

Senator from Oklahoma

The Legislative Career of Hoosier Elmer Thomas

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Although he might not rank with Daniel Webster or Henry Clay, United States Senator John William Elmer Thomas was a leading national politician in his time. A native of Indiana, Thomas achieved his prominence early in the twentieth century, when he represented the state of Oklahoma first as a two-term, Democratic member of the U.S. House of Representatives and later as a four-term member of the Senate. His knack for formulating legislative solutions to the problems confronting Native Americans, farmers, veterans, and wage earners contributed to the duration of his success in politics.

To understand Elmer Thomas's significance, it is important to consider his political legacy, not only to his adopted state but also to the nation. Thomas arrived in Oklahoma on November 16, 1900—seven years to the day before the Sooner State was admitted to the union. Opening a legal practice in Lawton—one of the sites for the great land lottery opening the Indian land of southwestern Oklahoma in 1901—Thomas carried on a lucrative business in notarizing homesteaders'

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documents. He served as a leading figure in the development of Lawton and of nearby Medicine Park, where he later resided.

After Oklahoma achieved statehood in 1907, Thomas was elected to its legislature as a senator, and was involved in setting up state government and planning the construction of the capitol. As chairman of the Senate committee on appropriations, he oversaw the funding of numerous projects around the new state. Never one to back away from a challenge, Thomas opposed bond issues to finance a state highway system, instead opting for a “pay as you go” arrangement to match federal monies. He also secured a state fish hatchery for Medicine Park.

In 1920, Thomas sought election as the Sixth District Representative to the U.S. House of Representatives. Defeated in that campaign, he won the seat in 1922 and was re-elected in 1924. In 1926, Thomas won election to the first of his four terms in the Senate. During his time in the Senate, he chaired both the agriculture and Indian affairs committees, eventually rising to the level of third-ranking member of the senior legislative body.

As the representative of a predominantly rural state, Thomas emphasized agricultural issues. During the drought of the 1930s, he obtained funds for the creation of irrigation projects for western Oklahoma. In addition, he worked with the Oklahoma delegation to push for statewide flood control projects. Thomas also worked to secure favorable legislation for Native Americans—an important constituency in the state. Although his memoir does not reflect his significant contributions to Indian policy, Thomas co-authored the Oklahoma Indian Welfare Act of 1936, which brought the New Deal to Oklahoma Indians. As a member of the House, Thomas had also secured for members of the Kiowa, Comanche, and Apache tribes the title to oil royalties in the bed of the Red River.

With the onset of the Great Depression, Thomas became an outspoken proponent of inflation. As a young man, he had supported William Jennings Bryan and his free silver policies. Now Thomas argued that cheapening the dollar would cause prices to rise and, in turn, bring more money to farmers and wage earners. In 1933, Thomas successfully added an amendment to the farm bill which allowed Franklin D. Roosevelt to adjust the money supply.

Thomas also championed the causes of veterans and wage earners. When the Bonus Army of World War I veterans descended on Washington, D.C. in 1932, he met with representatives of the group on

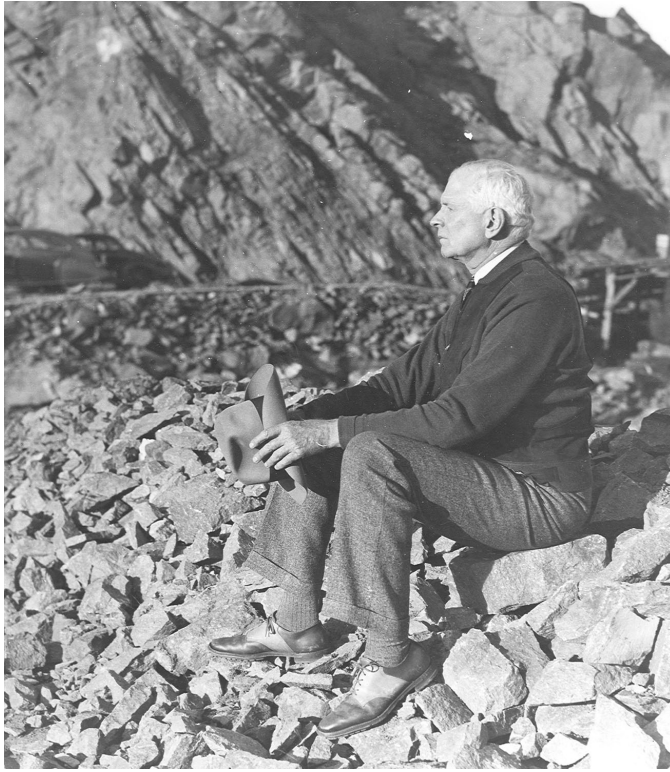
the Senate steps to discuss their frustrations and their desire for funding adjusted service certificates. Thomas recognized that he had no chance of securing the relief that the former soldiers desired, but he used the opportunity to state his reasons for supporting the measure. During his first term as a senator, Thomas also worked on behalf of independent oil producers to secure a tariff on imported oil. Although he knew he fought a losing battle against the Republican leadership, he successfully filibustered the measure in the last hours before that session adjourned to force the issue to the next session. While he held the Senate floor, he used a worn, greasy pair of overalls to emphasize dramatically the plight of the western oil workers. Indeed, Thomas's congressional papers contain thousands of pieces of mail reflecting his efforts to ease the problems of his constituents.

With the outbreak of war in Europe in 1939, Thomas led a House and Senate group on an inspection tour of military establishments throughout the U.S. and its territories. The 60-day, 30,000-mile trip convinced the legislators that the U.S. was ill-prepared for war. As chair of the military subcommittee of the appropriations committee, Thomas asserted that he would be liberal in funding preparedness programs. Thomas convinced the committee to release the funds needed to allow the War Department to make its own contracts and commitments, without requiring the department to file an approved budget estimate for each item.

One of the greatest challenges of Thomas's career involved the secrecy concerning development of the atomic bomb. As one of only a handful of legislators with knowledge of the Manhattan Project, Thomas was able to convince his Senate colleagues to fund the project without alerting them to the true nature of the appropriation. Thinking perhaps of this among other efforts, Thomas would later reflect that he found it much easier to pass large, complex legislation than small, simple bills.

Thomas's career on the military appropriations subcommittee continued after the war. As the head of a fact-finding committee investigating the use of Marshall Plan funds, Thomas met with heads of state throughout Europe. In a perceptive appraisal of post-war Europe, the senator remarked that some countries were devastated while others, namely Sweden and Switzerland, had actually profited from the war.

In 1950, seeking a fifth term in the Senate, Thomas was defeated in the Democratic primary by A. S. "Mike" Monroney, a congressman from Oklahoma's Fifth District. Although the senator had relied on his



Elmer Thomas, n.d.

In retirement, Thomas looked back on his Hoosier boyhood from the perspective of four terms in the U.S. Senate.

Courtesy Indiana Historical Society

seniority as a key issue in the campaign, it was obvious that Oklahoma had moved away from its rural beginnings. Monroney offered a fresh, young face while, to many voters (especially among the state's growing urban population), Thomas was an old man whose time had passed. Following his defeat, Thomas remained in Washington, D.C., and practiced law. In the late 1950s, he returned to Lawton, where he resided until his death on September 19, 1965.

After his retirement from public life, Thomas penned a memoir of his boyhood and his political career. For years, the memoir was effectively hidden in the senator's congressional papers, which came to be part of the Elmer Thomas Collection housed at the Carl Albert

Congressional Research and Studies Center at the University of Oklahoma. Known only to a few scholars, the memoir occasionally received a mention in a scholarly article or book. In 2005, historian Richard Lowitt and archivist Carolyn G. Hanneman reviewed the memoir and decided that it merited publication. After obtaining a publisher, they extensively edited the piece, omitting the early pages concerning Thomas's boyhood and coming of age in Indiana. The University of Oklahoma Press published *Forty Years a Legislator* in 2007. What follows are the unpublished pages detailing Thomas's early life in Indiana.

