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Victor E. Wickersham as the Greer County Clerk in 1929.

A FAVORITE SON OF MANGUM

By Dee Ann Ray
On Tuesday, March 15, 1988, Victor Wickersham, oldest member of the Oklahoma Legislature at the time, died. He was sworn into office on February 9, 1988, after winning a special election for Seat #60 in the Oklahoma House of Representatives. Wickersham won his last political campaign race by 211 votes. In the Democratic primary election, he faced several opponents but won easily by a big majority garnered mostly in his home county, Greer. His Republican opponent in the special general election for the seat was R. B. Cline. Wickersham got 2,167 votes to Cline's 1,956.

Wickersham's political career spanned six decades. He served nine terms of office in the United States House of Representatives, beginning in 1941; and four terms in the Oklahoma Legislature from 1971-1979, prior to his last election to office in 1988.

When asked about his health during the final election campaign, Wickersham replied, "I had a doctor examine me a few months ago, and he told me I could do anything a 60-year-old man or a 10-year-old mule could do." Wickersham's death was caused by a massive stroke and the following complications.

In September of 1984, this writer traveled to Mangum to interview Victor Wickersham. Many people thought Wickersham had already died by that time because little had been heard from him since his last term in the Oklahoma House. His wife of more than fifty years, Jessie, was ill and Wickersham had been taking care of her. She died July 14, 1984.

The interview was delightful. Wickersham was a gentleman and a marvelous host. He loved being interviewed again, and it was obvious that he still wanted to be involved in politics. As he relived his years in public service, his eyes were full of longing for the old days.

As a result of that visit, Wickersham included my sister and me on his mailing list. We received a copy of the newsletter he wrote after each trip to visit his relatives around the United States. He sent copies to everyone he thought would be interested. He always did like to travel, and he accepted every invitation that came his way.

On November 8, 1986, Victor Wickersham married Lorene Meason-Dennis of Bedford, Texas. She had been a widow for five years. She had three children, and Wickersham had four. His son, Galen Wickersham, served as best man. Following an extended tour, about which Wickersham wrote a newsletter, the couple was at home in Mangum. They did continue to travel. It was with his second wife's blessing that Wickersham decided to make the race for Oklahoma House Seat #60.

The following story was written in September of 1984 as a result of the personal interview with Victor Wickersham.

"I've always tried everything three times, at least, before I gave up," said Victor Eugene Wickersham, former Congressman from Oklahoma's sixth and seventh districts. "I believe that is why I was able to accomplish so many things for my district when I served in Congress. If I called a federal office regarding some matter and I was told no, I tried again and again, even if I had to wait a year until another appropriation. I usually was able to get the contract, industry, or job for my district."

Victor is most often remembered by citizens in his district because he knew so many people by face, name, and voice. His hobby is remembering names, a practice he began when he worked as deputy clerk in the Greer County Courthouse. His facility with faces and names won him many helpers in his campaigns for Congress and the Oklahoma Legislature. Of his 106 opponents for political office, he defeated
Rep. Wickersham behind a portrait he commissioned as a gift for Harry S. Truman. Larry Pendleton of Cordell was the artist.

ninety-nine and won re-election to the U.S. House of Representatives for nine terms or eighteen years. He spent eight years in the Oklahoma House of Represent­atives.

His theory that trying something three times usually wins success is validated by the fact that his third race for the U.S. Congress from the old seventh district of Oklahoma put him in the office he sought. Victor ran unsuccessfully for Congress in 1938, losing to incumbent Sam Massingale from Cordell. Since he had no automobile, Victor made that race on foot. He hitchhiked all over the southwestern part of Oklahoma and made a good showing in the field of candidates. He ran again in 1940 and by that time had a "Reo Flying Cloud" auto, which he drove relentlessly over the district. Again he lost to Congressman Massingale, who was a very popular member of the U.S. Congress. But Sam Massingale died unexpectedly on January 17, 1941 of complications following a short bout with the flu. Massingale's vacant seat was sought by a field of eleven candidates. Victor won the primary and the run-off and left for Washington, D.C. on April 1, 1941. Before he made that trip, he gave his old "Reo Flying Cloud" car, which was worn out from the campaign, to the American Red Cross to use in the World War II effort. He purchased a new car for his trip to Washington, where he was sworn into office on April 14, 1941.

Victor E. Wickersham was the son of Frank M. and Lillie Sword Wickersham. He was born at Lone Rock, Arkansas on the family homestead February 9, 1906. He was the second of eight children (six of the eight were still living at the time of this story). Morrell died at six months of age, and an older sister, Velma Husell, died in 1977. William Jefferson Wickersham, the third child, was Chief Clerk at the Oklahoma State Reformatory at Granite. Nina Elise is married to Herman S. Knight of Cordell. Helen married Paul Butterfield. (Nellie Jane and Ashley were the two other living Wickershams in 1984.)

The Wickersham family immigrated to the United States in the early 1700's. There is still a town in East Germany named Weckerheim, "Home of the Basket Weavers." Serving people through political office runs in the Wickersham family. Ambrose Wickersham, Victor's grandfather, was a County Clerk in Arkansas; and other Wickershams served in federal offices, including one U.S. Attorney General. Victor's father even envisioned political office for his second son, but Victor had no such aspirations until he began to help others campaign. The bug bit and Victor threw his hat into the ring.

Victor had a great sense of family history and recalled nearly his early growing years. He even related the ways his father paid the delivering doctor for each of the eight children. The first was paid for with five hundred fence rails. The second cost a dressed hog. The third earned the doctor a whole hind quarter of beef. For the fourth, the doctor received five hundred bales of fodder. The fifth cost one hundred pounds of Mayapple roots and twenty-five pounds of Ginsing roots dug from the ground. The elder Mr. Wickersham worked four days on the county roads to pay the doctor's poll tax for the sixth child. Victor's mother made uniforms for the doctor and nurses for the seventh child. Victor was selling Watkins goods and contributed some of them, to which his father added fresh Irish potatoes and sweet potatoes plus dried blackeyed peas, to pay for the eighth child.

Always enterprising, Victor went to work as a boy. In addition to doing chores at home, he began selling GRIT and CAPPER'S WEEKLY when he was six years old. He had to walk to town to pick them up, and he made only two cents a delivery; but, added to the family money, it helped. Later he began selling Watkins products door to door. "I always put the popular and easy products back in the box next to
my body and the more difficult sales up at the front," Victor related.

Shortly after Victor was born, the Wickersham family moved to Oklahoma, settling in various towns of Greer County, and finally Mangum. Victor continued working on the farm, as a janitor for three churches in Mangum, picking turkeys for seven cents each and hens for four cents each for a produce house, salting down cow hides for the same produce house, and doing anything else that contributed to the family income.

"One reason we came to Oklahoma was that my Grandfather Wickersham taught Ashley Wilson, age 19, to read and write. He used the old MCGUFFEY'S READER and BLUE BACK SPELLER. Later Wilson moved to Mangum and operated a general store and implement business. He encouraged us to move there," said Wickersham.

Victor's memories of growing up are rich with family gatherings, literary meetings, and church going. His family was close knit. He learned about hunting, trapping, and living from his uncles and grandfather as well as his father. Grandfather Wickersham taught the children how to spell and also to write in Spencerian penmanship. Although times were difficult financially, there was no feeling of poverty, for the entire family basked in the warmth of sharing what they had.

In Mangum, Victor and his older sister, Zelma, were placed in the same grade. When they graduated in 1923, Zelma was Valedictorian and Victor was Salutatorian out of the sixty-three graduates. "Zelma always studied harder and made the better grades. I came in second but studied less," said Victor, laughing.

Victor continued his selling career until he was appointed Deputy County Clerk and later Court Clerk of Greer County. He served in those offices from 1926 - 1935.

On June 30, 1929, Victor married Jessie B. Stiles. He sold himself the marriage license and put off paying for it until the next Monday when he got his paycheck.

Victor and Jessie had met when Victor was purchasing a suit. He was trying to make an impression on the Mangum folks who believed he was brokenhearted because a young lady whom he had dated for some time had become engaged to another young man. Victor took a different girl each night to the church revival that was in progress. Jessie was the girl for the eighth night. After he went through all sixteen girls and nights, he returned to Jessie. They dated every other night for 1½ years, became engaged, and married.

Jessie and Victor had four children. The oldest, Galen, designs Fisher Body interiors. LaMelba Sue is married to anything a 60-year-old man or a ten-year-old mule could do."
He answered his telephone.

Everett Lloyd Renberger, who owns a jewelry store in LaCrosse, Kansas. Nelda is married to Samuel L. Holston, Jr., of Richmond, Virginia. Mr. Holston represents Johnson Wax for four states in his area. The youngest son is Victor Wickersham, Jr., who is Assistant Director of the Aging Program in Phoenix, Arizona. Among the children, there are "twelve fine grandchildren and ten outstanding, cute great-grandchildren of whom we are proud."

Of Jessie, Victor said, "I never met a better Christian. We shared so many wonderful years. Jessie made a marvelous home for us. I miss her greatly."

While serving as Court Clerk of Greer County, Victor helped Congressman E. W. Marland campaign for Governor of Oklahoma. Marland then appointed Victor as Chief Clerk of the State Board of Affairs on February 1, 1935. Two years later, politics changed and Victor lost his job (governors were elected for only two years at that time).

Ready to work, Victor began moving houses where the oil companies were drilling near the State Capitol. He bought some of those houses from a man named Roy J. Turner and some from another man named Robert S. Kerr, both of whom later became governors of Oklahoma. Kerr also became U.S. Senator from Oklahoma.

At the same time Victor was moving houses, he was also selling insurance. He became the top salesman for his company in Oklahoma.

When Victor made his first race for Congress, he was not completely unknown. He had been making friends for years. He often acted as volunteer auctioneer at pie suppers and box suppers at schools throughout the area. He was always active in his Christian Church work, starting with Christian Youth Endeavor. He served faithfully in all types of civic activities. He was an active Rotarian, a Mason, a Modern Woodman of the World, a member of the Shriners, of the PTA, and a long list of other organizations. He often served as president of those groups.

Early on, Victor adopted a slogan that was to remain his during every political campaign: "Anytime I may be of service, phone, wire, or write," to which he later added "or see me." He always termed himself as his constituents' "best friend."

After hitchhiking in his first congressional race, Victor used Dr. G. Fowler Border's old ambulance for the second race. The siren made a great entrance note for each town.

During that race, the Mangum Drum and Bugle Corps accompanied Victor often, marching up and down the streets performing while volunteers aided Victor in handing out cards.

During World War II, Victor went
Hello, this is Victor Wickersham, your best friend.

Overseas frequently, always taking with him letters, photos, and messages from home for the boys of his district. From the earliest days of campaigning, Victor's constant companion was his camera. He took pictures of his constituents in uniform to bring home. He had his picture taken with dignitaries wherever he went. His files were full of historical photos taken around the world.

When Victor first went to Congress, the government paid for only one trip home each year per congressman. Now, congressmen are allowed eighteen trips home a year and can take staff or spouses with them. The salary of a congressman in 1941 was $7,500. The congressmen were allowed only one long-distance phone call and two wires a day. They had to pay their own air mail charges. Pushing for more phone and mail privileges earned Victor a photo and story in a LOOK magazine article one year with the mistaken headline that he wanted a bigger salary. "I only wanted more money to use for office expenses," said Victor. "I paid for the offices I kept in Oklahoma out of my own pocket, as well as the salaries to staff those offices. I also took my campaign expenses out of my own pocket, so I wasn't obligated to anyone or any group.

"People could always get hold of me in 2½ minutes. I kept three phones at home, eight in the office, and was accessible to twenty-eight phones in the cloakroom off the House floor," related Victor.

One of Victor's House committee chairmanships was the Military Appropriations Committee. Through his activities on that committee, military installations were brought to Altus, Frederick, and Burns Flat. Ft. Sill was expanded greatly through his efforts. "If I couldn't get them for my district, then I worked on the next priority, which was for Oklahoma," he stated.

Victor served in Congress during the administrations of Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman, Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, and Lyndon B. Johnson. In addition, he was acquainted with Presidents Nixon and Ford. He knew some of the Presidents when they were fellow congressmen.

Many people who live in Western Oklahoma remember their trips to Washington because Victor made them memorable. School children visiting in our nation's Capitol - if they were from Victor's district - were treated to lunch at his expense. He took them to the Congressional dining room and brought the Speaker of the House and other dignitaries to meet the touring Oklahomans. On days when Congress was not in session, Victor toured the groups in his car and his staff members' cars throughout Washington - even to Mount Vernon. When he took the young people and their teachers to the U.S. Mint, he always made a point of taking at least $100 in freshly printed bills - which he got from his personal bank account the day before. While tour members were watching the money being printed, Victor handed out "free samples" - $1.00 to each child. Other tour groups felt slighted and often questioned their guides, requesting some "free samples," too.

When Victor told that story, he laughed a great deal, and it was evident that he had enjoyed those tours. A large number of young Oklahomans carried home from Washington a vivid image of the importance of Washington in our nation's government. They remembered the smiling congressman from their district who told them to call him "Victor."

When Victor wasn't in Congress, he sold real estate very successfully in Washington and Oklahoma. He was always a good salesman for whatever product he promoted. He returned to insurance selling when he retired from Congress in 1965.

In 1971, politics again beckoned to Victor, and he served the next eight years in the Oklahoma House of Representatives from Greer County and part of Beckham County. He retired from that office only because he developed a severe allergy to smoke. So
many of the House members smoked in session and in committee that Victor’s tendency to contract pneumonia was a threat to his good health.

When questioned whether he missed politics, his eyes seemed to look far back on the many excitement-filled years of public service, and he said quietly with a tremor in his voice, “I miss it terribly!”

But then he quickly became the vibrant man he still was and said, “You know, people just don’t know how to get things done. I get lots of calls and letters from people asking me to help them make contact with their legislators, congressmen, or senators. I have a typewriter there in the office that I use everyday. I write letters and make phone calls at no cost to the people. I have always liked the feeling I get from helping people. It makes me feel good and useful.”

Victor remained true to the Democratic Party. He voted the party down the line, although he was not always in agreement with the party platform planks, he said.

“Our Congressman Glenn Lee English is doing a great job,” remarked Victor. “I keep in touch with him, and he is really serving this district well.”

Of politics in 1984, Victor said, “We need more horse traders in office. We need to shorten the sessions. The congressmen should make fewer trips home during the sessions and stay there to get the job done. I think they should finish up in ninety days. We need to streamline the government. I think that congressmen should spend three months each year overseas seeing how our foreign aid is spent. They should spend three months in their own districts seeing the people and talking with them. They should have three months with their families — there’s never enough time for the family. The final three months of the year should be spent in Washington in session.”

Victor also believed that there was too much foreign aid, which he said resulted in the United States being drawn into the politics and wars of too many foreign countries. He worried about the lack of competitive bidding, the long coffee breaks, and the high costs of materials bought by government, etc.

Enthusiasm was Victor’s secret ingredient. He never lost it through the years of public service. He attacked each problem presented with enthusiasm and the willingness to work until the goal was achieved.

“THE DAILY OKLAHOMAN used to make fun of my handshaking and remembering names, but I think that is the best way to campaign. You have to reach out to people. You have to be of service whenever you can and you have to be accessible to the people,” said Victor.

The tall, thin, then-retired congressman and state representative was well known wherever he went. He did remember people. His life was too full for one article. He is worthy of a book. His photo album overflowed, and his filing cabinets were full of materials concerning his public-service careers.

Victor was willing to try three times, at least, on any request he received for help. He served the City of Mangum on the Planning Board; he served his First Christian Church as an Elder. He stayed active, and he was always happy for you to write, wire, phone, or see him. He answered his telephone, “Hello, this is Victor Wickersham, your best friend.”

DEE ANN RAY well fits the designation “Renaissance woman” because she has a variety of interests. In addition to her work as director of the Western Plains Library Systems, she writes book reviews, stories, and researched articles.

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