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History Minute

Ozro Hadley

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

Reconstruction was a time of chaos, violence, corruption, and confusion in Arkansas. Politicians plotted against each other while lynchings and assassinations bloodied the landscape. In the midst of the intrigue, one man rose from relative obscurity in the legislature to catapult himself into the governor's office, Ozro Hadley.

Ozro Amander Hadley was born into a farming family in Chautauqua County, New York, in 1826, in the southwestern corner of the state. As his father's health declined, he took on more responsibilities of running the farm. Eventually, he started an insurance business. In 1855, he moved to Rochester, a small community in the southeastern portion of the Minnesota Territory to again sell insurance. He was elected as a Republican as Olmsted County auditor and re-elected several times.

Consumed with ambition, he saw an opportunity with the close of the Civil War and moved to Arkansas in 1865. He attempted to start a business, but the deep economic depression of postwar Arkansas, coupled with the embittered and disfranchised former Confederate population determined to boycott Reconstruction supporters like Hadley, doomed his enterprise from the start.

Hadley, like many other northern Republicans settling in the South, turned to politics. In 1868, with a new state constitution supporting Radical Reconstruction in place, Hadley ran for the state senate in a district that included Pulaski and White counties. He won easily and quietly rose to become president pro tempore of the Senate.

The new Radical Reconstruction government was beset by numerous problems. Though the government supported civil rights for the freedmen, it faced intense hostility from Confederate veterans who had lost their right to vote for taking up arms against the Union. Though Hadley and his fellow Radicals supported building new railroads and new schools and even a proposed new state university that would become the University of Arkansas, these propositions were expensive for a war-torn population that had lost everything.

As political and economic pressures increased, the Radicals increasingly turned on each other. They hurled insults and threats of impeachment at each other often. Gov. Powell Clayton became a particular target, and anti-Clayton forces schemed to get rid of him. The Arkansas legislature elected Gov. Powell Clayton to the U. S. Senate after Sen. Alexander McDonald had only served two years. He resigned as governor on March 4, 1871, to assume what would be his only term in the Senate.

At this point, the lieutenant governor, James M. Johnson, would have become governor. But he had fallen out with many of his fellow Radical Republicans as well. Hadley and his allies saw a valuable opening and schemed to keep Johnson out of the governor's office. All it took was a bribe. Secretary of State Robert White was encouraged to resign, and the lucrative, appointed position was offered to Johnson, who resigned the higher office with lower pay for the lower office with higher pay. With both the positions of governor and lieutenant governor vacant, Hadley was next in line of succession and became governor on March 17.

As governor, he had to deal with continuing riots, lynchings, and uprisings against the Radicals. A series of assaults against law officers and a posse in Pope County nearly resulted in an assault by state militia troops and the imposition of martial law in summer 1871. Working with local officials, Hadley appointed an interim sheriff while investigations continued, defusing the situation. Corruption and violence simmered during Hadley's administration. The appointment of a state geologist, William F. Roberts, at the high salary of \$15,000, caused an uproar among legislators, especially after Roberts continually wandered through the streets of Little Rock drunk.

The situation was compounded by the disastrous 1872 election in which the two main Republican factions fought tooth-and-nail across the state, stuffing ballot boxes, intimidating voters and destroying opposition ballots. Hadley did nothing to stop the electoral fraud, which resulted in an election in which there was no clear legal winner. After Elisha Baxter assumed the governorship in January 1873, Hadley quietly left the state to spend a year in Europe, avoiding the violent clashes between the Republican factions fighting over the governor's mansion.

When Hadley returned, he received a lucrative federal appointment as postmaster of Little Rock in 1874. As his appointment wound down, Hadley attempted to make a living as a farmer, buying plots in eastern Arkansas. Demoralized from his lackluster success and declining political fortunes, he left for the New Mexico Territory in 1879 to become a cattle rancher. At the age of 84, in 1910, Hadley left for Los Angeles to be near family. He died in California in 1915.

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