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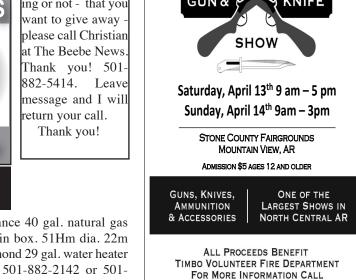
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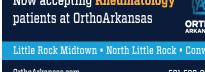






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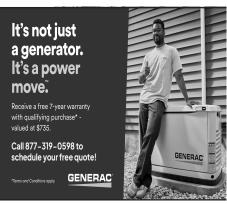


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History Minute

Joseph Taylor Kovinson By Dr. Ken Bridges - Professor of History, South Arkansas Community College South Arkansas Historical Preservation Society kbridges@southark.edu<mailto:kbridges@southark.edu>

Joseph Taylor Robinson had one of the shortest terms as governor in state history but perhaps had one of the most profound impacts. The Lonoke native, lawyer, one-time teacher, and son of a country doctor and Baptist minister was an idealist and determined to make the government serve the people.

Robinson had a long career of reform. After he was elected to the state House of Representatives in 1894 at the age of 22 to represent Lonoke County, he joined with reformers to support regulation of railroads within the state, which had been a matter of special importance to farmers fighting unfair hauling rates.

In 1902, Robinson ran for Congress. He overwhelmingly won with 89% of the vote. When he arrived in Washington, DC, the Arkansas Democrat was far in the minority. Nevertheless, he found a way to reach across the aisle and work with Republicans on reform legislation. He continued his fight against the railroads and supported laws against child labor. He became an increasingly popular figure in Arkansas, winning re-election four more times with at least 80% of the vote each time. In 1906, he supported passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act, which led to the creation of the Food and Drug Adminis-

tration and protected the safety of the nation's food and medicines. In early 1912, Robinson announced he was running for the Democratic nomination for governor. Gov. George Washington Donaghey was seeking a third two-year term. Robinson entered the race with a four-point platform to bring reform and efficiency to state government. He promised to establish a state banking department, enact anti-corruption legislation, promote efficiency in state spending, and to create a state budgeting committee. Donaghey had left much of the state unimpressed with his performance, and Robinson's energy and popularity won the nomination in the end. He swept to an easy victory in the general election that fall.

The year 1913 marked a great deal of upheaval Arkansas politics. Veteran U. S. Senator Jeff Davis died on January 3. One governor was leaving office and another was coming into office. Though his congressional term would not end until March, Robinson resigned his seat on January 14 in order to jump into his new post as governor and was inaugurated on January 16.

The legislature quickly acted on his reform proposals. The State Bank Department was created, which regulated commercial banks. The Arkansas Department of Labor was created to oversee working conditions and to compile data on the state's workforce. With more cars coming to Arkansas roads, Robinson also signed into law the Arkansas Highway Commission to oversee construction and spending on state highways.

Robinson also approved the state's first official flag, the familiar white and blue diamond design on a red field used today. In addition, he encouraged legislators to help fund the creation of hydroelectric dams across the state to bring electricity to the people. He enacted a new corrupt-practices law aimed at curbing graft by officials as well as creation of a prison oversight board. He also signed into law the state's first electric chair, which at the time was meant to be a more modern and more humane form of execution. He also enacted the first statewide alcohol licensing system.

Within a short time, Robinson accomplished his entire platform plus more reforms that transformed how the state operated. Legislators were so impressed that they elected him to fill the unexpired term of Jeff Davis in the Senate on January 28. Though honored by the appointment, Robinson stayed in office as governor for an additional six weeks to help guide the legislature. He resigned on March 10 after only two months as governor to return to Washington, DC, to serve in the Senate seat he would hold until his death in 1937.