48 “William Henry David Murray.”

49 “Troops Stop Flow of Oklahoma Oil,” *The New York Times*, August 5, 1931, 1.

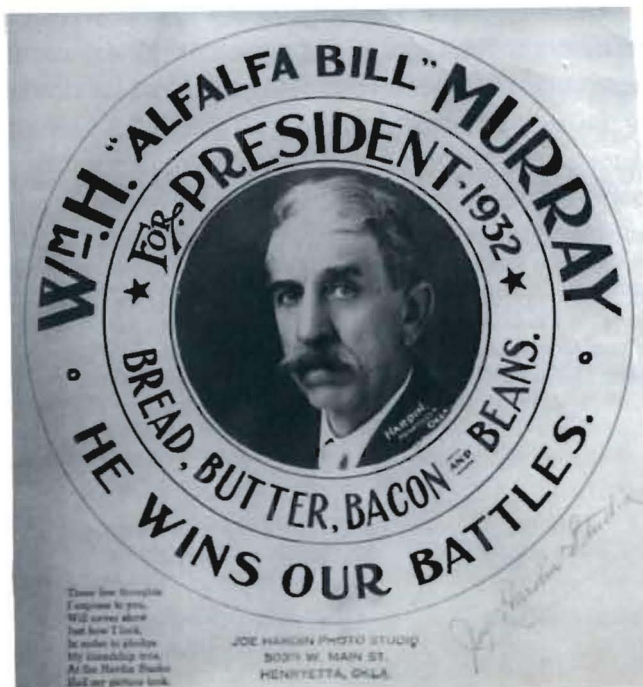
50 “W.H. (Alfalfa Bill) Murray Dies; Ex-Governor of Oklahoma Was 86,” *The New York Times*, October 16, 1956, 33.

51 “William Henry David Murray;” Mary Louise Richardson, “Where is Alfalfa Bill Murray?,” *The Saturday Evening Post*, December 18, 1948, 74.

52 “Alfalfa Bill! Is a Candy Bar Now, *The Oklahoman*, March 11, 1932, 14.



Alfalfa William Murray will be remembered as one of Oklahoma's most colorful characters (date unknown).
Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.



"Bread, Butter, Bacon, and Beans" was Murray's 1932 presidential campaign slogan.
Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

it a state.”⁵³ After facing some of the most difficult issues ever faced by an Oklahoma governor, Alfalfa Bill retired in 1935 and set his hand to writing books and pamphlets that conveyed his strong character and made people either love him or hate him.⁵⁴

After retiring, Murray moved to some acreage in Broken Bow with his wife and daughter, “dwelling in a little unpainted home, sleeping on the floor and dining on food cooked in an iron pot over a campfire in his front yard” and asserting that it was a peaceful place to live; he lived there until his wife died in 1938.⁵⁵ While there, Murray began to assert his opposition to the New Deal and aggravated many people throughout the United States by stating, “It is my intention to be free to fight the New Deal until it is destroyed or it destroys the Republic, for one or the other is bound to occur.”⁵⁶ Murray continued to tour the plains states and enumerate the faults of the New Deal.⁵⁷ Oddly, the lake that came to bear his name, Lake Murray, was built and funded by agencies the New Deal created.⁵⁸

After Mrs. Murray’s death, companionless and browbeaten, Murray began writing and publishing truculent onslaughts on people or factions he blamed for his political failures.⁵⁹ Continuing to castigate the New Deal, Alfalfa Bill published one of his first books, targeting the plan in *Rights of Americans under the Constitution of the Federal Republic*, a book written because he felt people needed to know the powers of the government and the inherent “dangers to our system of government and our freedom.”⁶⁰ His second publication attacking the New Deal was

53 “Oklahoma to Sue U.S. for \$100,000,000,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, January 12, 1934, 2.

54 “Library to Host ‘Story Concert’ about Former Governor ‘Alfalfa Bill’ Murray,” *McAlester News-Capital* http://www.mcalesternews.com/apstorysection/local_story_064110923.html/resources_pri... (accessed April 19, 2007).

55 “Murray ‘Goes Native’ in Crude Farm Home,” *The New York Times*, July 7, 1935, 18; William H. Murray, *Memoirs of Governor Murray and True History of Oklahoma: Together with his Biography, Philosophy, Statesmanship, and Oklahoma History Interwoven*, vol. 3 (Boston: Meador Publishing Company, 1945), 10-11. [Hereafter cited as *Memoirs of Governor Murray*, vol. 3].

56 *Memoirs of Governor Murray*, vol. 3, 68.

57 *Memoirs of Governor Murray*, vol. 3, 125.

58 “Tucker Tower: Marietta, Oklahoma,” http://www.lasr.net/pages/city.php?Marietta&Oklahoma&City_ID=OK0507012&VA=Y&... (accessed April 19, 2007).

59 Bryant, 259.

60 William Murray, *Rights of Americans under the Constitution of the Federal Republic* (Boston: Meador Press, 1937), 90.

Uncle Sam Needs a Doctor.⁶¹ Murray's purpose in writing this book was that "Uncle Sam needs a doctor who knows the remedy isn't sedatives and shotguns; that civilization isn't made of mortar; and that human beings weren't intended for guinea pigs."⁶² Another book Alfalfa Bill penned, *The Finished Scholar*, although not specifically attacking the New Deal but including many references to it, was written "to supply the incompleteness of school textbooks and teachers who learned only the textbooks and to enable the high-school and college student to become a 'finished scholar.'"⁶³

Murray's later publications changed focus to concentrate on his religious views and racist views (Figure 6). Throughout his career, Murray held a basic southern viewpoint on the Negro people and the Jews, believing the "Negro gets his idea of morals, honor, integrity, and 'proper sense of propriety' from the white man, and, if he be one who wants to do right, follows these virtues. If left alone, where there be large numbers of his race, he will have none of these virtues."⁶⁴ Furthermore, Murray stated, "I do not want my country governed by a minority race. In this Republic there are places for all, even the Negro and the Jew, but not in *policy framing*."⁶⁵ Alfalfa Bill exhibited more respect for the Negroes, at least the ones who showed respect for him, than he did for the Jews.⁶⁶ For example, during his son Johnston Murray's administration as governor, a group of New York journalists sought Bill Murray to interview him to see what he had been up to over the years.⁶⁷ When the reporters from *Look Magazine* found Murray and identified themselves to him, Alfalfa Bill responded "*Look Magazine*, you say! You mean that goddamn nigger-lovin' Jew outfit?"⁶⁸ In response to the obvious slur, the reporter, who was Jewish, forcefully asserted, "I wouldn't write it for 10-million bucks."⁶⁹ Murray's last big publications were *Adam and*

61 Bryant, 266; *Uncle Sam Needs a Doctor*, 14.

62 *Uncle Sam Needs a Doctor*, 14.

63 William H. Murray, *The Finished Scholar* (Philadelphia: Dorrance and Company, 1941), 1.

64 William H. Murray, *The Negro's Place in Call of Race* (Tishomingo, OK: William H. Murray, 1948), 13. [Hereafter cited as *The Negro's Place in Call of Race*].

65 *The Negro's Place in Call of Race*, 11.

66 *The Negro's Place in Call of Race*, 26-27.

67 Martin Hauan, *He Buys Organs for Churches, Pianos for Bawdy Houses* (Oklahoma City: Midwest Political Publications, 1977), 45-46. [Hereafter cited as Hauan].

68 Hauan, 46.

69 Hauan, 47.

Cain, a bible interpretation, and a pamphlet titled *Christian Mothers* that he addressed to “Christian mothers (not to Communist or Anti-Christ women: they possess distorted morals and a propagandized mentality that dwarf body and soul); yea, to Christian mothers, who care for their own babies rather than to trust them to BABY SITTERS.”⁷⁰

On October 15, 1956, Alfalfa Bill passed away at the age of 86 due to health problems that had been ongoing, but his character and impact on Oklahoma will never be forgotten.⁷¹ In one of his books, Alfalfa Bill quoted Noah Webster who said, “‘Character is the aggregate of distinctive mental and moral qualities belonging to an individual or a race as a whole; it is the stamp of individuality impressed by nature, education, or habit; it is that which a person or thing really is.’”⁷² Alfalfa Bill was flashy and vibrant, stamped with strength of character that led him to stamp his own special place in Oklahoma history. William Henry David Murray wrote that, in history, “it is more important to know what ‘caused’ the war than who ‘won’ it; more important to know the people, than their rulers—to know the people’s character, degree of intelligence, social customs, codes of honor and integrity, their vices and virtues, family relations, morals and religions, who permitted the voting privileges and did they advance or retrograde.”⁷³ Through his publications, political campaigns, and terms in office, Alfalfa Bill advanced to become an Oklahoma legend. One reporter summed up this entertaining character by writing, “There is a saying in Oklahoma that the former Governor may offend sometimes, but he never bores.”⁷⁴

70 William H. Murray, *Christian Mothers* (Boston: Meador Publishing Company, 1950), 5.

71 “W.H. (Alfalfa Bill) Murray Dies; Ex-Governor of Oklahoma Was 86,” *The New York Times*, October 16, 1956, 33.

72 William H. Murray, *Adam and Cain* (Tishomingo, OK: William H. Murray, 1951), 137.

73 *The Finished Scholar*, 29.

74 *Uncle Sam Needs a Doctor*, 11.