

W.P. "BILL" ATKINSON: THE MAN WHO BUILT A CITY, LOST A STATE,
AND CHALLENGED A KING

By

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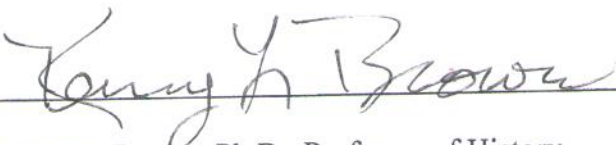
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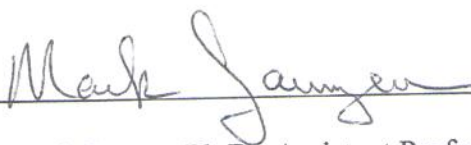
THESIS APPROVAL

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Abstract

The legendary public and private feud between W.P. “Bill” Atkinson and Edward King Gaylord is an intriguing and unusual story of powerful and wealthy men — once close associates and friends — who became enemies. This work verifies the origin of the animosity and the main areas of conflict between Atkinson and Gaylord: the land purchase that became Midwest City, the 1958 Democratic Primary, the gubernatorial election of 1962, and the libel suit filed in reaction to Gaylord’s vicious editorial attacks. This thesis concentrates upon the seminal event of the feud, incidents pivotal to escalation of the hostility, and legal actions which emanated from the antagonism. The bickering of two powerful and famous men can have tremendous ramifications, once such consequence was that the bitter conflict directly contributed to the election of the first Republican governor in Oklahoma’s history.

The first portion of the work examines Atkinson’s early life, careers, and personal associations to a level necessary to understand the experiences that eventually placed him in Gaylord’s crosshairs. A major segment of the composition reviews Atkinson’s 1958 and, more significantly, 1962 campaigns for governor. During both gubernatorial bids Atkinson’s candidacy was repeatedly condemned and vehemently attacked by Gaylord in *Daily Oklahoman* editorials. In 1962, believing that the governorship had been lost because of Gaylord’s malicious accusations Atkinson filed a \$10 million dollar libel suit against the publisher and his newspaper. This thesis concludes with an examination of activities undertaken by Atkinson’s legal and investigative teams as they prepared for a monumental legal battle against Gaylord’s formidable cadre of lawyers and allies. The legal action never reached trial stage because a U.S. Supreme Court ruling, in an

unrelated libel action involving the press and public figures, adversely affected Atkinson's basis for legal redress. The lack of legal resolution influenced him to retaliate against Gaylord in the most public, and personal, way possible: he launched a competing daily newspaper the *Oklahoma Journal*.

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A long and valuable internship at the Atkinson Heritage Center inspired me to pursue my interest and research into the life of Mr. Atkinson. I am sincerely grateful to the Rose State College Foundation Executive Director Cindy Mikeman and, especially, former AHC coordinator Carolyn Cuskey for their help and indulgence.

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Introduction

W.P. “Bill” Atkinson’s full, adventurous, and successful life ended in 1999, at the age of ninety-two.¹ During his lifetime he received many tributes that praised his accomplishments and contributions to Oklahoma, from building a city to playing key roles in improving the welfare of her citizens. Atkinson vied for an opportunity to become governor in the Democratic Primary of 1958 and became his party’s nominee in 1962. Several books and academic papers mention his political aspirations and, invariably, note that he was defeated by the state’s first Republican governor. Atkinson’s accomplishments and political battles have been well-documented and will be mentioned in this work’s chapter one literature review. However, this thesis accentuates Atkinson’s decades-long and bitter conflict with *Oklahoman* publisher Edward King Gaylord and elucidates the immense ramifications produced by the bickering between two powerful and famous men.

Over fifty years ago, the public sparring of these two titans developed into a topic of provocative conversation and conjecture among many Oklahomans, yet most never knew any details beyond those reported in the newspapers. This work verifies the origin of the animosity and the main areas of conflict between Atkinson and Gaylord: the land purchase that became Midwest City, the 1958 Democratic Primary, the gubernatorial election of 1962, and the libel suit filed in reaction to Gaylord’s vicious editorial attacks. It delivers substantive evaluations of events and people related to the legendary fracas. Finally, conclusions are reached about the significance of the conflict to the individuals and to Oklahoma history.

¹ “Midwest City Founder Dies at Age 92,” *Oklahoman*, 21 March 1999, 497.

Atkinson endured poverty and devastating loss as a child growing up in Carthage, Texas. Undeterred by his tragic beginnings, young Atkinson secured menial jobs with local newspapers which provided him with indispensable skills and helped in the formation of characteristics essential to his intrepid approach to life. Chapter two of this thesis explores Atkinson's early life and subsequent occupations as a journalist, university professor, realtor, and home developer. It describes momentous actions related to his creation of Midwest City and sets the stage for his first foray into state politics in 1958. The most meaningful aspect of this chapter is the revelation of incidents paramount to the instigation of his legendary battle with Gaylord. Chapter three examines Atkinson's campaign as the Democratic nominee for governor in 1962 and the venomous editorial assaults levied by Gaylord against his candidacy. He deemed Gaylord's accusations to be libelous and filed a lawsuit against the publisher and his newspaper. The resultant complex legal actions and extensive investigative efforts commenced by both parties are summarized and discussed. The final chapter exposes the zealous activities undertaken by Gaylord allies to gain advantage over Atkinson and his associates in the protracted legal battle, and examines the unrelated U.S. Supreme Court decision that brought an unceremonious end to litigation. This work concludes with Atkinson's challenge to Gaylord's journalistic omnipotence by founding a competing daily newspaper, the *Oklahoma Journal*, and describes the uneasy tolerance that existed between the two foes until Gaylord's death in 1974.

Through extensive research I became aware of the paucity of materials related to the Atkinson-Gaylord relationship. Atkinson's own personal documents, correspondence and commemorations are the preponderance of primary sources utilized in my research.

Therefore, this work is appreciably from Atkinson's personal perspective and recollections of events.

Chapter 1: Review of Literature and Background

Authors and academics have tended to investigate only the few subjects associated with the creation of a city or the gubernatorial pursuits of others in their limited exploration and interpretation of W.P. Bill Atkinson's life. The works of James Crowder and Susan Lee feature Atkinson's crucial role in the development of Midwest City. Notable historians Wayne Fisher Young, Billy Joe Davis, and other respected authors examined Atkinson's gubernatorial campaigns in 1958 and 1962, and offered their assessments of events and opinions of his inability to prevail in those elections. Few authors have mentioned the bitter feud between Gaylord and Atkinson and no one, other than Martin Hauan, expounded upon the enmity beyond a superficial reference. Existing historiography on Atkinson tends to be homogenous with no significant differences in either information or conclusion. My thesis presents Atkinson as the principal character in the events under examination and seeks to establish new scholarship and impart original information about both his political involvements and, most significantly, his complex relationship with Gaylord. However, existing scholarly works provide insight into Atkinson's political endeavors and his much-celebrated land development and also serve as foundation for the story which follows this chapter.

The first work illuminating Atkinson's role in creating Midwest City is "More Valuable than Oil: The Establishment and Development of Tinker Air Force Base, 1940-1949" written by Tinker chief historian James L. Crowder. The book chronicles the inception and early growth of the aeronautical facility now known as Tinker Air Force Base. Although the narrative's primary purpose is to explain how the base came to

realization, it also provides understanding of the circumstances prevalent during Atkinson's acquisition of the property which, ultimately, became Midwest City.¹

Crowder recounted an October 1940, Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce meeting which organized a trust to "fund future property acquisition for the city's industrial development." Expected national defense expansion precipitated the chamber's efforts to secure an aviation facility. Additionally, procurement of real estate by the trust intended to serve as a preemptive measure against outsider profiteering.²

Crowder described Gaylord's use of his significant influence to assure that Oklahoma City's defense facility would result in an air depot instead of a mere airplane factory. Through his city newspapers, Gaylord kept Oklahomans both informed of the city's aspirations and motivated to support those efforts. "More Valuable" contends that only a select few individuals actually knew the behind-the-scenes activities to promote the city as the preferential site for the coveted facility and, further, that the chamber elite sought to stem rumors and supposition because they feared opportunists would drive-up land prices.³

Anticipation of an aeronautical facility in the state created a rush by all manner of fortune hunters to amass allotments surrounding the probable site. Crowder avoided judgment on Atkinson's method for divining the exact location for the proposed facility, and simply stated that he worked his way into "Gaylord's inner circle at the chamber" in order to become privy to confidential information. The author concluded, as have other

¹ James L. Crowder, "More Valuable than Oil: The Establishment and Development of Tinker Air Force Base, 1940-1949," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* (Fall 1992).

² Crowder, "More Valuable," 229-30.

³ Crowder, "More Valuable," 232-3.

historians, that Atkinson's land acquisition caused an irreparable fracture between himself and his once close ally, Gaylord.⁴

Building upon Crowder's work, Susan M. Lee wrote "The Social and Cultural History of Midwest City Oklahoma: 1941-1959," in 1996. It examines Atkinson's success as the developer-builder of Midwest City and adds context for his quarrel with Gaylord. Written predominately as tribute to the establishment of Midwest City, the opus painstakingly describes how the city came to be, highlighting notable participants, providing time-lines of events, and listing milestones in its founding and formation.⁵

Lee described how the founding of the city yielded not only great prominence and honor but also an equal measure of suspicion and disdain to the town patriarch. The author explicated the connection of Atkinson's involvement with the Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce to a lasting, and antagonistic relationship with one of Oklahoma City's most influential people, Gaylord. After he established himself as a "fair-haired boy" of the inner circle, Atkinson quickly realized the supreme decisive power of Gaylord.⁶ Lee claimed that the chamber director Stanley Draper and his assistant, Jack Hull, had exclusive access to precise details and governmental intent regarding the location of the purposed air depot installation. This statement supports Atkinson's claim that he had not benefitted from any insider information gleaned from any chamber member or committee meetings he attended. The author contended that Draper's

⁴ Crowder, "More Valuable," 234-5.

⁵ Susan M. Lee, "The Social and Cultural History of Midwest City, Oklahoma, 1941-1959," (MA thesis, Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1996). Lee utilized information regarding Atkinson from her thesis for an article titled "William P. "Bill" Atkinson: The Father of Midwest City, Oklahoma," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* 77 (Fall 1999).

⁶ Lee, "The Social and Cultural History," 6-7.

displeasure with Midwest City (and Atkinson) stemmed from what he viewed as a “fragmentation and duplication of governments, city services, and taxes.” Draper believed any expansion bordering Oklahoma City must be under the city’s jurisdiction. Lee cited that Draper “promoted Tinker Field for the best interests of Oklahoma City, not for W.P. Atkinson,” and that view contributed to the larger municipality’s attempts to annex Midwest City throughout the 1950s.⁷

Lee gave a sympathetic account of Atkinson’s foray into the political arena and added emphasis to the accusations of his powerful critics. In both the 1958 and 1962 governor’s races, Gaylord used his daily broadsheets to inflict insult and injury upon Atkinson’s candidacy with accusations of illegal campaign finance, fraud, and deception. Lee linked Atkinson’s failure to obtain the state’s highest elected office with his pivotal decision to circumvent Draper and Gaylord as he planned his fortune-making building of a city.⁸

In 1980, Hugh Cosby edited *People of Midwest City*, a biographical history of the city’s outstanding residents. *People* delivers an opinion, divergent from the conclusions of Lee and Crowder, indicating that Atkinson’s use of Gaylord’s own editorial as evidence to the state legislature that Oklahoma City should not be allowed to annex Midwest City became the act which “drove the final nail, and put Atkinson in deep and permanent contravention with Gaylord.”⁹

⁷ Lee, “The Social and Cultural History,” 10, 18, 118.

⁸ Lee, “The Social and Cultural History,” 33-6.

⁹ Hugh E. Cosby, ed. *People of Midwest City* (Moore Oklahoma: Cosby Publishing, 1980), 7.

Sunbelt Cities: Politics and Growth Since World War II, written in 1983, is a compilation of essays examining post WWII population explosions in twelve southern metropolitan areas of the United States.¹⁰ This work provides excellent insight into the insecurity prevalent in Oklahoma City leadership which drove attempts to annex Midwest City. Editor, and contributing author, Richard Bernard supplied discernment into both Gaylord's permeating influence and the rationale behind attempts to annex Midwest City in his article "Oklahoma City: Booming Sooner." The author illuminated Gaylord's extraordinary ability to influence public opinion through his newspapers, radio, and television outlets. Oklahoma City's historical predisposition toward a conservative approach to politics, religion, and culture was reinforced by Gaylord's front-page editorials which "denounced liberalism in all alleged forms and set the political tone of the city and state."¹¹ Additionally, Bernard indicated that the Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce, led by managing director Stanley Draper, had a proactive agenda of territorial expansion as early as 1943. Draper feared that growth and expansion in Midwest City could, eventually, restrict Tinker's flight patterns and, thus, endanger future growth at the facility or jeopardize the existence of the air base.¹² In contrast to Lee's assertion, Bernard suggested that Draper's efforts to appropriate Midwest City were founded in the belief that such action was required to protect the economic welfare of Oklahoma City, by insuring the survival of the air base.

¹⁰ Richard M. Bernard and Bradley Robert Rice, eds., *Sunbelt Cities: Politics and Growth Since World War II* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), 1.

¹¹ Richard M. Bernard, "Oklahoma City: Booming Sooner," in *Sunbelt Cities*, 215-6.

¹² Bernard, "Oklahoma City: Booming Sooner," in *Sunbelt Cities*, 214, 221.

Billy Joe Davis presented perceptive observations of Atkinson's first foray into the political arena with his work, "J. Howard Edmondson: A Political Biography," which focused solely upon the civic career of the former state administrator.¹³

At thirty-two years of age, Edmondson's youth and relatively brief experience in public service were characteristics his detractors and rivals sought to exploit.

Edmondson turned the tables on Atkinson when he underscored that reforms were usually accomplishments of youthful leadership, and advocated constituents preference for a young governor "obligated to them rather than an older governor obligated to the politicians." He cited Atkinson (at that time fifty-one years of age) as a prime example of someone handpicked to seek the office by the state's powerful political elite and, particularly, by sitting Governor Raymond Gary.¹⁴

Davis identified two significant reasons why Edmondson won the democratic nomination over Atkinson. First, he developed an "energetic platform advocating efforts to wipe out corruption and dishonesty, efficiency in county government through fundamental reform, equal representation through reapportionment of the legislature, and enterprises seeking new industry and promoting prosperity in agriculture." The second, and more important, Edmondson's youth, natural good-looks, confidence, and oratory skill resonated with television viewers, especially females. To his detriment, Atkinson laid-out no substantive solutions for issues the state faced, and in televised debates he seemed awkward and stage-struck before the viewing audience."¹⁵

¹³ Billy Joe Davis, "J. Howard Edmondson: A Political Biography" (PhD diss., Lubbock: Texas Tech University, 1980).

¹⁴ Davis, "J. Howard Edmondson," 1, 9, 26, 28-9, 31.

¹⁵ Davis, "J. Howard Edmondson," 9, 11, 15-6, 21, 44.

Davis focused on how the contentious run-off period during the summer of 1958 produced the biggest scandal of the election. According to Edmondson, his opponent deliberately “was planning a campaign based on smear and character assassination, (and) petty politics.” He accused Atkinson, and his political organization of forgery and circulation of fictitious campaign pamphlets. The author explained Atkinson’s response to the indictments as a “shifting of blame” to Edmondson’s publicity manager, Leland Gourley, and *Oklahoman* publisher, E.K. Gaylord.¹⁶

David Dary’s *The Oklahoma Publishing Company’s First Century: The Gaylord Family Story*, is a flattering account of Gaylord’s life, family, and media empire. This publication references Atkinson and his two failed bids for governor in a dismissive manner and stresses the repeated repudiation of his candidacy by the *Oklahoman*’s front page editorials. Dary also reminded readers that, in 1958, Atkinson had purportedly sent out a “dodger” pamphlet designed to make voters believe Edmondson sought to reduce legislative seats through reapportionment. Conspicuously absent in Dary’s book is any mention of the subsequent libel lawsuit that followed Gaylord’s scathing editorials in the 1962 election.¹⁷

In 1964, Wayne Fisher Young examined the political events which led to the election of the Sooner State’s first GOP chief executive in his dissertation entitled, “Oklahoma Politics: With Special Reference to the Election of Oklahoma’s First Republican Governor.” Young investigated how “a predominately one-party, Democratic, state since statehood” experienced extraordinary influences which resulted

¹⁶ Davis, “J. Howard Edmondson,” 41, 48, 50-3.

¹⁷ David Dary, *The Oklahoma Publishing Company’s First Century: The Gaylord Family Story* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Publishing Co., 2003), 109-10.

in a victory for the minority party. To date, this work is the most extensive study of Atkinson's participation in the elections of 1958, and 1962.¹⁸

Young explained that, beginning in the early 1950s, Americans experienced a period of political uncertainty which led to an upsurge in votes cast for Republican candidates in presidential, congressional, and gubernatorial contest. This political doubt resulted from the United States entry into the unpopular Korean War and the ensuing national inflation. Two consecutive GOP presidential victories (for Eisenhower), starting in 1952, "probably broke many Oklahomans of the habit of voting the straight Democratic ticket and they unquestionably generated increased Republican Party activity in the state."¹⁹

The author concluded that in addition to the national voting trend, Oklahoma's governor election had two significant "short-run" factors that assured Bellmon's victory in 1962: campaign issues and candidate personalities. He further explained, "When there is conflict between party preference and one or more of the short-term factors, this leads to a more equivocal decision and to split-ticket voting or to staying at home on Election Day." To bolster his hypothesis, Young recalled incidents of the previous gubernatorial race of 1958. He concluded that Atkinson represented the status quo, thus leading to his failure to obtain his party's nomination. Many voters believed him to be a rich man who tried to buy the office and someone who had no real political expertise or heartfelt call to civic service. In contrast, Young reckoned that Edmondson's platform of positive reforms, his compelling personality, and command of a television audience

¹⁸ Wayne Fisher Young, "Oklahoma Politics: With Special Reference to the Election of Oklahoma's First Republican Governor" (PhD Diss., University of Oklahoma, 1964), 4, 7.

¹⁹ Young, "Oklahoma Politics," 29-31, 34.

led to his victory. However, midway through Edmondson's term in office many citizens became disenchanted and dissent between rural and urban constituents became apparent. The governor alienated many through his reapportionment and highway petitions. Unfortunately for Atkinson, widespread disappointment in Edmondson's administration carried-over to the subsequent election and contributed to the end of political domination by Democrats.²⁰

The author cited the large number of candidates (eleven) in the Democratic Primary as an indicator of "fragmented party control" in 1962. Initially, former governor Raymond Gary led the pack of competitors with an anti-Edmondson and rural-oriented platform which advocated no new taxes. In the first primary, "instead of voting their own preferences, many voters were trying to guess who had the best chance to defeat Gary."²¹

Atkinson emerged as the only candidate equal to the task; he witnessed a transformation in public opinion toward him in the four years since his failure to obtain the nomination in 1958. He formulated a substantive stance on issues, advocated a penny tax increase, attracted "urban-progressives," and touted his business prowess. His *Build Oklahoma* theme resonated well with supporters hopeful for higher wages and greater job opportunities. The Midwest City builder garnered sufficient endorsement to extend the contest into a run-off with Gary. Two important candidates vanquished in the primary, Preston Moore and George Nigh, merged their organizations with Atkinson's and, for three weeks, the trio traversed the state assailing Gary with attacks on his person

²⁰ Young, "Oklahoma Politics," 2, 184, 201-205, 208.

²¹ Young, "Oklahoma Politics," 212-5, 221.

and platform. Senator Robert S. Kerr, unwilling to alienate rural constituents, gave “quiet support” to the Atkinson movement and worked clandestinely through his associates stationed in all seventy-seven counties.²²

Young attributed Atkinson’s victory over Gary in the run-off to several factors, two of which later proved “to be among his biggest liabilities in the general election campaign.” The candidate’s support of a one-cent tax hike and his condemnation of his opponent during the primary run-off became divisive issues. Gary’s subsequent refusal to endorse his adversary perpetuated the divide between the rural and urban factions of the Democratic Party and, although significant, was not the sole contributor to Atkinson’s defeat.²³

Candidate personality extensively influenced the 1962 election and contributed to the Republican victory. Many viewed Bellmon as an untainted commodity in Oklahoma politics. His rugged appearance and humble personality were in perfect harmony with his pledge to eliminate waste, graft, and corruption. In contrast, many deemed the always debonair Atkinson to be disingenuous, smug, and cold, even though he improved considerably from the prior election.²⁴

Bellmon benefitted from the lack of a printed platform since “he ignored or disavowed portions of the Republican Party platform that might alienate large numbers of Democrats.” Atkinson suffered a great disadvantage because his opponent’s broad and transitory programs were almost impossible to attack; instead, he ineffectually chose

²² Young, “Oklahoma Politics,” 216, 229-30, 281-3. Robert S. Kerr; a successful oilman and Oklahoma Governor 1943-1947, U.S. Senator 1948-his death in 1963, is considered one of the state’s most politically powerful citizens of that era.

²³ Young, “Oklahoma Politics,” 288, 294.

²⁴ Young, “Oklahoma Politics,” 296-301.

to fire his salvos toward the GOP national platform. Further, he declared that publisher Gaylord, who had repeatedly deprecated him throughout the contest, dominated and controlled the Republican candidate. Ultimately, the “short-run” factors involving campaign issues and candidate personalities resulted in a victory for Bellmon who, with 55.2% of the total ballots cast, became the state’s first Republican governor.²⁵

High-profile defense attorney and political scholar Stephen Jones wrote *Oklahoma Politics in State and Nation: Volume I, 1907-1962*, a retrospective survey detailing the rise and fall of the state’s political parties and leaders through a variety of contests from statehood until the time of its publication in 1974. Jones summarized Atkinson’s defeat in two gubernatorial elections and explained the underlying factors which facilitated the candidates defeat in each match.²⁶

In agreement with Davis and Young, Jones concurred that Atkinson soon emerged as the man to beat in 1958. He was viewed as one of the “traditional elements” of the state’s long-dominant Democratic Party, and benefitted from the support of Oklahoma’s anti-liquor contingent, which were significant in number and influence.²⁷

A pronounced change in the Oklahoma political climate became evident during the 1958 competition when a relatively unknown candidate defeated Atkinson. Oklahoma voters had grown dissatisfied with many years of static Democratic hegemony and wanted something different from the “old guard” faction. Voters were not yet disposed to make the radical change to a Republican state administrator but

²⁵ Young, “Oklahoma Politics,” 307, 316, 321, 323.

²⁶ Stephen Jones, *Oklahoma Politics in State and Nation: Volume I: 1907-1962* (Enid, OK: Haymaker Press, 1974).

²⁷ Jones, *Oklahoma Politics in State and Nation*, 215.

many perceived Edmondson to embody their desire to transition the state into a new political era of reform.²⁸

Four years later, Edmondson left office with a decidedly fragmented state party and a citizenry disillusioned by the lack of governmental progress. His tenure had been fraught with battles with the rural-dominated legislature, which resulted in an insurrection within his own party. The most divisive clash had been disagreement on the issue of reapportionment of the legislature.²⁹

In 1962, former governor Gary and previous Democratic candidate Atkinson quickly emerged from the pack as leading contenders. Results from the Democratic Primary revealed Gary to be the top competitor but Atkinson, with a respectable percentage of the vote, forced the leader into a run-off. A coalition of former aspirants rallied around his campaign and, three weeks later, Atkinson achieved a run-off victory many had thought impossible. However, in the general election, Bellmon the Republican nominee easily won the state's highest office. In difference to Young and Davis' conclusion of why Atkinson witnessed defeat, Jones opined that Atkinson lost because "he was not the candidate of the urban voter and he most assuredly was not the candidate of the rural voter."³⁰

James R. Scales and Danney Goble provided a broad overview to politics in the Sooner State in *Oklahoma Politics: A History*. The authors furnished insight into the uniqueness and peculiarities of Oklahoma's political attitudes and practices. Their work

²⁸ Jones, *Oklahoma Politics in State and Nation*, 217-8.

²⁹ Jones, *Oklahoma Politics in State and Nation*, 223-4.

³⁰ Jones, *Oklahoma Politics in State and Nation*, 234-5, 237, 246-7.

chronicles the shift in Oklahoma politics from a Democratic Party strong-hold to a Republican-receptive populace. This book provides excellent assessments of the 1958 and 1962 governor's campaigns and offers beneficial evaluations of the participants.³¹

Scales and Goble concurred that Atkinson had been viewed as the "chosen one" of the Democratic Party early in 1958 and, as such, received the endorsement of many influential partisans. He had the benefit of a sitting governor (Gary) from his party who held favorable sway among the rural voters and he enjoyed ties with the state's economic and political elite, cultivated through his triumphant creation of Midwest City. To his disadvantage, Atkinson feared controversy, skirted the issues, and never delivered a definitive platform to the voters. His appeal suffered further damage with the perception that his performance before constituents was bland and ineffectual. The front-runner's lackluster performance became even more visible when the business of common place politics witnessed an upheaval from an unlikely source; the candidacy of Edmondson. The new contender quickly unleashed an advantageous modern political arsenal that included constituent polling, frequent television addresses, a professionally packaged campaign, and an appealing personal appearance. Edmondson's high-profile approach contributed to his victory while it underscored Atkinson's shortcomings.³²

The authors concluded that Oklahoma politics as usual underwent a momentous disruption between the gubernatorial elections of the late '50s and early '60s. In 1962, numerous prominent Democrats threw their hats into the ring hopeful of re-creating a successful crusade similar to Edmondson's impressive *prairie fire* campaign.

³¹ James R. Scales and Danney Goble, *Oklahoma Politics: A History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982).

³² Scales and Goble, *Oklahoma Politics: A History*, 308, 311.

Atkinson, more sagacious than the last time he ran, reversed most of his previous strategies. He no longer evaded issues to remain uncontentious and proposed a viable program. Former Governor Gary was considered the frontrunner and hands-down favorite to be victorious in the Democratic Primary. Battles between the current Governor Edmondson, and the state legislature, pitted the interests of the rural sections of the state against those of the urban areas and the Democratic Party split into rural and anti-rural factions. The rancorous conflict filled voters with cynicism and distrust which undoubtedly carried over into the primary.³³

Atkinson and Gary were forced into a run-off primary and sparred intensely. The resultant tension and acrimony created during the campaign caused an irreparable gulf between democratic supporters on both sides. Although Atkinson won his party's appointment, he could neither mend the fracture in the party nor secure the support of Gary's voters. The Republican nominee, Bellmon, predictably won the executive office because he exploited his image of being the "untarnished newcomer" who stood above the fray and promised no new taxes. The authors concluded that Bellmon was victorious because "no candidate was more appropriate for the Republican effort and none was better suited to capitalize upon Democratic discontent."³⁴

Oklahoma's Governors, 1955-1979: Growth and Reform, examines both the people and the events central to the elections 1958 and 1962. Contributing author Leroy Hawkins stated that Atkinson's prompt focus upon choice voter blocs and early campaigning catapulted him into the position of front-runner early in 1958. However,

³³ Scales and Goble, *Oklahoma Politics: A History*, 307, 326-9.

³⁴ Scales and Goble, *Oklahoma Politics: A History*, 330-1.

after announcing his candidacy, Edmondson rapidly became a formidable rival and captivated the voters with his enigmatic persona and *Big Red E* grassroots crusade. Edmondson ultimately won the nomination because of his cleverly ambiguous platform which appealed to both wet and dry and rural and urban constituents. Atkinson's hard-liner stance on prohibition enforcement, coupled with his tepid image, could not overcome Edmondson's *prairie fire* campaign.³⁵

In context of the 1962 contest, author Carolyn Hanneman proffered that state finances and reapportionment were the chief issues in the election. Atkinson's proposal of a one-cent tax increase to assuage the state's burden proved unpopular. In accord with Young, Scales and Goble, Hanneman cites the fracture within the Democratic Party as a contributing factor, but featured Gaylord's editorial denigration of Atkinson, in tandem with his endorsement of Bellmon as most significant to his defeat.³⁶

James Milligan and L. David Norris provided supplementary scholarship in *The Man on the Second Floor: Raymond Gary*; a study of the former governor, his time in office, and recollections of his campaign experiences. In 1962, pundits promptly dubbed Gary the front-runner as he sought to become Oklahoma's first former governor to reclaim office. Gary recalled later in life that he feared being designated the leader, because he believed the label made him a target for assault from his fellow competitors. The former state executive based his platform on three key concerns: efficient and

³⁵ Leroy W. Hawkins, "James Howard Edmondson, 1959-1963," in *Oklahoma Governors, 1955-1979: Growth and Reform*, ed. LeRoy Fischer (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Historical Society, 1985), 86-9.

³⁶ Carolyn G. Hanneman, "Henry Louis Bellmon, 1963-1967," in *Oklahoma Governors, 1955-1979: Growth and Reform*, ed. LeRoy Fischer (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Historical Society, 1985), 157-8.

stable government without a tax increase, reapportionment in accordance with the national congress, and resolution of issues in road construction, welfare, and education.³⁷

Results from the May 1 primary indicated Gary received 176,525 votes to Atkinson's 91,182. Unable to prevail by a sufficient margin, the leader and his closest competitor faced a run-off. In a shocking turn-of-events, Atkinson beat his opponent by a margin of only 449 votes. Subsequently, Gary received information which claimed voting machines in Tulsa had been rigged by Atkinson campaign workers. Infuriated, he believed the nomination had been stolen and demanded a recount. Allegations of voter fraud were never substantiated, the results were confirmed, and Atkinson became certified as the democratic nominee on June 1, 1962.³⁸

After Gary's defeat, his campaign workers were unwilling to support the Atkinson crusade. They resented the lies and accusations levied during the interval between primaries and Atkinson's admission that he wanted to be governor "for the honor of it." The former governor refused to endorse Atkinson because of strong disagreement with the candidate's stance on a tax increase and reapportionment. He added that he had no inclination to shake hands and forgive lies. Milligan and Norris chose to ignore other contributing factors and claimed that, ultimately, Atkinson's defeat resulted from the rift among the Democrats which produced circumstances favorable to the election of a Republican governor.³⁹

³⁷ James C. Milligan and L. David Norris, *The Man on the Second Floor: Raymond Gary*, (Muskogee: Oklahoma Heritage Association, 1988), 192-4, 197.

³⁸ Milligan and Norris, *The Man on the Second Floor*, 198-9.

³⁹ Milligan and Norris, *The Man on the Second Floor*, 200-2.

Bob Burke's *Good Guys Wear White Hats: The Life of George Nigh* offers the former governor's perspective of the Democratic primary of 1962. Nigh related in retrospect, "I probably would not have voted for myself." Reportedly, he did not want to run for the office at that time because he believed the likely victor for the Democratic nomination would be either Atkinson or Gary. Nigh also sensed the odds to be against him, the public viewed him as a member of Edmondson's "fresh faced team" that had disenchanted voters.⁴⁰

Nigh's campaign strategy mirrored that of his rivals: Atkinson, Preston Moore, and Fred Harris. The four considered Gary to be the leader in the primary and believed it imperative that one of the other contenders be the second candidate in a run-off capable of winning the nomination with the backing of the urban vote. The author reasoned that Atkinson realized the party's nomination through a transformation of his public persona to that of an "elder statesman of the Democratic Party" and a man devoted to serving Oklahoma's interests in his senior years.⁴¹

In 2008, former Senator Fred Harris wrote a personal, yet predominantly political, retrospect of his life in *Does People Do It?* The senator humorously mused "I was not, as it turned out, the only Democrat who thought he heard the voice of the people urging him to run for governor of Oklahoma in 1962." Harris professed that out of all the opposition, W.P. Bill Atkinson proved to be the most formidable.⁴²

⁴⁰ Bob Burke, *Good Guys Wear White Hats: The Life of George Nigh* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Heritage Association, 2000), 95. Nigh served as Oklahoma's lieutenant governor in 1958, 1966, 1970, and 1974, and was elected governor in 1978 and 1982.

⁴¹ Burke, *Good Guys Wear White Hats*, 96-7.

⁴² Fred Harris, *Does People Do It?* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008), 54.

Scant information is supplied in Harris' remembrance about his, or Atkinson's, gubernatorial bids. However, Harris contributed intriguing information about Senator Kerr's influence over Atkinson and, by extension, his campaign. Kerr, a "militant teetotaler and a former president of the Oklahoma Baptist Convention," once apprised Harris on the advantages gained from Christian voters because of his anti-liquor stance. In that same meeting he said, "Fred, if I could do it without hurting you or without it hurting me, I would like to see you governor." Harris later realized the duplicity of that remark because the senator used his prestige to discreetly promote Atkinson's nomination. Presumably, Kerr furtively sponsored Atkinson, and not Harris or any other Democratic contender, because Atkinson could do more good than harm to Kerr's power and position.⁴³

The state's first GOP governor came to power as a Republican movement thundered through Oklahoma in the aftermath of all the Democratic feuding. Journalist and author Jenk Jones penned *Looking Back: A Sampler of Writings by a Veteran Newsmen*. The book features stories about prominent people and Oklahoma politics. Written during the 1962 campaign, one essay illuminates the competition to win favor and votes in "Little Dixie," a historically Democratic Party strong-hold comprised of counties in the southeastern part of the state.⁴⁴

Jones conjectured that Bellmon had no illusions of carrying Little Dixie but he wished to reduce Atkinson's advantage as a Democrat in that part of the state. The author prophesied, "Bellmon will do better in this part of the state than any GOP

⁴³ Harris, *Does People Do It*, 55-6.

⁴⁴ Jenk Jones, *Looking Back: A Sampler of Writings by a Veteran Newsmen*, (Tulsa: Jenk Jones, 2012).

gubernatorial candidate in history.” He provided three reasons for his prediction. First, Bellmon was a common country boy who “spoke the language,” while Atkinson was a rich city boy with little in common with Little Dixie constituents. Second, Gary had been regional champion of the people and residents believed Atkinson had employed unfair tactics to steal the nomination, which resulted in Gary’s refusal to place his support behind his former competitor. Third, the area was economically repressed, many simply could not afford Atkinson’s proposed one cent tax hike. In contrast to other works examined for this literature review, Jones clearly and succinctly encapsulated the key issues and result in very few pages and, correctly, predicted the outcome of the election before it took place.⁴⁵

Henry Bellmon’s autobiography, *The Life and Times of Henry Bellmon*, lends personal recollection and perspective to his first candidacy for governor. According to his analysis, by the fall of 1961 two factors became clear: current Governor Edmondson had become a divisive political figure and Bellmon’s own Republican Party had no significant contender to confront the democratic candidate. Troubled by the fact that Oklahoma Democrats outnumbered Republicans five to one, he initially believed his chances for election to be minimal.⁴⁶

Bellmon accomplished his campaign strategy to make as much direct and sincere contact with constituents as possible by having hundreds of *two-party tea parties* in every county of the state.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Jones, *Looking Back*, 18-9.

⁴⁶ Henry Bellmon, *The Life and Times of Henry Bellmon* (Tulsa: Council Oaks Books, 1992), 126-8.

⁴⁷ Bellmon, *The Life and Times*, 141.

Bellmon's work, in agreement with Jenk Jones and others, recounts the benefits his movement received from the blood-letting between Atkinson and Gary during their contest. Against counsel, Bellmon chose to avoid the democratic fray that waged during the run-off period. Many Gary supporters were so incensed by Atkinson that they endorsed Bellmon and delivered Little Dixie for the first time to a Republican contender.⁴⁸

In conjunction with the Democratic Party uproar, Bellmon capitalized upon Atkinson's unpopular stance for a tax hike and his front-page duel with the *Oklahoman*. Atkinson did his best to characterize his Republican foe as Gaylord's puppet. Bellmon never conceded that Gaylord had any influence over him but stated that the newspaper publisher "was totally dedicated to the defeat of my opponent" and realized his first tangible evidence of support from the media-mogul when he received a \$200.00 contribution at a fund raiser.⁴⁹

In retrospect, the GOP candidate claimed he was helped by projecting a rural image while Atkinson flaunted urbane style and affluence. Bellmon avowed that he "had no real dislike for Bill, but it was a great pleasure to try to get under his skin." He viewed Atkinson as a man unable to take a joke and one who appeared sensitive about his wealth.⁵⁰

Journalist and Democratic Party insider Martin Hauan contributed revealing insight in two of his works: *He Buys Organs for Churches, Pianos for Bawdy Houses* and

⁴⁸ Bellmon, *The Life and Times*, 150-1.

⁴⁹ Bellmon, *The Life and Times*, 132, 137.

⁵⁰ Bellmon, *The Life and Times*, 148, 150-1.

Legal Graft, Illegal Graft, and Just Plain Stealin'. His recollections are an intriguing addition to previous scholarship because they yield first-hand knowledge and a personal perspective. With humor and particular bias, Hauan's works take to task not only Atkinson's incompetence as a candidate in two failed bids to become Oklahoma's top administrator but also the journalistic integrity of *Oklahoman* publisher, Gaylord.⁵¹

Previous accounts have postulated that Gary and Atkinson were friendly colleagues in the campaign of 1958 and that many believed the governor actively managed Atkinson's campaign. However, Hauan (former press-secretary for Gary) portrayed the perception of the two men as friendly colleagues as an absolute lie because the governor, truthfully, disliked Atkinson. "He was disgusted with Atkinson's indecisiveness and closeness to Kerr, for whom Gary had little love, and wanted nothing to do with the campaign."⁵²

Hauan attributes Atkinson's failure to obtain the Democratic nomination in 1958 to an inability to compete with the likes of his charismatic opponent who "straddled both sides of the Wet-Dry issue with his pledge of enforcement or repeal." The author remarked "those who try to get 100% (votes), as Atkinson did, invariably lose... There is no way to be forthright and firm on any issue with the I-want-everyone-to-love-me approach."⁵³

⁵¹ Martin Hauan, *He Buys Organs for Churches, Pianos for Bawdy Houses* (Oklahoma City: Midwest Political Publications, 1976); *Legal Graft, Illegal Graft, and Just Plain Stealin'* (Midwest Political Publications, 1992). In addition, Hauan authored another witty politically centric work *How to Win Elections Without Hardly Cheatin' At All* (Oklahoma City: Midwest Political Publications), 1983.

⁵² Hauan, *He Buys Organs*, 91.

⁵³ Hauan, *He Buys Organs*, 73, 77.

The author affirmed the premise previously promulgated by Young, Scales and Goble, Hanneman, Milligan and Norris, that a significant factor in Atkinson's 1962 defeat was the fracture within the Democratic Party. The split signaled the end to unity within the party, which led to a Republican victory when "Gary loyalists and Edmondson haters crawled in bed with Henry Bellmon."⁵⁴

Hauan whole-heartedly believed, in agreement with several others authors that Gaylord's immense dislike of Atkinson originated with the seminal event of the Midwest City land purchase. Gaylord's editorials were instrumental in both Atkinson campaign losses because "He wrote editorials accusing Atkinson and his troops of spreading malicious rumors about Edmondson . . . when, truthfully, Gaylord made up the stories and spread the lurid gossip."⁵⁵

Hauan described Gaylord as a "coldly dispassionate little man...he never ran for high public office. But he ran most of those who did in Oklahoma." The former press-secretary vehemently claimed that Gaylord skillfully utilized his media empire to annihilate political opponents, and until "his dying day he was the unquestioned political boss of Oklahoma City."⁵⁶

Opinions of the Atkinson-Gaylord conflict, expressed in existing works by historians, are consistent and rather simplistic. There is general agreement that the feud began with Atkinson's 1941 land purchase, escalated with the gubernatorial campaign of 1958, and climaxed during the election of 1962. Several authors have limited their investigation of Atkinson to his futile bids for governor and, with review of much the

⁵⁴ Hauan, *He Buys Organs*, 111.

⁵⁵ Hauan, *Legal Graft*, 212-3.

⁵⁶ Hauan, *He Buys Organs*, 12.

same information, have reached similar conclusions. A few writers have examined his paramount role in constructing Midwest City without extensive analysis of the man or his relationships. My research takes an original, and divergent, direction from the existing historical narrative. No longer will Atkinson be merely a sub-topic discussed in connection with a city, an air base, or a political candidate. The following chapters feature Atkinson as the primary focus and provide previously unknown facts, context, and perception. Further, this work provides substantive details to the fraudulent Edmondson pamphlets chronicled in Billy Joe Davis' dissertation and produces evidence of the true origin of the campaign forgery. I will expand on Atkinson's Midwest City land purchase activities and convey supplemental information not explored in Susan Lee's "The Social and Culture History of Midwest City." This paper presents background information and conclusions about the election of 1962 not offered by Wayne Fisher Young's "Oklahoma Politics." This work establishes primary scholarship regarding the complicated relationship between Gaylord and Atkinson with emphasis upon the people and circumstances involved in the lawsuits following the contentious political race of 1962.

Chapter 2:

All My Life I've Been "Busier Than a Cranberry Merchant"¹

"I am who I am, so far as I'm concerned, because of my mother." Thus was a definitive statement made by a man who had seen much—and accomplished much—as he neared the end of his life.²

William Paul Atkinson came into this world on November 9, 1906, in Carthage, Texas, the eldest of four children, three boys and one girl, born to Paul and Magie Tiller Atkinson. The early years of his life had a profound impact upon the evolution of characteristics prevalent in the man who significantly affected Oklahoma history and left an enduring legacy as a business leader and politician. He remembered his father, Paul, as a superb woodworking craftsman who plied his trade wherever work was available. He also remembered him as an unfortunate alcoholic who spent little time performing his duties as husband or father. The Atkinson family received only miniscule and sporadic financial support from the father.³

Conversely, Atkinson's memories of his mother were filled with detailed recollections of a strong emotional attachment with her and the abundance of affection she bestowed upon the struggling family. Resolute in caring for her children, Magie utilized her seamstress skills not only to clothe her progeny but also as a means to provide the household with desperately needed funds. At seven years of age, young

¹ Atkinson to Dennie Hall, Director-Journalism Hall of Fame, 25 January 1995, Box 1, File 19, W.P. "Bill" Atkinson Papers, Atkinson Heritage Center, Midwest City, Oklahoma. Sources cited from Atkinson Papers from this point on will be abbreviated as AHC.

² Atkinson, "Transcript of Tape," 14 November 1994, Box 1, File 2, AHC.

³ "Biographical information" ca. 1990, Box 1, File 2, AHC. There are four different items titled "Biographical Information" in the Atkinson papers that do not include date. However, carefully read a determination of approximate date can be made.

“Willie” (as he was known in grade school) started honing his skills as a salesman. He went door-to-door, making his pitch to the lady of the house, saying “if you will give my mother a chance to make your next dress, it will be a better fit and a more beautiful dress, probably, than you have ever been able to buy at a store and it will be far less money. If you will just give us the chance, we’ll show you.” However, despite Willie’s sales efforts and his mother’s hard work, the family remained destitute and in a battle for survival. When he was nine years of age, Magie’s crusade to support her family ended. After spending a cold winter day outdoors, doing washing she had taken in to make money, she became sick with pneumonia. On the ninth day of her illness, she awakened and spoke to her first-born. Magie impressed upon Willie her belief in his future through her words: “Always be nice and good to people, then you can’t help but succeed.” She also made him promise that he would work hard at whatever he endeavored and that he would receive a college education.⁴

After the tragic loss of his beloved mother, Willie ultimately became the ward of his uncle, William Curtis Atkinson. The boy soon came to regard the uncle and his wife, Ola Pearl, as his father and mother and lived with the couple and their daughter, Emma Jane, until he completed his upper secondary education.⁵

At the young age of eleven, he secured his first bona fide job and began working for the local weekly newspaper in Carthage, Texas. The owner, Mr. Whitman, hired him as a print room “devil” and the ambitious youth quickly learned all aspects (except editorial) of running a newspaper. Sometime in Atkinson’s teen-years, the Carthage

⁴ Atkinson, “Transcript of Tape,” 14 November 1992, Box 1, File 2, AHC; “Willie Paul Atkinson Admission to the High School Department,” Carthage Public Schools, 19 May 1920, Box 1, File 5, AHC.

⁵ Atkinson to Randy Grissom, Editor-*Panola County News*, 2 July 1985, Box 1, File 1, AHC.

weekly folded. Undaunted, Willie acquired a position as linotype operator and occasional contributing reporter at the *Panola Watchman* where he worked under the supervision of Mr. Parks.⁶

He graduated from Carthage High School in 1924 and enrolled at Lon Morris Junior College in Jacksonville, Texas. He obtained a job with the *Jacksonville Daily Progress* and became both a boarder and a protégé to the paper's owner and publisher, George McFarland. Upon completion of his studies at Lon Morris, Atkinson registered at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth where the budding newsman swiftly established himself as publisher-business manager of the campus weekly broadsheet, *The Skiff*.⁷

Now known formally as "W.P." and informally as "Bill," he perfected his editorial skills and began to display his acumen as a shrewd businessman. A 1927 agreement between Atkinson and Amos Melton, editor of *The Skiff* and a fellow classmate, demonstrated his business perspicacity. The editor and business manager-publisher of the TCU paper were allowed to profit from their positions publishing a campus newspaper. As manager, Atkinson executed a contract between himself and the editor, Melton, which stipulated that Melton received a guaranteed amount of \$175 per week and, in return, Atkinson retained any and all profits above the predetermined amount assured the editor. An additional agreement to insure printing of *The Skiff* at

⁶ Atkinson to Grissom, Editor-*Panola County News*, 2 July 1985, Box 1, File 1, AHC.

⁷ Atkinson to Grissom, Editor-*Panola County News*, 2 July 1985, Box 1, File 1, AHC; Leon Hatfield, "Bill Atkinson and Midwest City Put One Another on the Map," *Midwest City Leader*, 4 October 1962, 1.

economical rates, increased advertising revenues, and circulation growth combined to generate significant cash flow during his college years.⁸

Atkinson claimed proceeds from his job with *The Skiff* allowed him to pay all of his university expenses at TCU, to buy a brand-new Chevrolet (the first car he owned), and to save money for his future endeavors. He graduated Cum Laude in 1928 with a degree in business, a minor in journalism, and a bank account balance in excess of \$4,000. Atkinson's first order of business following commencement was to return to his hometown and claim his sweetheart. He married Rubye Eugenia Beauchamp on July 9, 1928.⁹

The twenty-one year old Atkinson, with a burning desire to make his mark upon the world, soon aligned himself with Douglas Tomlinson, vice-president and general manager of one of the largest commercial printing companies in Fort Worth. Tomlinson's All-Church Press had been the party with whom Atkinson had an agreement to print *The Skiff* and the collaboration during that endeavor produced a mutual respect between the two. In fact, Tomlinson was so impressed by Atkinson's journalistic expertise and innate business acuity that he hired him to assist in the strategic formation of All-Church Press facilities in several leading cities in the southwestern area United States. Soon after joining Tomlinson's team, Bill and Rubye decided to move to

⁸ Atkinson and Amos Melton, "Agreement," 6 June 1927, Box 1, File 5, AHC; Atkinson and Douglas Tomlinson, "Agreement," 8 June 1927, Box 1, File 5, AHC; Ben H. Procter, "Melton, Amos W.," *Handbook of Texas*, accessed 4 February 2015, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fme08>.

⁹ Atkinson to Grissom, Editor-*Panola County News*, 2 July 1985, Box 1, File 1, AHC; "Background in a Nutshell," undated, Box 1, File 1, AHC.

Oklahoma City, set up permanent residence, and launch an affiliate paper with All-Church Press called *The Oklahoma City Star*.¹⁰

The next six years were eventful for the fledgling impresario, both professionally and personally. Atkinson secured publication contracts with many of the larger churches in the Oklahoma City area, was promoted to district manager for All-Church Press, and became a first-time father with the birth of his son, William J. Atkinson. Also momentous during that time was the procurement of a seat on the Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce where he met *Oklahoman* owner and publisher, Edward King Gaylord. The media mogul, impressed with Atkinson's tenacity, intelligence, and vigor, began to mentor and groom him to join the ranks of his trusted "fair-haired boys."¹¹

In 1934, Oklahoma City University recruited the young publisher to fill a vacancy in the college's School of Journalism and swiftly promoted him to department head in just his second year of teaching. During his four-year stint as a professor, Bill and Rubye increased the size of their family with the birth of two daughters, Eugenia and Jeanette. The escalation in family size caused the youthful couple to contemplate the need for a larger home and a decision to build was made. Typical of his approach to new ventures, Atkinson educated himself in all aspects of home planning and construction. He became so knowledgeable and conversant on the subject that his builder, E.C. Stanfield, eventually hired him to sell dwellings for the company. His abilities and understanding

¹⁰ Atkinson to Grissom, Editor-*Panola County News*, 2 July 1985, Box 1, File 1, AHC.

¹¹ "Modest Start, Atkinson Becomes Leading Builder," *Midwest City News*, 26 October 1944, 1; Atkinson, "Living Historical Center," undated, 16-7, on computer hard-drive, AHC.

of the real estate business caused sales to flourish, and, in 1938, he resigned his post at the university to pursue full-time employment as a realtor.¹²

In 1940, Atkinson purchased Stanfield's expanding home construction company. News articles reported that Stanfield had been advised to retire because of ill health; however, Atkinson later claimed that the builder had actually decided to return to his native Canada. Some years earlier Stanfield, allegedly, had fled to the United States and changed his name after killing a man over his wife in his home country.¹³

Atkinson quickly became a trail-blazer in building and development. In 1941, his realty firm secured more residential construction permits and sold more homes than any other real estate organization in Oklahoma. He utilized his knowledge of the power of advertising, refined during his newspaper days, to promote his products and himself. Ubiquitous promotional material saturated the Oklahoma City landscape announcing "W.P. (Bill) Atkinson Builds Good Homes!" That same year, the homebuilder augmented his successes in real estate, construction, and promotion with an epic and historic feat.¹⁴

In early 1941, world-wide conflict against totalitarian forces had raged for a year and a half. In anticipation of being drawn into the escalating struggle, America commenced the conversion of many manufacturing plants into facilities to assemble goods and weapons requisite for conducting full-scale war. Oklahomans had been aware

¹² "Biographical information," ca. 1990, Box 1 File 2, AHC; "Modest Start, Atkinson becomes Leading Builder," *Midwest City News*, 26 October 1944, 1.

¹³ "Modest Start, Atkinson becomes Leading Builder," *Midwest City News*, 26 October 1944, 1; Atkinson, "Living Historical Center," undated, 13, computer hard-drive, AHC.

¹⁴ "Biographical information," ca. 1990, Box 1, File 2; "W.P. Bill Atkinson Builds Good Homes," advertisement, undated, on display, AHC.

since the fall of 1940 that the War Department sought land someplace in the midwestern United States (midway between east and west coast) to build an air depot. Keeping abreast of the situation through the newspapers, and especially through his membership with the Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce, Atkinson believed this to be a colossal opportunity. As he looked back upon these events later in life, he mused: "I have been, fortunately for me, at the right place at the right time; it seemed like my entire life."¹⁵

Already the capital city's preeminent homebuilder, Atkinson became the recipient of a fortuitous boon that befell the Sooner State. Before determination of the site for the Midwest Air Depot, Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce officials developed a strategy to attract a war-time facility with the capability to sustain jobs long after hostilities ended. Under the direction of the Chamber president, Judge Samuel E. Hayes, the Industries Foundation of Oklahoma City, Incorporated, was formed and tasked with insuring that the metropolis secured land prerequisite to selection by the War Department for the planned facility. The Industries Foundation soon found itself under the direction and control of the chamber Advisory (also known as Executive) Committee headed by Gaylord and managing director, Stanley Draper.¹⁶

Atkinson had steadily ascended the chamber's ranks during his years of membership and had arrived at the upper-echelon. Initially flattered, he considered himself to be Gaylord's "water boy" and one of the chosen insiders. However, his enthusiasm faded as he began to realize that activities by the lower-committee members

¹⁵ Roy P. Stewart, *Born Grown* (Oklahoma City: Fidelity Bank, 1974), 253-4; Atkinson, "History-Books," 23 May 1992, Box 1, File 2, AHC.

¹⁶ James M. Smallwood, *Urban Builder: Life and Times of Stanley Draper* (Norman: Oklahoma Heritage Association by University of Oklahoma Press, 1977), 102; "Great Moments in Tinker's Beginning Recalled by Draper," *Tinker Take Off*, 21 April 1961, 1.

were often merely a means to enhance the fortunes of those on the Executive Board. He became fully cognizant that Gaylord was not only a brilliant and powerful man, but also a greedy one. This profound realization about Gaylord and the Executive Committee member's objectives had the effect on Atkinson of emancipating any feelings of loyalty to anyone but himself.¹⁷

Taking clues from information printed in a late February 1941 article in the *Oklahoman*, Atkinson and numerous other realtors and aspiring entrepreneurs sought to find the most logical spot for the proposed depot. Better known site opportunists included C.B. Warr, prominent builder and lumber company owner, who selected property just west of the city which is now known as Warr Acres. G.A. Nichols, another well-known developer, speculated on the site by procuring holdings just southwest of downtown OKC. Atkinson later indicated that Gaylord had both influenced and held a financial interest in Nichols' decision on which land to purchase.¹⁸

Atkinson went to Adams Oil Company and obtained an oilfield map for use in divining the probable location based upon the War Department's criteria. The requirements indicated that the new depot must be located within ten miles of a city center, be near a rail line, be more than four miles from any oil field, and include several hundred flat acres for landing strips. The astute developer deduced that the region immediately east of Oklahoma City would fulfill all the requirements mandated and, in addition, be logistically favorable for the creation of a self-sustaining community for

¹⁷ Atkinson, "Living Historical Center," undated, 16-7, computer hard-drive, AHC.

¹⁸ Atkinson, "Living Historical Center," undated, 14, computer hard-drive, AHC; "The Following May be One of the Best Kept Secrets of World War II," undated, computer hard-drive, AHC. Although Atkinson did not state, the article "Air Depot to Open Jobs for Hundreds of Skilled Civilians," *Oklahoman*, 27 February 1941, 1-2, is credited for giving him the specifications.

workers to live, raise families, and conduct business. As he undertook his first course of action, interviewing farm residents in the target area, the conversations quickly revealed that all the farms on the south-side of S.E. 29th street were not for sale while all the farms on the north-side of the thoroughfare were available. Atkinson knew he had found the intended location for the facility and worked incessantly for two weeks (mid-March 1941) acquiring an initial allotment of 310 acres from Frank Trosper and Joe Chesser. Trosper, a guileful old man who made the Oklahoma land run and had his own quarrel with Gaylord, vehemently told Atkinson “(to) not file (the) deed of record because if you do they’ll kill you, Bill, and Gaylord would turn against you.” To which the land-purchaser replied “No, Mr. Gaylord will never turn against me,” still trusting that the publisher possessed genuine fondness and regard for him. After much inveigling by Trosper, Atkinson did not file the deed and soon realized the wisdom in the old man’s admonition.¹⁹

April 8, 1941, the War Department officially announced that Oklahoma had been selected for the air depot, and construction was to commence as soon as all title to property located on S.E. 29th street, township 11 north, range 2 west, had been obtained by Oklahoma City and turned over to the army. Soon after the official proclamation it became known that someone had recently purchased the prime parcel of land located just north of the forthcoming air terminus. City administrators and, most especially, members of the Chamber of Commerce were not at all pleased. Executive Committee member Gaylord raged against the “interloper” who had unscrupulously gained insider

¹⁹ Atkinson, “Living History Center,” undated, 11, 15-6, computer hard-drive, AHC; Atkinson, “The Following May Be One of the Best Kept Secrets of World War II,” undated, computer hard-drive, AHC. Regrettably, Atkinson did not provide dates for his activities connected to locating the land, or, subsequent meeting with Pentagon officials. Therefore, the time-line of events is somewhat ambiguous.

information and seized the territory surrounding the soon-to-be-built maintenance terminal.²⁰

Atkinson claimed he endured five weeks of chamber committee meetings where Gaylord railed against the unknown speculator-intruder. The daily print-media and several civic leaders followed suit, expressing concern over who owned the adjacent land and the intentions of the purchaser. Many were fearful that the devious entrepreneur would cause the government to discontinue the project before it was even started.²¹

In the midst of the uproar, Oklahoma Congressman Mike Monroney, called his friend, Atkinson, and said, “You sure are giving me a lot of problems right now, (at least) I think you are. Do you know who owns that property right across from where they think they want to build the air base?” The local turmoil and questions had apparently gotten the attention of Pentagon officials who contacted the congressman that represented the district, and had assiduously lobbied both Congress and the Army Air Corps to locate the depot near Oklahoma City, to express concern and get clarification of the situation. Atkinson told him that he could not say who owned the property and asked why he was inquiring. Monroney relayed that Pentagon brass had phoned him over the last few

²⁰ “Air Corps Ready to Start Depot Within Month,” *Oklahoman*, 9 April 1941, 1.

²¹ Atkinson, “Living History Center,” 16, computer hard-drive, AHC; Leon Hatfield, “Bill Atkinson and Midwest City Put One Another on the Map,” *Midwest City Leader*, 4 October 1962, 4. Atkinson maintained that newspaper articles denounced the unknown land opportunist. After extensive research of the *Oklahoman* I found no evidence to corroborate criticism by the media. Other authors (Crowder, Lee, and Hatfield) referencing this incident cite no specific evidence, their only source for this assertion is Atkinson.

weeks, having heard about the local chaos, and were seriously considering backing out of the deal with Oklahoma.²²

Atkinson flew to Washington, D.C., the next day. Escorted by Congressman Monroney, the duo arrived at the Pentagon to address an assembly of top officials. Fearing the government might seize his purchased land; Atkinson told Monroney just before the meeting, “If they want it, all they have to do is tell me.” Atkinson calmly entered a conference room filled to capacity with four-star generals and colonels. Told to stand, place his hand on a table, and pretend there was a Bible under it, his interrogator, Major General H.H. “Hap” Arnold, asked if he had heard any information which had indicated where the government planned to build. Atkinson replied, “Absolutely not.” “Did you receive any information out of the OKC Chamber of Commerce or any other source?” Atkinson responded that he must reply with a qualified answer. “As far as the Chamber of Commerce, or any businessman, the answer is no.”²³ However, he clarified that the source of information which led to the divination of the proposed site was a small article in the *Oklahoman* newspaper which contained the specifications required for the aviation maintenance terminus. He stated “the very newspaper that was bringing such ridiculous charges . . . was the same newspaper that had actually given me the specification for finding that location in a news story it had run a number of weeks prior.”

²² W. David Baird and Danney Goble, *The Story of Oklahoma*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 402; Atkinson, “Locating Site for Midwest City,” undated, Box 1, File 2, AHC.

²³ W.P. Bill Atkinson, interviewed by Max Nichols, 3 March 1992, Oral History Collection, H1992.022, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; Atkinson, “Living Historical Center,” undated, 18, computer hard-drive, AHC. Although the date of Atkinson’s visit to the Pentagon is unknown, the most probable time-frame is that it took place between official announcement on April 8, 1941, and *Oklahoman* article “Army Deals Blow to Addition Plan,” 15 May 1941, 6, in which Atkinson’s ownership of property is known and although assured by Pentagon they will not take land, OKC wants to acquire his property for possible air depot expansion.

He further explicated, step-by-step, his methodology for locating the probable parcel of land and the lengths to which he went thereafter to secure the adjacent territory. He concluded his address to the distinguished audience and later recalled the episode by saying, “it turned out to be an easy sale.” General Arnold declared to Monroney “I’m convinced that your man has told us the total truth.”²⁴

The meeting was a critical occurrence in the energetic developer’s life and career. He explained to the commanders his vision for a self-sustaining community and all in attendance agreed there would be a need for a permanent city including homes, schools, churches, shopping centers, and businesses. Atkinson promised the assembled officials that he would eagerly undertake the task of developing such a community, provided they would give him their full cooperation.²⁵

Before leaving Washington, Atkinson retained the services of one of the nation’s master city planners, Seward Mott. Within two weeks, the community architect arrived in Oklahoma and confided “If this thing develops, it will be the first time in my career in planning that I had the opportunity to take a large piece of raw ground, with no obstructions, and plan a complete city; the way one should be planned.” In retrospect, Atkinson believed commissioning Mott to have been “the smartest thing I did because it gave me the pattern for a whole city, which is what I wanted.”²⁶

²⁴ George Lang, “The Town That Tinker Built,” *Oklahoma Today*, (July-August, 1998): 63; Atkinson, “The Following May Be One of the Best Kept Secrets of WWII,” undated, computer hard-drive, AHC; Atkinson, “Locating Site for Midwest City,” undated, Box 1, File 2, AHC.

²⁵ “Tinker, MWC Mark 25 Years Together,” *Oklahoma Journal*, 27 October 1967, 25-6.

²⁶ Atkinson, “A History of Midwest City:1940-1945,” undated, Box 6, File 25, AHC; “Housebuilder Bill Atkinson,” *Builder Magazine*, January 1951, Box 1, File 3, AHC; “Air Corps Ready to Start Depot Within Month,” *Oklahoman*, 9 April 1941, 1; “First Commander Arrives January ’42,” *Tinker Take Off*, 21 April 1967, 4.

Soon after meeting with Pentagon officials, Atkinson revealed his title to the property which had caused so much turmoil and gossip. The disclosure that he had bought the land instead of some out-of-state meddler in no way eased tensions between the builder and the chairman of the Oklahoma City Chamber Executive Committee, Gaylord. In fact, this is where the bad-blood between the two began, and the animosity, endured for decades.

After the U.S. Corps of Engineers arrived in mid-July 1941, Atkinson began planning construction of his new community but he knew that he, working alone, could not possibly create an urban area to house a population of 6,000 in eighteen months. He called upon respected regional builders to aid in completing the task and made a preliminary application for 400 building permits. Atkinson unexpectedly received approval for 700 permits, the total allocation for the Oklahoma City area. Atkinson later divulged that the permits had been sent directly from the Pentagon and all building in the metropolitan region had been halted to expedite the construction of Midwest City. Production of the first home began in April 1942, and the newly-founded township witnessed prodigious growth. By the conclusion of the WWII decade, it possessed all manner of houses, apartments, churches, schools, shopping centers, and essential infrastructure. The cooperative effort forged among the housing manufacturers created a lasting alliance. In 1946, the Midwest City founder chartered the Oklahoma City Home Builder's Association and served as one of its early presidents.²⁷

²⁷ "Housebuilder Bill Atkinson," *Building Magazine*, January 1951, Box 1, File 3, AHC; Atkinson, "Living Historical Center," undated, 9, computer hard-drive, AHC; Atkinson, "Biographical Information," ca. 1990, Box 1 File 2, AHC; Lee, "The Social and Cultural History," 19.

The 1950s decade became an efficacious era for the boy from Carthage. In January 1951, Atkinson's skill and innovation as the "businessman-builder" who had transformed housing construction from a "craft to an industry in the past decade" earned him the position of National Association of Home Builders President. The title afforded even greater public visibility and allowed him to implement another lasting element to the Midwest City landscape, the Ridgecrest Addition. When construction began on the subdivision in 1952, the developer received accolades for his state-of-the-art ranch-style structures. He employed an outrageous, albeit successful, promotion to market Ridgecrest: the first 100 new owners to purchase a home in the addition received a Shetland pony!²⁸

The Ridgecrest tract adjoined the parcel which Bill and Rubye selected for their family home. As the Atkinsons' lives revolved around the community they had originated and nurtured, it seemed logical and advantageous that they build a permanent residence there. The Atkinson acreage, purchased in the early 1940s, boasted a small cabin (designed by Tinker Field Logistics Commander, Colonel William Turnbull), which served as both a weekend retreat from Oklahoma City for the Atkinsons and an Officers Club for enlisted servicemen.²⁹

Spurred by loftier ambitions, Atkinson engaged prominent architect Jean Bolls to design what he planned to be a secondary *governor's mansion*. Conceived in 1953, and completed in 1956, the structure contained over nine-thousand square feet. Situated on

²⁸ "Housebuilder Bill Atkinson," *Builder Magazine*, January 1951, Box 1, File 3, AHC; Lee, "The Social and Cultural History," 23-4; "Ridgecrest Features Club, Pony Rides for Children," *Oklahoman*, 4 September 1955, 46.

²⁹ Atkinson, "Living History Center," undated, 6, computer hard-drive, AHC.

the southwest corner of Midwest Boulevard and N.E. 10th Street, the luscious estate featured a sizeable stable where the Atkinson family boarded their herd of prize miniature steeds.³⁰ The stately home and pony ranch existed as a tangible indicator of Atkinson's grandiose plans for the future. At this stage of Atkinson's life, he could look back with pride in his accomplishments and feel confident that his future could be whatever he wanted it to be. He had supreme confidence in his abilities and began to set his sights on becoming the Governor of the State of Oklahoma.

The 1950s produced deliberate activities designed to facilitate an eventual run for the state's highest office. The Midwest City creator diligently sought opportunities within the public realm to further increase his recognition and standing in the greater-metropolis and throughout the state. Increasingly, he pursued association with leaders in the Democratic Party. Many became friends and, more importantly, some became conducive to the advancement of his political aspirations.

He garnered indispensable political clout when named finance chairman for the Oklahoma Democrats. He quickly allied himself with key party dignitaries such as Governor Johnston Murray, former Governor Roy Turner, and Senator Robert S. Kerr, from all of whom he actively pursued friendship and patronage. Atkinson held Kerr in highest regard and considered the elder statesman to be a role-model and mentor. One strategy employed by Atkinson to curry favor with the senator and to promote himself to

³⁰ Jean Bolls, "Atkinson House blueprints," 1953, Box 12, File house blueprints, AHC. Bolls also designed Senator Robert S. Kerr's mansion in Poteau, Oklahoma, in 1957.

the anti-liquor and Christian demographic was the hosting of “buttermilk socials” held at his pony-ranch.³¹

Atkinson also continued building. During the decade of the 50s he expanded business ventures into southwest Oklahoma City where he developed new housing additions, built shopping centers, and proposed an area hospital.³²

Concurrently, he diligently secured funds and raised awareness for a much needed medical facility in northwest Oklahoma City. Named general chairman in 1955 for the Shepherd Memorial Baptist Hospital (re-named Baptist Hospital), Atkinson steered a campaign committee inundated with state VIPs; two of the most notable of whom were Draper and Gaylord. The committee leader steadfastly labored for three years and, ultimately, achieved the goal of raising \$1 million dollars.³³

In 1957, the political side of Atkinson re-emerged as he industriously prepared for participation in the next year’s election for governor. Headquartered at the Huckins Hotel in Oklahoma City, he enlisted assistance from trusted comrades. Floyd Maytubby and Red Jacobs were recruited to serve as co-state campaign managers while Bill Boykin, Leon Hatfield, and Eddie Miller joined the team as publicity directors.³⁴

³¹ “Atkinson and Martin to Seek Campaign Cash,” *Oklahoman*, 3 October 1950, 13; Ray Parr, “Buttermilk Social seeks Party Unity,” *Oklahoman*, 18 October 1950, 1.

³² “Projected land development and purchases,” 1956, Box 2, File 18, AHC.

³³ “Developer Heads Baptist Hospital Drive,” *Oklahoman*, 31 March 1955, 11; “Shepherd Memorial Hospital dedication day program,” 13 November 1958, Box 2, File 32, AHC.

³⁴ “W.P. Bill Atkinson for Governor Organizational Chart,” John Dunning Political Collection, Box 31, File 11, Oklahoma Historical Society Research Division, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

A formal announcement of candidacy took place on March 1, 1958, when Atkinson indulged guests to tours of his pony-ranch, a barbeque dinner, entertainment by Indian dancers, and a rally at Midwest City High School.³⁵

By May, pundits deemed Atkinson the front-runner in the race. However, the question remained: “Which candidates are going to develop enough momentum in their campaign to get into a runoff?” Around that same time, Atkinson became aware of ominous factors at play. He later recalled, “It seemed like my whole world caved in about six weeks before the election (primary).” A perfect storm of negative influences converged upon the Democratic hopeful. Phillips Petroleum president, Boots Adams, offered a cash contribution to Atkinson’s campaign fund in return for an appointment to an influential position in the candidate’s proposed cabinet system administration. Atkinson refused the bribe. Soon after the incident, he alleged that Phillips Petroleum gave his opponent, J. Howard Edmondson, hundreds of thousands of dollars, which sponsored his ubiquitous television plugs. Adding to the candidate’s reversal of fortune, Congressman Ed Edmondson became actively involved in his little brother’s crusade.³⁶

Purportedly, Congressman Edmondson conspired with Gaylord to “knock Atkinson off the top of the perch.” The *Oklahoman* editor, who had harbored veiled resentment for years, utilized his power-of-the-press to thwart his former fair-haired-boy’s political aspirations. Gaylord personally directed Otis Sullivant, one of the most respected observers of state politics in the twentieth-century and an *Oklahoman* employee since 1926, to falsify polling results. Distraught, Sullivant and his wife met with Bill and

³⁵ “Atkinson Rally Slated Tonight,” *Oklahoman*, 1 March 1958, 7.

³⁶ “Candidates Fight to Get in Runoff Against Atkinson,” *Oklahoman*, 11 May 1958, 116; Atkinson, “First Governor’s Race 1958,” undated, Box 3, File 1, AHC.

Rubye at their home, where the Sullivants' revealed Gaylord's directive. He said, "I'm in a horrible spot. I don't know what to do." Gaylord ordered the political correspondent to skew constituent polling data to indicate a rapid decline in Atkinson's lead. Puzzled and appalled, Sullivant asked the publisher why he wanted to perpetrate such a deception. Gaylord reportedly exclaimed, "I just don't trust Bill Atkinson, I think he has built a city and it has gone to his head and apparently he thinks if he's in government he can just take over Oklahoma City." After considering the matter, Atkinson and Sullivant agreed it to be a no-win situation and concurred that Sullivant would sustain less damage to his livelihood if he complied.³⁷

With or without external manipulation, Edmondson's auspicious *prairie fire* crusade produced results, and the tally of July 1 primary votes indicated Edmondson leading by a small margin. A tumultuous three weeks filled the interim between the primary and run-off contests. Sullivant, via his column, predicted a land-slide victory for Edmondson in the runoff. Atkinson began to believe his prospects for gaining the nomination were getting bleak and when accusations of fraud were levied against him, he knew those chances became significantly bleaker.³⁸

Edmondson bitterly denounced Atkinson's organization for circulating false campaign materials in southeastern Oklahoma. He claimed, "They are using highway department employees to distribute forged pamphlets which they prepared to appear as my own campaign literature." Edmondson indicated he had no proof of his opponent's

³⁷ Atkinson, "First Governor's Race 1958," undated, Box 3, File 1, AHC; "Personnel Directory," *Oklahoma Publishing Company*, May 1962, Box 3, File 41, AHC. Examination of Otis Sullivant Collection, Oklahoma Historical Society Research Division, yielded no verification of this meeting. However, in discussion with the author, George Nigh recalled Atkinson telling him this same information.

³⁸ Otis Sullivant, "Hard campaigning Between Atkinson, Edmondson Starts," *Oklahoman*, 3 July 1958, 1; Sullivant, "Political Signs Favor Victory by Edmondson," *Oklahoman*, 20 July 1958, 77.

direct involvement but still held his competitor personally responsible. Shaken and dismayed, Atkinson disavowed any knowledge of the counterfeit materials. He believed his campaign staff to be innocent and speculated that the true perpetrator was his adversary's own press-manager, Leland Gourley. Atkinson explained his accusation against Gourley by saying, "I know the way his mind functions. I am not saying he did it but I am more inclined to think he did it to try to discredit me in some way."³⁹

Matters came to a head just three days before the runoff. The *Oklahoman* printed a side-by-side comparison of genuine and forged Edmondson campaign literature which illustrated manipulation of the original into a pamphlet designed to offend and mislead. Next, the metropolitan newspaper published a scathing editorial which accused Atkinson of disgraceful tactics, forgery and brazen dishonesty.⁴⁰

Angered and humiliated, the embattled candidate sought to set the record straight. He arrived at the 4th and Broadway headquarters of the *Oklahoman* and placed an order for two full-page spreads. He told the advertising manager that the first page would be a re-print of the highly defamatory editorial printed that morning and the second page would contain his personal retort to each and every allegation made. He wrote his riposte in just a couple of hours and handed it, along with a few thousand dollars, over for publication. Next day, the manager called and informed Atkinson that the ad and his money were not accepted. Furious, Atkinson hastily made his way back downtown and directly to Gaylord's office. Greeted by the publisher's devoted secretary, Helen Jean Cole, he told her of his frustration and insisted upon talking to the newspaper chief. After

³⁹ Bob McMillin, "Edmondson Calls Pamphlet Forgery," *Oklahoman*, 18 July, 1958, 8; "Bill Atkinson Visibly Upset," *Oklahoman*, July 19, 1958, 5.

⁴⁰ "George Battles As Edmondson Gets Breather," *Oklahoman*, 19 July 1958, 3; "Slander and Forgery," *Oklahoman*, 20 July 1958, 87.

a few minutes absence, Cole returned and informed him that Gaylord was just too busy. Undeterred, and trying to remain calm, Atkinson notified her that he would wait and, if necessary, speak to Gaylord as he was going down the elevator to leave. The assistant left again to advise her employer that Atkinson intended to stay even if it meant lingering until the end of the workday. When she returned for the second time, Cole said Gaylord had instructed her to order a cot and his dinner because he intended to remain locked in his office all night. Defeated, Atkinson walked down the stairs instead of taking the elevator because he feared running into anyone he knew. This was one of the few occasions in his life when he actually cried. As he put it, “I broke out crying like a baby.” Atkinson put on his sunglasses to hide his swollen eyes as he stepped outside into the late afternoon sun. As his chauffeur drove him home, he looked down at the blue shirt he had worn for his black and white television appearance and noticed it was wet with tears. He realized, more than ever before, that Gaylord was an extremely tough man to beat, and he would not stop at anything.⁴¹

Atkinson’s life thus far had been like a roller-coaster ride with both extreme highs and lows. He suffered poverty and tremendous loss during his childhood in Carthage, Texas, but he also gained experiences which, combined with his innate determination created the impetus for the successful man he became. The example and advice of his mother instilled him with a resolute work ethic and jobs throughout his youth provided skills necessary to finance a university education. Tenacity and shrewdness were powerful personality traits recognized by men of importance who provided Atkinson with opportunity and valuable connections. The Midwest City patriarch gained fame and

⁴¹ Atkinson, “First Governor’s Race 1958,” undated, Box 3, File 1, AHC; “Personnel Directory,” *Oklahoma Publishing Company*, May 1962, Box 3, File 41, AHC.

fortune through his triumphant creation of a complete city but also acquired an adversary who significantly impacted his life, business, and civic career for decades. Although defeated, politically and emotionally, after the primary season of 1958, Atkinson confidently looked forward to future redemption of his reputation and political fortunes. He believed the outrageous accusation of campaign fraud in concert with Edmondson's powerful benefactors Gaylord, Adams, and Congressman Edmondson, produced his defeat.⁴² The convergence of actions robbed him of his party's nomination in 1958 but Atkinson was confident that he would be elected governor in 1962.

⁴² Atkinson, "First Governor's Race 1958," undated, Box 3, File 1, AHC.



Bill Atkinson, ca. late 1920s

Courtesy Atkinson Heritage Center



Bill Atkinson (center) with Seward Mott (right), 1941

Blueprint for Midwest City

Courtesy Atkinson Heritage Center

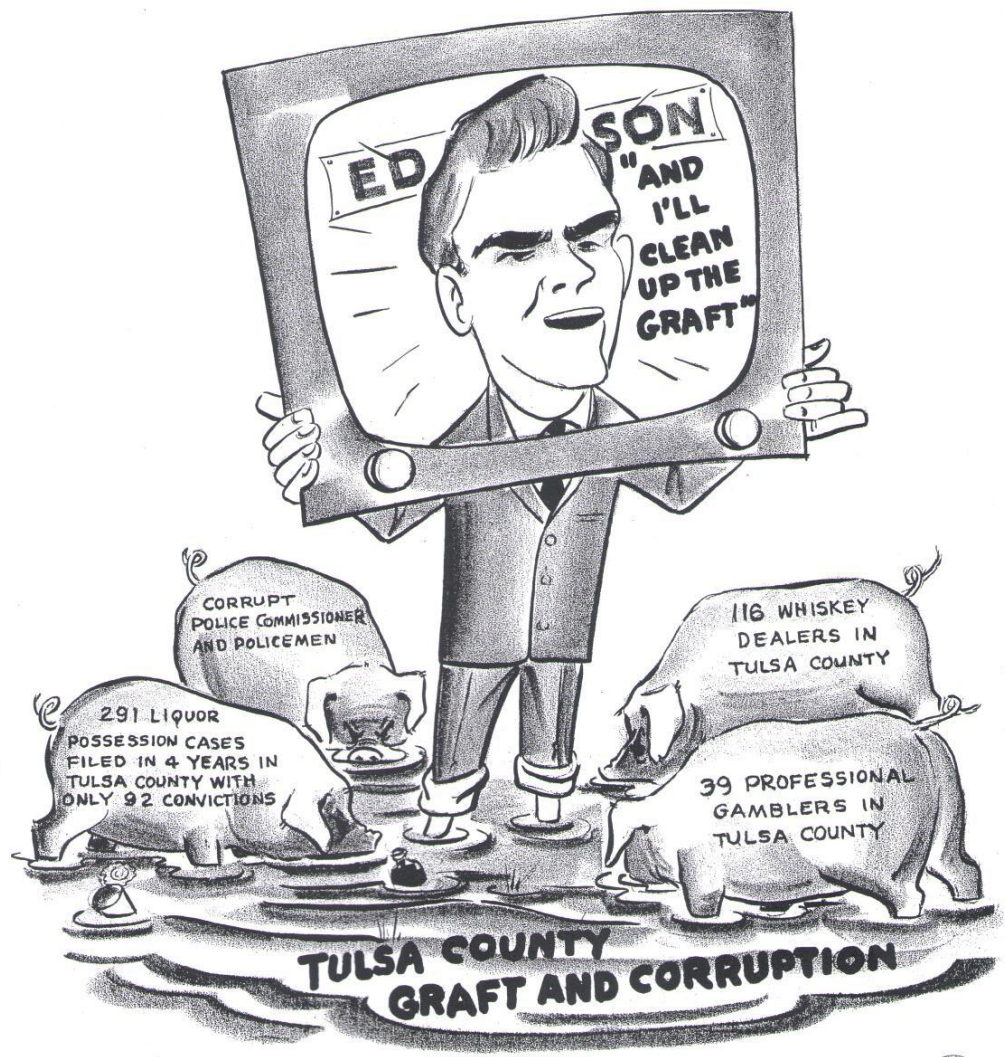
Bill and Rubye Atkinson, 1957
Courtesy Atkinson Heritage Center



Atkinson for Governor Campaign Rally
March 1, 1958, at Atkinson Pony Ranch
(Atkinson's home in background)
Courtesy Atkinson Heritage Center



What the TV Camera doesn't see!



Atkinson Campaign 1958, political cartoon of J. Howard Edmondson
Courtesy Oklahoma Historical Society Research Division

Chapter 3:

“Hell Hath No Fury Like That of a Rejected Democrat”¹

Following his defeat in the Democratic primary election of 1958, Atkinson devoted time to his home construction and commercial development ventures while he continued to promote himself through highly-visible civic and charitable activities. He successfully solicited over one million dollars, for construction of a new state-of-the-art hospital in Oklahoma City, maintained a position on the board of the National Association of Home Builders, and campaigned for Midwest City to establish its first YMCA. In retrospect, Atkinson viewed his inability to obtain the Democratic Party’s nomination in 1958, as a “fluke.”² Insight into the mistakes of the election allowed him to formulate new strategies for a future run at securing the votes to become governor. He believed an improved relationship with Gaylord to be a strategic imperative for his future political success. Atkinson methodically orchestrated every aspect of his 1962 campaign for governor and secured the services of well-seasoned political tacticians. Despite his careful and comprehensive plans, he neither succeeded against a formidable Republican opponent nor escaped the hostilities of Gaylord. The second foray into the political arena delivered a depressing election loss and precipitated an expensive, bitter, and protracted legal battle with his nemesis.

In the early months of 1959, an exchange of polite correspondence with his former colleague buoyed Atkinson’s hope for more cordial relations with Gaylord. Furthermore, he made a genuine effort to avoid confrontation with Gaylord when he

¹ “Nothing Sacred,” *Bixby Bulletin*, 4 April 1963, no page, Box 3, File 18, AHC.

² Atkinson, “Second Governor’s Race 1962,” undated, Box 3, File 1, AHC.

refused an opportunity to purchase an interest in television station KWTW offered by owner Edgar Bell. He sincerely believed that, through his efforts and restraint, he had “gotten on better terms with Mr. Gaylord and all I wanted him to do was stay off my back, and if I bought into Channel 9 he would never get off my back.” In April 1959, the Midwest City builder wrote a *mea culpa* letter to his former mentor which expressed true remorse and asked forgiveness:

Will you please accept my apologies and forgive me for every mean thought I ever had about you, all of which, I must admit were in the run-off during the Governor’s race. I felt at the time and now am more convinced than ever, that our differences were based upon honest misunderstandings.³

Atkinson trusted that he would fare much better in the next gubernatorial election with Gaylord’s support or, at the very least, without active opposition from him or the *Oklahoman*.

Atkinson declared his intent to run for governor on March 1, 1962. By all indications, he had formulated a sound platform and effectively sparred with his fellow Democratic aspirants as the May primary approached. He looked forward to the primary, and general election, confident that the elections would deliver the governorship to him. However, the candidate’s optimism faded when, just days before the May 1 primary, a succession of vitriolic editorials hit the newsstands.⁴

On each of the three days immediately prior to the primary election, the *Oklahoman* publicly vilified Atkinson. The Saturday and Sunday editions charged him

³ Gaylord to Atkinson, 20 February 1959; Atkinson to Gaylord, 26 February 1959, Box 3, file 40, AHC; Atkinson, “Edgar Bell Channel 9,” Box 3, File 37, AHC; Atkinson to Gaylord, 30 April 1959, Box 3, File 40, AHC.

⁴ “Notification and Declaration for nomination to the office of governor,” 1 March 1962, Box 3, File 6, AHC.

with dishonesty and a blatant attempt to fool the public with a political advertisement designed to falsely appear as an *Oklahoman* editorial promoting his candidacy.⁵ On Monday, April 30, 1962, the *Oklahoman's* condemnation of Atkinson read:

**AN EDITORIAL
The Governorship
Is Not For Sale**

One Candidate for Governor in the Democratic primary has doubtless spent more than twice as much as any other candidate. The legal limit of expenditures by any candidate is \$36,000. A careful calculation indicates that W.P. "Bill" Atkinson is spending at least \$200,000. He has hired some of the ablest and most expensive campaign talent and an army of workers. His expenditure for television, radio, newspaper and other forms of advertising has been huge. Atkinson is a very rich man and can outspend any other candidate. Four years ago he spent vast sums of money, unquestionably going far beyond \$100,000. At the end of his campaign, he filed a sworn statement that his expenditures were approximately \$23,000. Can a man buy the governorship because he is wealthier than his opponents? Atkinson's campaigns are always based on deceit. Four years ago he put out dodgers to which was signed the name of Howard Edmondson, filled with statements calculated to cause the voter to vote against Edmondson. The forgery of another candidate's name is despicable trickery. Last week he inserted a paid advertisement in *The Daily Oklahoman* quoting an editorial from another paper and it was intentionally so worded as to appear to the reader as an editorial expression of *The Daily Oklahoman*. The editor and publisher, the advertising manager and other officials were in New York, attending a newspaper convention. The advertising would not have been accepted if any of them had been here to see it. We deeply regret that numbers of subscribers were deceived into believing *The Oklahoman* was endorsing the candidacy of Mr. Atkinson. The citizens of Oklahoma need, above everything, an honorable man in the governor's chair. A deceitful man is not morally honest.⁶

⁵ "We Are Still Against Atkinson for Governor," *Oklahoman*, 28, 29 April 1962, 1.

⁶ "The Governorship Is Not For Sale," *Oklahoman*, 30 April 1962, 1.

Enraged and humiliated, Atkinson seethed! Had he not genuinely sought to make amends with Gaylord? The loyalties and intentions of the publisher were now perfectly clear.

Atkinson personally supervised the layout and content of the ad now being labeled as deliberately misleading and knew the charges were fictitious. He judged the manner in which the ad appeared in the newspaper to be either a simple mistake or sabotage. Bill Boykin, a key member of Atkinson's campaign team, arrived at the newspaper's advertising department at 7:00 a.m. on Monday morning, April 30, and asked to view the contentious ad from April 25. Examination of the advertisement as originally proposed revealed two proof copies with the letters "O.K." circled in green. The layout contained reprints of two different articles, one from *Tulsa World* and the other from *Tulsa Tribune*, and a hand-drawn sketch of the *Tulsa World* masthead atop the ad. The layout appeared exactly as Atkinson intended. Hastily, Boykin instructed Barney Barnett, display advertising employee, to hold the information in question for his return shortly. Boykin then placed a call to photographer George Hale, who worked directly across the street from the *Oklahoman*, and asked him to take photographs of the layout as evidence of the candidate's innocence. When Boykin and Hale returned to the paper, they were advised that the copy had been taken from Barnett's desk and sent upstairs to either Managing Editor Charles Bennett or Gaylord.⁷

Informed of the events at the newspaper, Atkinson surveyed the magnitude of damage sustained to his reputation and to his campaign. He enacted an immediate,

⁷ "Account of advertising for campaign involving *Tulsa World*," Box 3, File 17, AHC.

definitive, and public condemnation of Gaylord's deceitful actions. In a press-release, submitted that very day, the political candidate proclaimed:

The front page editorial in the Monday issue of the *Daily Oklahoman* attempting to destroy my character and candidacy for Governor on the day before election is based on assumptions, misstatement of fact and malicious falsehoods. As a candidate four years ago I did not...repeat did not... "put out" or "cause to be put out" dodgers bearing the name of Howard Edmondson. I did not engage in forgery as maliciously alleged in the editorial. Much also was made of a charge that an advertisement reprinting an endorsing editorial from the *Tulsa World* was made to appear to be the opinion of the *Daily Oklahoman*. This is untrue. The copy showing this was on file at the *Daily Oklahoman* Monday morning but permission to photograph it was denied. These acts and false charges at the last minute before election when a candidate has difficulty in making a reply is contrary to all rules and ethics of responsible journalism. They demonstrate the extent of extreme personal malice. Today, I filed a libel suit petitioning the court for damages but no judgment can be reached before the citizens of Oklahoma go to the polls in the morning...I ask every thinking citizen to go to the polls tomorrow and cast a vote for all of Oklahoma...and justice!⁸

The libel suit petition filed in Oklahoma County Court, alleging defamation and libel, demanded payment of damages in the amount of \$10 million dollars.⁹

Atkinson's retort produced swift reaction from the public and, especially, the state-wide press. Some newspapers used their platform to champion the man from Midwest City while others seized an opportunity to bash Gaylord. Lengthy editorials devoted to the fracas filled newsstands in every county in the state; it seemed as though everyone possessed an opinion. The *Capitol Hill Beacon* compared the *Oklahoman's* slur to a "piddlin', childish editorial," and said "The Big Daily believes that they can beat

⁸ Atkinson Campaign Headquarters, "press release," 30 April 1962, Box 3, File 17, AHC.

⁹ W.P. Bill Atkinson vs. E.K. Gaylord and The Oklahoma Publishing Company, "Petition," District Court in and for Oklahoma County, State of Oklahoma, no.156520 (30 April 1962).

any candidate with their last-minute-dirty-pool front page editorials.”¹⁰ *The Duncan Banner* answered the *Oklahoman*'s editorial assertion that “Oklahoma needs, above everything an honorable man in the governor’s chair,” with, “But we could also use an honorable man as publisher in Oklahoma City.”¹¹ Del City’s *Leader* did not mince words and declared the Gaylord commentaries to be unjustified attacks that sprang from Oklahoma City’s attempt to annex Midwest City. Author Bob Kidd, Jr., likened the situation to a “journalistic shiv” thrust by Gaylord into Atkinson’s back and concluded his commentary by adding “P.S.—Cousin E.K., that editorial wasn’t clever and good enough to publish two days runnin.”¹²

In some quarters, the war-of-words overshadowed results of the May 1 Primary Election. Raymond Gary and Atkinson placed first and second in the contest and moved toward a run-off on May 22. After the final tally, Freda Ameringer of the *Oklahoma City Advertiser* mused:

There is no way of knowing, of course, how many of these voters were influenced in the closing hours to vote for Mr. Atkinson as a result of attacks upon him by the *Oklahoman*. Mr. Gaylord, who counts himself wise beyond most of us, may have thus been directly responsible for placing his arch enemy in the run-off against Mr. Gary.¹³

Uncharacteristically, the embattled *Oklahoman* initially remained silent and did not proffer a response to the candidate’s allegations or his lawsuit. The reticence elicited *The Duncan Banner* to remark, “the silence this election day is deafening. The *Daily*

¹⁰ “Is the *Oklahoman* Thinking of Good of State?,” *Capitol Hill Beacon*, 29 April 1962, 1.

¹¹ Jack Wettengel, “Banner Banter,” *Duncan Banner*, 30 April 1962, 3.

¹² Bob Kidd, Jr., “I Kidd You Not!,” *Del City Leader*, 3 May 1962, no page, Box 3, File 18, AHC.

¹³ Freda Ameringer, “Mr. Gaylord’s Wisdom,” *Oklahoma City Advertiser*, 3 May 1962, 1.

Oklahoman has shut up. The sting of a \$10 million libel suit has sobered E.K. Gaylord into realizing he is not dealing with the general run of Oklahoma political puppets but with a man who is his own man.”¹⁴

Atkinson conscientiously tried to maintain focus upon his campaign with only three weeks before the run-off. Fortunately for him, defeated former aspirants George Nigh and Preston Moore came to his aid. When asked why he campaigned for Atkinson instead of Gary, former Governor Nigh explained that it was not a question of who he liked more. He had confidence and respect for both men but he considered Atkinson the most qualified for the job. Nigh said that Oklahoma required a business expert to get the state on a firm fiscal footing, and to promote industrial growth, following a period of economic weakness. Nigh also felt a sense of appreciation and obligation to Atkinson because he had, in the prior election, keenly supported Nigh’s candidacy for lieutenant governor.¹⁵

According to UPI’s first state-wide poll in mid-March 1962, Gary led Nigh in the survey by a scant 59 vote margin. By the primary, Atkinson supplanted Nigh in the second position and earned a berth in the run off. Had Atkinson won increased acceptance through his campaign efforts or had the prejudicial editorials produced compassion and backing which carried him into the run-off? Many believed the “vitriolic editorials aroused a lot of sympathy for Atkinson,” and led to his “surprise victory over the other top-rated hopefuls.”¹⁶

¹⁴ Jack Wettengel, “Banner Banter,” *Duncan Banner*, 1 May 1962, no page, Box 3, File 18, AHC.

¹⁵ George Nigh, interview with the author, 2 March 2015.

¹⁶ “Gary, Nigh top Statewide Poll for Governor,” *Oklahoman*, 18 March 1962, 8; “Jim’s Jems,” *Garfield County News*, 4 May 1962, no page, Box 3, File 18, AHC.

The *Oklahoman* took a one-week respite before they launched a new wave of articles and editorials against their adversary. Although not as direct, the new commentaries were unambiguous in their intent. Gaylord's press claimed Gary's qualifications for the job of governor to be superior and insinuated that election of Atkinson would place his campaign manager, H.W. "Coach" McNeil, in position to dictate policy and be the true administrator of the state. In response to the on-going attacks, Atkinson inundated local and city news outlets with press-releases that denounced Gaylord's tactics and rebutted the charges levied against him. He underscored Gaylord's vacillation on the one-cent tax increase and challenged him to publicly explain.¹⁷ Written one year before, an *Oklahoman* article extolled a sales tax increase to meet financial burdens, declaring "Progress is worth the price." Atkinson attempted to run a political ad that contained a re-print of the article along with his condemnation of the fluctuation in support of the idea. He sought to prove "How completely E.K. Gaylord has changed his position. He is now boosting Raymond Gary and his big bond plan." The *Oklahoman* advertising department refused publication of the politician's ad with the only reason given, "the copy is not acceptable."¹⁸

Hostility hung in the warm spring Sooner State air as the Democratic combatants made their final pleas to the voters prior to the run-off election. Both candidates promoted themselves and disparaged the other as they traversed the state. In retrospect, Atkinson called the contentious run-off campaign the "battle royal." Gary and Atkinson,

¹⁷ "Gary Better Qualified," *Oklahoman*, 8 May 1962, 10; Atkinson Campaign Headquarters, "press-release," 11 May 1962, Box 3, File 17, AHC.

¹⁸ "Forward or Backward?" *Oklahoman*, 1 June 1961, 1; Atkinson Campaign Headquarters, "press release," 11 May 1962, Box 3, File 17, AHC.

former party allies, became bitter rivals not only because of their disagreement on key issues such as a tax increase and reapportionment but also because of Gary's somewhat childish notion that it was his turn to run for governor—an intriguing assertion made by Atkinson and confirmed by Nigh.¹⁹

Atkinson defeated Gary in the run-off election by a meager margin of 449 ballots. He felt somewhat relieved and confident that Democratic intra-party fighting would cease and provide him with support from a unified organization. Unity remained elusive and the anticipated level of support never emerged. The *Oklahoman* argued the primary outcome was not a case of Atkinson winning but, rather, a case of Gary losing. An article pondered whether those who voted against Gary would remain with Atkinson or if there was a readiness by the public to finally elect a Republican governor. Further, the commentary cited the victor's campaign manager as a significant factor in the win and adroitly implied that McNeil had utilized unsavory tactics to ensure success.²⁰

H.W. "Coach" McNeil, an old-time oilman and political strategist, managed the Atkinson crusade after being enlisted at the urging of Senator Robert Kerr, who believed McNeil to be one of the finest tacticians around. Atkinson later recalled that he most likely would have lost the primary to Gary if he had listened to his manager. He found McNeil to be obtrusive and complained that he "wasn't half as good as what he cost; that

¹⁹ Atkinson, "Second Governor's Race 1962," undated, Box 3, File 1, AHC; Nigh, interview by author, 2 March 2016.

²⁰ Milligan and Norris, *The Man on the Second Floor*, 199; "An Anti-Gary Vote?," *Oklahoma City Times*, 24 May 1962, 44.

wasn't too good because he didn't charge all that much money." Contrary to Atkinson's assessment, Bellmon claimed the "Coach" had been paid \$52,000 for his services.²¹

Atkinson attempted to unite the party and gain Gary's endorsement through several reconciliatory overtures but the former governor did not relent and never conferred his patronage. The newly-certified Democratic nominee worked to put the acrimonious run-off behind him and began to focus his efforts upon defeating his newest adversary. He later reminisced that "I didn't have any fear of Bellmon, I knew I would be the next governor. I knew I would be." He considered the fact that Oklahoma had never had a Republican governor to be a significant dynamic in his favor.²²

Bellmon focused his full attention upon the mission to defeat his Democratic foe while Atkinson split his concentration between his Republican opponent and the Oklahoma City publisher. The libel suit filed in April simmered in the background as Atkinson waited to determine the validity of the legal action's claim that the Gaylord editorial had been "deliberately conceived to cause the defeat of the plaintiff...in his race for Governor."²³ November election results were the only way to prove that facet of the lawsuit correct.

The GOP candidate utilized every weakness of his opponent's campaign to his advantage. Bellmon implored voters to not to be swayed by his challenger's wealth and

²¹ Atkinson, "Second Governor's Race 1962," Box 3, File 1, AHC; "Both Parties Throw Support Behind Republican Candidate," *The Bellmon Bugle*, November 1962, 1, Henry Bellmon Papers, Box 59, File 21, Special Collections and University Archives, Oklahoma State University.

²² UPI, "press-release," 8 November 1962, Harry Culver Collection, Box 1, Folder 15, Carl Albert Center Congressional Archives, University of Oklahoma; Atkinson, "Second Governor's Race 1962," undated, Box 3, File 1, AHC.

²³ W.P. Bill Atkinson v. E.K. Gaylord and The Oklahoma Publishing Company, "Petition," District Court in and for Oklahoma County, State of Oklahoma, no.156520 (30 April 1962).

extravagant self-promotion. About Atkinson he warned, “He will hope to overcome opposition to his irresponsible sales tax increase by flooding the air waves with political advertising intended to create a smoke screen around the real issue.” Bellmon consistently declared a sales tax increase to be both superfluous and absurd. He argued that the elimination of waste, graft, and corruption in state government served as the only remedy.²⁴

Atkinson categorically defended his fiscal stance against naysayer attacks and said, “I urge the people of Oklahoma to recommend to their legislators to stop deficit financing.” He stressed the need to fully fund essential services provided by the state – education, highway construction, funding of state agencies, and creation of a viable mental health system – through adoption of the idiom “paying as we go.”²⁵

In early fall 1962, the battle for the governor’s office became even more combative when Gaylord’s disapproval toward the Democratic nominee intensified. Editorials, prominently displayed on the front page, exalted the virtues of Bellmon and condemned the weaknesses of Atkinson. Many citizens believed the publisher sought to tell constituents how they should vote and were offended by the *Oklahoman’s* tactics. Some voters, in letters to Atkinson, expressed their displeasure with his treatment in the press and pledged their support. Others wrote directly to Gaylord and reprimanded him for his abominable behavior. An anonymous citizen wrote:

Well, you’ve done it again, and again will probably be responsible for Oklahoma having four more years of what we have had in our

²⁴ UPI, “press-release,” 30 August 1962, Harry Culver Collection, Box 1, Folder 35, Carl Albert Center Congressional Archives, University of Oklahoma; Bellmon, “Speech Excerpts,” Henry Bellmon Papers, Box 60, File 1, Special Collections and University Archives, Oklahoma State University.

²⁵ “Atkinson Stresses Need for Revenue,” *The Daily Ardmoreite*, 4 October 1962, 1.

Statehouse... Is it the first time you've been concerned with the thought that perhaps two parties were needed in Oklahoma, or did this just happen to be the election where the winner in the Primary, on the Democratic ticket, happened to be one of your foes from the past, and through your paper, you could do all you could to bring about his defeat?....In closing, you go right ahead and enjoy all of it to the fullest, but one thing you can NEVER, NEVER, NEVER do, is TELL me, through your paper, how to cast my ballot.²⁶

With a marked indifference to any negative reactions, the editorial assault continued. Infuriated by what he deemed to be unwarranted attacks, Atkinson fought back. On one occasion he sent a pointed telegram to Gaylord which argued his case for the proposed tax increase and demanded the editor's response. He received no direct reply from the publisher who only communicated, indirectly, with him through the newspaper.²⁷

Atkinson's anger clouded his judgment as he expended an inordinate amount of time and energy criticizing Gaylord instead of battling his Republican opponent. In the month prior to the election, he increased his defensive rhetoric against Gaylord and advised citizens that the media mogul was "obsessed in his bid to control the state." Boldly, he illustrated the point when he commissioned a cartoon which portrayed Bellmon as a marionette and Gaylord as the puppeteer.²⁸

Gaylord issued a final disparagement towards the candidate on the eve of the 1962 general election. The *Oklahoman* insisted that opposing editorials were always a

²⁶ "A Change is Needed," *Oklahoman*, 23 September 1962, 1; A Citizen and Taxpayer of Oklahoma City to Edward K. Gaylord, Editor-*Daily Oklahoman*, 23 September 1962, Box 3, File 24; AHC. Several letters of encouragement and support of Atkinson can be found in Box 3, File 23, AHC.

²⁷ W.P. Bill Atkinson to E.K. Gaylord, telegram, 5 October 1962, Harry Culver Collection, Box 1, File 15, Carl Albert Center Congressional Archives, University of Oklahoma.

²⁸ UPI, "press-release," 23 October 1962, Harry Culver Collection, Box 1, File 15, Carl Albert Center Congressional Archives, University of Oklahoma; Clarence Allen, Gaylord and Bellmon political cartoon, 1962, Box 3, File 14, AHC.

contentious element of any political campaign and considered Atkinson's reaction to be nothing but typical. The article further said "The newspaper deals with many controversial subjects. Politics is loaded with controversy and any newspaper that is worth its salt makes a lot of politicians mad." The attempt to explain months of critical editorials as business-as-usual not only dismissed Atkinson's response to those editorials but also conveyed a veiled implication that he should have taken it like a man, as had those who came before him.²⁹

Victory came to Bellmon in November's gubernatorial election by a margin of almost 77,000 votes. Atkinson steadfastly maintained the opinion that his defeat emanated primarily from Gaylord's deceit. He also attributed additional motive to Gaylord with the revelation that, for the past two years, plans were in development to establish a daily newspaper to compete with the *Oklahoman*. Atkinson claimed "My closest friends realize this is the basic reason why E.K. Gaylord has fought me with a vengeance and why he fought me so intensely in the campaign."³⁰

Atkinson and his advisors deemed legal action against Gaylord to have the highest probability of a successful outcome if proceedings were held in an unbiased location. The publisher's permeating influence in the entire Oklahoma City metropolitan area necessitated selection of the remote location of Okmulgee County as neutral ground.³¹

Within a week of the general election, Atkinson formally retained attorney Truman B. Rucker and his associate O.H. "Pat" O'Neal of the Tulsa-based law firm

²⁹ Otis Sullivant, "Political Jabs Old Stuff to the Daily Oklahoman," 30 October 1962, 13.

³⁰ Hanneman, "Henry Louis Bellmon," in *Oklahoma's Governors*, 159; UPI, "press release," 8 November 1962, Harry Culver Collection, Box 1, File 15, Carl Albert Center Congressional Archives, University of Oklahoma.

³¹ "Atkinson Talks with Lawyers," *Oklahoman*, 10 November 1962, 31.

Rucker, Tabor, Shepherd and Palmer. The defeated candidate promised full cooperation to his counsel and offered his personal staff in Midwest City to assist in the fight. His optimistic expectation that he would prevail grew as he heard from reliable sources that Gaylord had started to get nervous. His nemesis, purportedly, increased his libel insurance by a substantial sum and appeared to be getting quite concerned about the impending legal action. The irritated Gaylord warned his staff that “Bill Atkinson’s name was to never be used on a broadcast on Radio or Television in a favorable light.”³²

The libel suit proceeded with a re-filing in Okmulgee District Court on March 14, 1963. Rucker held a press conference in which he declared that the *Oklahoman* deliberately published an offensive editorial purposed to cause the defeat of his client. The petition named Oklahoma Publishing Company (OPUBCO), E.K. Gaylord, and E.L. Gaylord as defendants and asked the recovery of \$5 million in actual damages and \$5 million in punitive damages. It contended:

That statements in the editorial were deliberately conceived and published to cause the defeat of the plaintiff in his race for governor and so timed by the defendants so that the plaintiff would not have time before the primary election on May 1, 1962, to answer its allegations....as a result of the editorial, he has had his political future curtailed and irreparably damaged and that his reputation as a businessman and civic leader also has been damaged.³³

Okmulgee District Court assigned Judge Jack Pitchford to preside over the proceedings. In a statement to the press, the judge expressed his desire to afford a fair trial to both parties and recognized that the suit had gained both state and national

³² Truman Rucker to Atkinson, 12 November 1962, Box 3, File 32, AHC; Atkinson to Rucker, 19 February 1963, Box 3, File 32, AHC.

³³ “Atkinson’s Libel Suit Finally Filed,” *Tulsa Tribune*, 16 March 1963, 4; “Atkinson’s Suit Asks \$10 Million,” *Tulsa World*, 15 March 1963, 1.

attention “because it involves, in essence, one rich and famous man suing another rich and famous man.”³⁴

Concurrent with the libel suit, Oklahoma County convened a Grand Jury tasked with examination of campaign financing. Accusations levied during the 1962 election had instigated the probe which sought to determine if candidates exceeded the mandated spending limits. Many believed the inquiry would yield nothing new and, as one report accurately portended, “if a really conscientious check into the spending of the major candidates for Governor in 1962 is entered, about all the Grand Jury will learn is that every one of the major candidates violated the expenditures law in one way or another.” Upon release of the Grand Jury’s final report no bills of indictment for violation of spending limits were returned.³⁵

Gaylord countered Atkinson’s libel suit with a *Motion to Strike* petition which argued that the plaintiff’s case “did not set forth a state of facts giving rise to a right of recovery.” As chief counsel Rucker battled against Gaylord’s formidable Oklahoma City attorneys — Mart Brown, Ben Lewis, and H.A. “Bud” Carter, Jr.— his associate Pat O’Neal and private investigator Harry J. Seacat traversed the southeastern counties of the state. They pursued witnesses who had information regarding the false campaign brochures from the 1958 primary election which had been such a prominent portion of

³⁴ “Outside Eyes on Us,” *Henryetta Daily Free Lance*, 25 March 1963, no page, Box 3, File 18, AHC.

³⁵ “Grand Jury Probes Campaign Expenses,” *Oklahoma City Times*, 25 April 1963, 24; “Of Limited Value,” *Tulsa World*, 24 April 1963, no page, Box 3, File 18, AHC; “County Grand Jurors Release Final Report,” *Oklahoman*, 17 December 1963, 6.

Gaylord's accusations against Atkinson. The investigators knew that the dodgers originated in that area of the state.³⁶

An experienced private eye with many meticulously detailed contacts and a reputation for keeping his mouth shut, Seacat sought the individuals responsible for the vexing pamphlets attributed to the Atkinson campaign. He also pursued the identity of witnesses with testimony to support the merits of Atkinson's case. Parallel to Seacat's investigation, Gaylord's private eyes, O.K. Bevins and Bill "Jelly" Bryce, a legendary sharp-shooter formerly with the Oklahoma City bureau of the F.B.I., pursued witnesses and information to bolster the *Oklahoman's* defense. Since rural campaign workers rarely interacted with candidates for state-wide office and often made autonomous decisions to support their candidates, the investigators faced a daunting task.³⁷

The bucolic political machinery of mid-twentieth century Oklahoma possessed a unique character and spirit. Partisans in the rural counties enthusiastically championed their favored candidate and viewed election work as both a rewarding activity and a substantive civic contribution. Working on a political campaign in a rural county provided excitement, opinions to discuss with friends and neighbors, and a desirable distraction from everyday small-town life. Rural workers operated independently of the

³⁶ W.P. "Bill" Atkinson vs. The Oklahoma Publishing Company, E.K. Gaylord and E.L. Gaylord, "Motion to Strike," District Court in and for Okmulgee County, State of Oklahoma, no. 28954 (16 April 1963). Brown, Lewis, and Carter were counsel for defendants, this information obtained from court filings, correspondence, and news articles.

³⁷ Rucker to Atkinson, 21 June 1963, Box 3, File 32, AHC; "Speaking of Pictures...G-Man Can Draw Gun Faster Than You Can Read This," *Life*, 12 November 1945, 12-3; Seacat to Atkinson, 3 July 1963, Box 3, File 32, AHC.

candidate's headquarters and rarely, if ever, received direction or funding from the big city.³⁸

Initially reported as a single instance of informational fraud, investigation revealed the existence of two separate issues of counterfeit pamphlets. "Oklahoma Don't Miss the Boat" emanated from Wilburton, while a second item called "Ten Point Program" originated from Durant. By the second week of July 1963, Seacat traced the origin of the first pamphlet to the Little Dixie area and proceeded, posthaste, to Pittsburg and Latimer counties. Upon arrival he contacted several loyal Atkinson supporters and enlisted their assistance in the acquisition of pertinent information and vital witness testimony. Numerous interviews revealed the person responsible for printing "Oklahoma Don't Miss the Boat" to be Fred Stovall, publisher of the *Latimer News*. An interesting interrogation of Stovall ensued during which the publisher initially claimed that, upon advice of counsel, he would not furnish any information related to the printing of the dodger. He stated an awareness that his deposition would be required at some point and he would have to tell the truth. Seacat impressed upon Stovall that he would not face prosecution if he did not participate in the composition or distribution of the material. Despite the investigator's efforts, the publisher refused to supply any names of those involved and affirmed only that Atkinson workers brought the material to him for printing and paid for the work. Seacat later conjectured that Stovall knew he would not

³⁸ This is the author's own assessment of the rural southeastern counties of Oklahoma during that era commonly referred to as Little Dixie. My opinion is derived by a culmination of many materials investigated for this thesis, and supported by: Rucker to Atkinson, 1 August 1963, Box 3, File 33, AHC.

be held legally responsible and, further speculated, that the man had either been paid-off or threatened with physical harm if he revealed the names of the perpetrators.³⁹

Seacat learned that distribution of the Latimer County pamphlet occurred during an evening meeting held at a Wilburton gas station. Those in attendance at the gathering were C.E. McDonald, Roland Young, garage owner Tony Basolo, and State Senator Gene Stipe. McDonald reported he had distributed the literature throughout the Muskogee and Pryor areas but not without incident. During delivery of the materials he had been apprehended by Edmondson supporters. An Associated Press reporter contacted him soon after the incident and a frightened McDonald called Senator Stipe and asked what he should do. The senator, possibly fearing incrimination, told McDonald to get out of town and disappear.⁴⁰

Atkinson's attorney, O'Neal, arrived at the Latimer County Courthouse in Wilburton to take depositions during the third week of July. First to be deposed, Fred Stovall testified that he had printed approximately 20,000 of the "Don't Miss the Boat" pamphlets between the primary and the run-off of 1958. The next witness sworn was Senator Stipe. O'Neal and Seacat were extremely nervous about his testimony because they were doubtful a truthful account could be extracted. All prior contact with the wily witness had shown him to be evasive and rude. Surprisingly, the senator admitted to having the materials printed but maintained that the forgery had been brought to him by an Atkinson campaign worker. He could not recall if that worker came from Tulsa or Oklahoma City. Stipe stated "he and Tony decided that it would be excellent politics to

³⁹ Seacat to Atkinson, 3 July 1963, Box 3, File 32, AHC; O'Neal to Atkinson, 26 July 1963, Box 3, File 32; O'Neal to Atkinson, 1 August 1963, Box 3, File 33, AHC.

⁴⁰ Seacat to Atkinson, 3 July 1963, Box 3, File 32, AHC.

have this dodger printed and distributed throughout southeastern Oklahoma.” The senator added that Atkinson had no personal knowledge of the article in question and all activities related to payment, printing, and distribution were entirely Basolo’s and his idea. Basolo’s deposition followed Stipe’s revelation. He affirmed his co-conspirator’s testimony concerning the pamphlet and echoed the declaration that Atkinson lacked any knowledge of the mischief. Seacat and O’Neal were relieved that the depositions had gone far better than anticipated. Stipe’s and Basolo’s confessions to being party to the deception and the assertion that Atkinson was not involved strengthened the case, even if no one admitted to composing the forgery.⁴¹

Later in life, Stipe recalled the Democratic primary season of 1958 in his book, *A Gathering of Heroes*. The former state senator conveniently disregarded the part he personally played in the forgery scandal and put forth new claims about his function during that period. Stipe claimed to have been “as close to a campaign manager as there was for the Atkinson camp.”⁴² That assertion is entirely false. Floyd Maytubby and Red Jacobs directed the operation and no supporting evidence exists that Stipe acted in any such capacity. If Stipe held a campaign manager position, it would have been a self-appointment and only for southeastern Oklahoma.

Following conclusion of the depositions at the Wilburton courthouse, Seacat proceeded directly to Durant to confirm information which indicated a local lawyer named Conner Montgomery had something to do with the “Ten Point” forgery. Informants Louie Gossett and Schoolboy Sherrer forewarned the investigator that lawyer

⁴¹ O’Neal to Atkinson, 26 July 1963, Box 3, File 32, AHC.

⁴² Gene Stipe and Ralph Marsh, *A Gathering of Heroes* (Heavener, Ok.: Spring Mountain Press, 2000), 219.

Montgomery was a dubious character who should be approached with caution. Sherrer predicted that he “would have his hand out and would sell out to the side who had the most money.” The informers told Seacat that Montgomery’s history included the manufacture of false campaign pamphlets. In the 1954 election the lawyer composed an anti-Gary dodger titled “The Shameful, Shameful Truth.”⁴³

Concurrent with the investigation in the southern portion of the state, Atkinson made tangible strides toward establishment of his newspaper. The groundbreaking ceremony for his new enterprise took place in Midwest City, on July 26, 1963. The aspiring newspaper magnate declared that his publication would practice what he personally preached and “give Oklahoma a second voice in our capital city.” The irony of Atkinson developing a competing newspaper while battling the *Oklahoman* amused many and prompted one correspondent to say “The first Democrat to lose an Oklahoma governor’s race not only wants to start a paper competing with the *Daily Oklahoman* but he wants its publisher to finance it.”⁴⁴

Meanwhile, Conner Montgomery’s deposition finally took place at the Bryan County Courthouse in early September after weeks of coaxing to set up the event. The lawyer testified that he had both authored and paid the printing costs of the “Ten Point” pamphlet. He swore that Atkinson had no knowledge of the literature and dramatically stated, “I want the record to show that I do not particularly like Bill Atkinson, but I just wanted to tell the truth about this whole situation.” Montgomery’s full, and histrionic, confession surprised O’Neal but generated satisfaction that he now possessed all the

⁴³ Seacat to Atkinson, 15 August 1963, Box 3, File 33, AHC.

⁴⁴ Travis Walsh, “Atkinson Hits Bellmon on Teacher-Solon Issue,” *Tulsa World*, 24 July 1963, 12; Troy Gordon, “Round the Clock,” *Tulsa World*, 17 March 1963, no page, Box 3, File 18, AHC.

information required to absolve his client of forgery allegations. After solving the forged pamphlet mystery, Seacat refocused his efforts toward the identification of voters in the Okmulgee area who, supposedly, had been negatively influenced by the *Oklahoman* editorial.⁴⁵

The Okmulgee District Court scheduled the libel suit to be heard on November 11, 1963. However, the defense filed a motion prior to commencement of the trial asking for additional time to answer the court's denial of their *Demurrer* motion. The court granted the request for an extension and gave the defendant until November 7 to file a response. Attorneys for Gaylord responded on November 6 with a filing that refuted each of Atkinson's charges and claimed all declarations made in the editorial had been truthful. The retort cited an Oklahoma statute that decreed any candidate running for office to be considered a public officer and, therefore, any editorial criticisms privileged and not subject to libel. The defendant's response continued with a denial of any responsibility for damage to Atkinson's personal or political reputation and stated the "reason he lost his political races and suffered damage to his reputation and political future, if any, were the method and manner in which he and his supporters conducted both the 1958 and 1962 campaigns for governor." The defense warned that, if the suit went to trial, they would prove that the plaintiff's campaign expenditures far exceeded the limit.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ O'Neal to Atkinson, 12 September 1963, Box 3, File 33, AHC.

⁴⁶ "Atkinson Suit Trial Could Be Delayed," *Tulsa Tribune*, 16 October 1963, no page, Box 3, File 20, AHC; "Defendant in Atkinson Suit Gets More Time," *Tulsa Tribune*, 24 October 1963, no page, Box 3, File 20; "Answer Filed in Libel Suit; Trial Delayed," *Oklahoman*, 6 November 1963, 11. In 1963 defense counsel cited Oklahoma statute (12 O.S. § 1443) to assert that candidate Atkinson had no basis to sue for libel.

A deposition hearing on November 7, before Judge W.R. Wallace in Oklahoma District Court afforded defense attorney Mart Brown a forum to argue that his client had the right to review bank records of three Atkinson for Governor clubs because those records were pertinent to the defense of the libel suit. Pat O’Neal spoke for the plaintiff and, interestingly, argued that the U.S. Constitution specifies that “an individual cannot be forced to make disclosures that would incriminate him.” Solicitor for the Atkinson campaign clubs, O.A. Cargill, maintained that financial records were property of the organizations and not an issue related to the lawsuit. Judge Wallace refused to grant the defense request for access to the information but ordered that the ledgers be sealed and sent to the trial court in Okmulgee. In response, the defense filed a *Mandamus* suit with the State Supreme Court which asked the high court to compel District Judge Wallace to allow access to all Atkinson for Governor Campaign club records. The State Supreme Court refused to grant the defendants request, upheld the lower-court decision, and re-affirmed Okmulgee to be “the proper tribunal to determine whether the subject bank records may be introduced as evidence.”⁴⁷

Gaylord’s barristers then petitioned Judge Pitchford, of the Okmulgee court, to recuse himself. They cited conflict of interest as the reason because of the magistrate’s close business and personal association with the plaintiff’s attorneys. Regardless of whether the challenge reflected a true concern or merely a desire to stall the trial, the jurist complied and voluntarily stepped aside.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ “Campaign Expense Disclosure Opposed,” *Oklahoma City Times*, 8 November 1963, 24; “Bank Records are Libel Suit Issue,” *Times-Democrat* (Altus), 27 November 1963, no page, Box 3, File 20, AHC; “Campaign Fund Look is Denied,” *Oklahoma City Times*, 26 December 1963, 9.

⁴⁸ “Gaylord’s Lawyers File Petition; District Judge Steps Aside in Case,” *Sooner State Press*, 18 January 1964, 4.

Eager for a determination on the inclusion of campaign finances in the lawsuit, counselor Truman Rucker readied his client for the last obstacle before trial. He told Atkinson to be prepared to detail every good and bad deed ever committed. He advised that special attention should be given to disclosure on the acquisition of land for Midwest City and all personal financial transactions. Rucker reminded his client of an analogy he had offered months before: “when you file a libel action...you lay your character and reputation on the line, with the defense lawyers picking on you with the same enthusiasm that you would expect from wolves tearing at the body of a wounded and dying deer.”⁴⁹

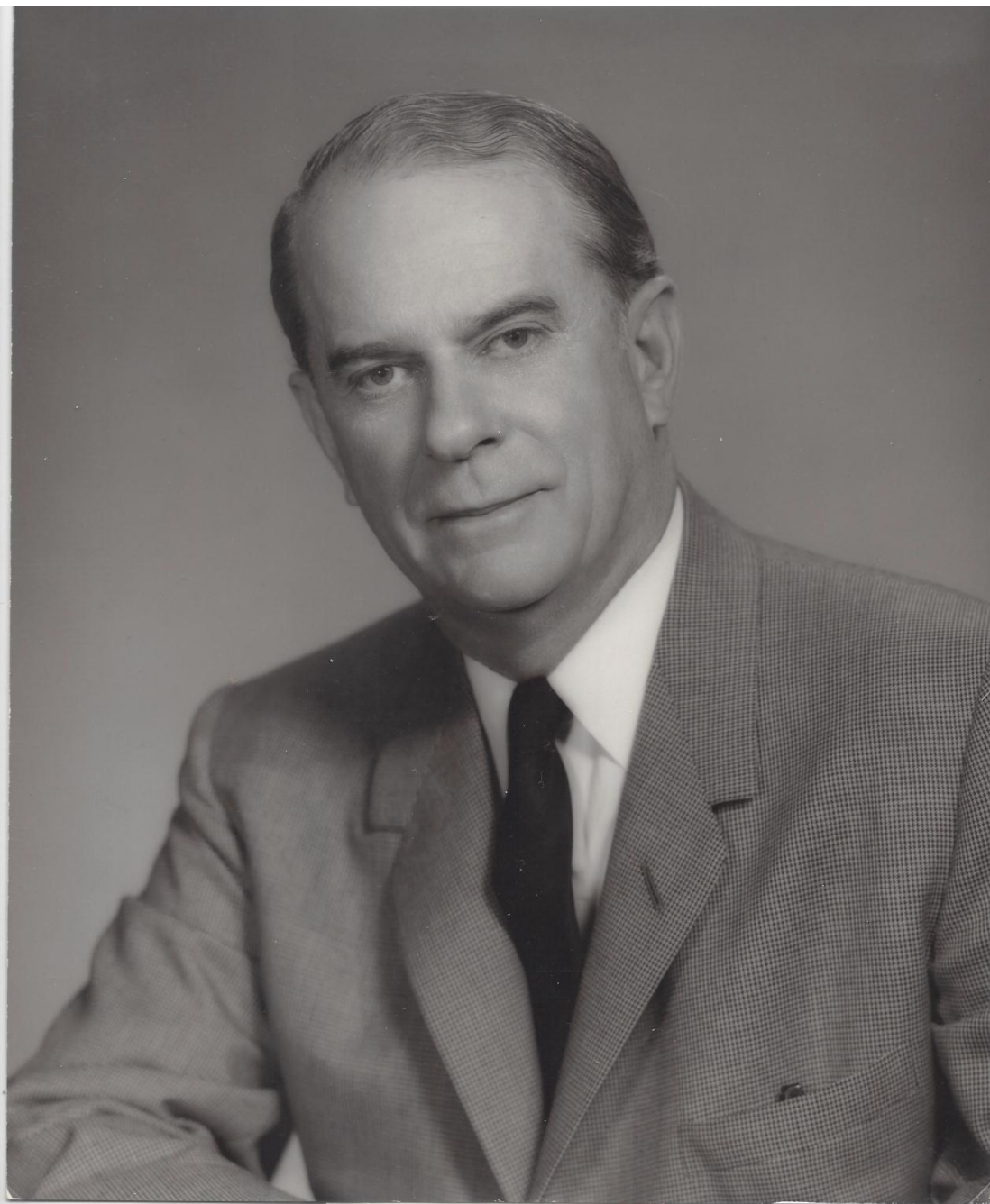
By the end of 1963, Rucker eagerly sought an end to litigation. However, on December 2, the situation became more tenuous and difficult when Atkinson filed a second libel suit for \$100,000!⁵⁰

Atkinson’s second quest to become governor began auspiciously but disintegrated into a debacle which eclipsed his failure to secure his party’s nomination in 1958. Meticulously planned details, creation of a substantive platform, and enlistment of the craftiest campaign team in the state ultimately were ineffectual because other elements and circumstances conspired to derail the momentum of the campaign. After the tempestuous and divisive primary run-off election, his inability to reconcile differences with Raymond Gary contributed significantly to the discord and schism in the Democratic Party which enhanced the Republican candidate’s probability of success in the general election. While the party split substantially affected the gubernatorial contest that year, Atkinson did not consider it to be the seminal cause of his defeat. His passive disregard of the persuasive campaign and personality of his Republican rival, Bellmon,

⁴⁹ Rucker to Atkinson, 24 December 1963, Box 3, File 34, AHC.

⁵⁰ “Suit Asking for \$100,000,” *Oklahoman*, 3 December 1963, 7.

also became a contributing element in his loss. However, most significantly, Atkinson fervently believed the election had been stolen from him by the *Oklahoman* publisher. He had naïvely underestimated the depth of his former mentor's animosity and allowed himself to be drawn into a battle with Gaylord instead of concentrating his campaign salvos toward Bellmon. Politicians accepted that the press would likely take issue with them or their platform during a campaign and acceded to the inevitable negative print articles. Atkinson's 1962 campaign differed from the politics-as-usual norm and deteriorated into a very public and very personal sideline battle between two powerful men which detracted from the real issues. Atkinson believed he had suffered, unjustly, from the wrath of Gaylord and filed a libel suit against him as the only remedy available for the injury. A desire to restore his public reputation and to obtain personal retribution outweighed the entreaty for monetary damages. Atkinson's investigators successfully, and definitively, determined the source of the contentious 1958 pamphlets which had precipitated allegations of fraud against him. The Atkinson legal team knew the information would exonerate their client of any complicity in the fraudulent pamphlets and were eager to get the trial underway. Unfortunately, as with the elections, no interaction between Atkinson and Gaylord would be routine or predictable.



Bill Atkinson, ca. early 1960s
Courtesy Atkinson Heritage Center



Raymond Gary: "To my good friend Bill"
(This picture most likely given to Atkinson prior to the campaign of 1962)
Courtesy Atkinson Heritage Center

Atkinson Campaign 1962, political cartoon of Gaylord & Bellmon
Courtesy Atkinson Heritage Center



Chapter 4: Publishers and Other Enemies

As spring and summer 1963 passed, Atkinson continued to manage his business enterprises, worked to establish his new daily newspaper, and actively assisted his legal team as they pressed the libel suit against Gaylord. By the fall of 1963, a barrage of new editorial attacks upon his character shattered the relative calm. This time the brutal assault of libelous newspaper condemnations originated from a new source much closer to home. Unprovoked, The *Midwest City Shopper's* acting editor, Irvin Hurst, blindsided Atkinson with outrageous charges of shady business dealings and menacing behavior. The introduction of additional allegations, and a second front in the editorial libel conflict, brought pressure for investigators to gather more information and gain an advantage. All manner of clandestine activities were initiated to secure intelligence about the strengths and weaknesses of adversaries. Addressing the new onslaught of accusations became a top priority but the legal team continued pursuit of the Gaylord battle at the maximum speed allowed by the judicial process. Atkinson knew that his pride and future business success dictated that he publicly and officially refute all aspersions of his character. He also knew the legal system to be the only vehicle capable of vindicating him. Meanwhile, he wanted to make certain that he had intelligence-gathering capabilities to rival those of Gaylord.

In October 1963, Gaylord's private detectives from United Research Service met with Irvin Hurst, at his insistence, and heard an offer to divulge sensitive information about Atkinson's business dealings. Hurst, a former newspaper reporter for the *Oklahoman* and failed political candidate, became affiliated with Midwest Publishing

Company when he offered to manage the printing company, *gratis*, for Maria Winkler, the widow of company owner, George Winkler. Perhaps, Hurst thought he could improve his fortunes if he ingratiated himself to the powerful *Oklahoman* editor by providing potentially explosive information about Atkinson's affairs to Gaylord.¹

One evening in November 1963, trusted Atkinson associates received information that the *Midwest City Shopper* planned to publish a scathing editorial on the front page of the next day's edition. The *Shopper*, an advertising circular, belonged to Maria Winkler who had named Irvin Hurst as the new acting editor. The widow had no business experience or journalistic expertise and only recently became the proprietor after her husband's death. When offered Hurst's publishing experience for free, she naively handed over the struggling operation to him. Upon confirmation of the publication's plan, Bill Boykin and Atkinson went to Winkler's home to plead their case for scrapping the editorial. They told the gullible woman about the sensational diatribe Hurst had composed and asked for her intervention. She immediately telephoned Payton Stanley, general manager at the printing plant, and directed him to stop the press. Boykin and Atkinson went directly to Midwest City Publishing where Stanley and advertising salesman Jerry Wells again spoke, on the telephone, with Mrs. Winkler to re-confirm her wishes. She emphatically ordered the offending page to be taken off the press and destroyed. Implementing the owner's directive, a Midwest Publishing Company employee loaded the pages in his car and hauled them away for destruction. Later that night, Hurst arrived at the publishing company and, when informed of the removal of the

¹ United Research Service to Ben Lewis and Mart Brown, "Investigator Report," 31 October 1963, Box 4, File 2, AHC.

pages, flew into a profanity-laced tirade, which included a threat to sue the underling who had removed the pages for grand larceny.²

Atkinson hoped the matter resolved and that Winkler would keep her manager in check. A few days later, he wrote her to clarify his position and to advise his opinion of Hurst's true intent. Atkinson warned:

I firmly believe that Mr. Hurst is not in Midwest City for the purpose you intended and had a right to expect...I have reason to believe he is in Midwest City for the purpose of serving the best interest of Mr. E.K. Gaylord and the *Daily Oklahoman*...Irvin Hurst has been in touch with officials of the *Daily Oklahoman* and their attorney almost daily since he came to Midwest City as the manager of the Midwest Publishing Company.³

The hoped-for détente evaporated when the offensive, and presumably destroyed, front-page editorial appeared in the following week's *Shopper*. Copies of financial transactions and a tale of dishonest dealings enlivened the usually vapid advertising circular. The tabloid claimed Atkinson had duped George Winkler when he purchased the *Midwest City Leader*. Hurst claimed "Thus, in one brief exchange, Atkinson wipes out his unpaid campaign printing bill, acquires a legal newspaper...with a cash gain of \$47.42 to boot!"⁴

Atkinson was furious that acting editor Hurst accused him of financial improprieties and intimidating behavior. Hurst's accusations derived from Atkinson's purchase of the *Midwest City Leader* in March 1963; his first formative step in his efforts to establish a new daily newspaper. The odious *Shopper* article omitted important details

² Leon Hatfield, "What Really Happened at Midwest Publishing Co.," Hatfield, "The Truth About Atkinson-Winkler," Box 4, File 5, AHC. Hatfield was present at Midwest Publishing the night of the incident.

³ Atkinson to Maria Winkler, 23 November 1963, Box 4, File 3, AHC.

⁴ Irvin Hurst, "How to Finance a Campaign in Four Easy Steps," *Midwest City Shopper*, 27 November 1963, 3, Box 4, File 4, AHC.

about the transaction such as the fact that George Winkler wanted to buy back Atkinson's 51% share of Midwest Publishing, a holding originally sold to Rubye Atkinson in 1961. The Atkinsons' purchased controlling interest in the printing company, at the request of Winkler, for cash desperately needed to keep the establishment operating. The sale of Atkinson's shares back to Winkler eliminated the debt owed the publishing company for printing campaign materials, transferred ownership of the *Midwest City Leader* to Atkinson, and netted \$47.42 to him from the combined business transactions. Hurst further alleged that Atkinson and his lieutenants had "stormed the publishing premises and aggressively taken the papers and facsimiles of checks off the press."⁵

Embarrassed and outraged, Atkinson judged he had no recourse but to file a second libel suit on December 2, 1963. The threat of impending litigation did not curtail Hurst's barrage of insults and half-truths. For two additional weeks, Atkinson's character and honesty were derided in the *Shopper's* headlines. The contents of a letter, allegedly written by Mrs. Winkler to Atkinson, appeared prominently on the front page of the tabloid. In the correspondence, Winkler claimed that Atkinson and Boykin stayed at her home for two hours until she yielded to pressure and agreed to kill the story with a call to the press.⁶ Betrayed by Winkler, under attack by Hurst, and locked in battle with Gaylord; Atkinson needed all his innate tenacity and perseverance to continue the bold defense of his reputation and continue to further his business ventures.

⁵ George Winkler to W.P. Bill Atkinson, proposal to sell one-third interest in Midwest Publishing Co., 16 October 1960; George Winkler to W.P. Bill Atkinson, "Bill of Sale" *Midwest City Leader*, 1 March 1963, Box 4, File 1, AHC; Leon Hatfield, "What Really Happened at Midwest Publishing Co.," Box 4, File 5, AHC.

⁶ "Suit Asking for \$100,000," *Oklahoman*, 3 December 1963, 7; Maria Winkler, "Maria Tells of Two-Hour Ordeal with Atkinson," *Midwest City Shopper*, 11 December 1963, 1, Box 4, File 4, AHC.

The approaching end of 1963, found Atkinson bogged down as he dealt with several vexing situations simultaneously. His lawsuit against Gaylord suffered seemingly interminable delay from a litany of motions, briefs, and arguments filed by the defense to terminate or interrupt proceedings. For months he had agonized about the prospect of a Grand Jury recommended investigation, or an indictment, related to campaign finances during the 1962 governor's race. He diligently toiled to get his *Oklahoman Journal* into publication, but even those efforts were now overshadowed by the skirmish with Hurst.

Intelligence gathering activities flourished as detectives, assisted by the business underlings of key players, intensified their investigative efforts in expectation of uncovering *dirt* helpful to their respective sides in the Atkinson versus Gaylord case or the Atkinson versus Hurst affair. Truman Rucker, Atkinson's chief counsel, reported his office had been under surveillance and directed investigator Seacat to check it out. Men, posed as Southwestern Bell employees, had continually resided at the Darby-Lane motel directly across the street since July. These phone company employees were frequently spotted watching the law office, presumably to observe visitors to the plaintiff's attorneys.⁷

Bob Cunningham, private eye for Gaylord, joined the fray and was known to have been in close contact with Hurst. The two met on several occasions at the coffee shop next to Midwest Publishing, conceivably to plot *The Midwest City Shopper's* plan of attack. Covert offensive and defensive activities became frenzied as detectives clandestinely followed every move of vital participants and noted potentially provocative information such as what "lady friend" had been visited or which defense attorney had

⁷ Seacat to Atkinson, 22 October 1963, Box 3, File 33, AHC.

become so overwrought that he had been admitted to the hospital after a reported suicide attempt.⁸

Atkinson and his associates strongly suspected that phones had been tapped and listening devices installed in various locations. He cautioned allies that conversations were being recorded and instructed that they be mindful of what they said. Counter-espionage was considered. Atkinson investigated the latest surreptitious listening gadgets and, possibly, contemplated the purchase of a bug detector made to look like a pack of cigarettes.⁹

Despite the tumult of information gathering and posturing, victory and vindication seemed to be elusive to both sides. A plethora of minutia—from filings, motions, and procedural issues—delayed progress in the legal proceeding against Gaylord. However, the action against Hurst was actively and determinedly pursued by lawyer Don J. Harr, of Tulsa, on Atkinson's behalf.¹⁰

In his deposition of December 18, 1963, the acting publisher of the *Shopper* admitted the fabrication of stories about Atkinson and acknowledged an involvement with E.K. and E.L. "Eddie" Gaylord. Under oath, Hurst stated that he approached the *Oklahoman's* attorneys with an offer to assist in his former employer's defense. He disclosed his recent affiliation with the Midwest Publishing Company to Gaylord's attorneys and suggested, "If you want to establish deceit it's all right here." In his

⁸ Leon Hatfield, "What Really Happened at Midwest Publishing CO.," Box 4, File 4, AHC; United Research Service to Ben Lewis and Mart Brown, "Investigator Report," 31 October 1963, Box 4, File 2, AHC; Boykin, "memo from the desk of Bill Boykin," Box 3, File, 47, AHC. Information from Box 3, File 47, consists of notes and memos mostly written on scrap paper without any heading to reference. The majority are Atkinson's handwritten notes to self, or associate Boykin.

⁹ "Science," *Time*, 6 March 1964, 55-6; Atkinson to Boykin, "to do memo," Box 3, File 47, AHC.

¹⁰ "Suit Asking for \$100, 000," *Oklahoman*, 3 December 1963, 7.

deposition, Hurst divulged receipt of “advance money” from Eddie Gaylord on three separate occasions. The funds, utilized to pay employees and keep the business running, were provided as payment for allowing Gaylord’s C.P.A. firm to review the financial books of Midwest Publishing for the purpose of establishing any fraud committed by Atkinson. Hurst confessed that he fabricated the story of Atkinson storming the print shop and destroying over 1,600 front pages containing the divisive articles. Hurst’s zealous and single-minded pursuit to take down Atkinson resulted in no real gain for any of the sparring parties. E.K. and Eddie Gaylord distanced themselves from the entire matter and Midwest Publishing permanently closed its doors. Vindicated by Hurst’s admissions, and with more serious pressing matters at hand, Atkinson unceremoniously concluded legal action against Hurst, and concentrated legal efforts against Gaylord.¹¹

As weeks passed and the new year began, problems developed in the action against Gaylord. Okmulgee District Judge Jess I. Miracle, after hearing defendant’s motion to allow campaign finances to enter the suit, ruled that expenditures could be considered in the case. The docket for the court finally reflected a scheduled start date for a trial, April 20, 1964. The long-awaited resolution became more clouded and convoluted when a federal court decision interjected itself into the suit.¹²

In a March 9, 1964, decision by the U.S. Supreme Court, *New York Times v Sullivan*, the justices unanimously ruled that a public official may not recover libel

¹¹ “Gaylord Money Used to Meet Midwest Publishing Payroll Irvin Hurst Says in Testimony,” *Midwest City Leader*, 19 December 1963, 1.

¹² “Atkinson Spending to Enter Case,” *Tulsa World*, 17 January 1964, 18; “Atkinson Libel Trial Date Set,” *Tulsa World*, 17 March 1964, no page, Box 3, File 21, AHC.

damages for a false statement or criticism unless it was committed with actual malice.

Justice William J. Brennan wrote the decision for the court and proffered:

We are required for the first time in the case to determine the extent to which the constitutional protections for speech and press limit a state's power to award damages in a libel action brought by a public official against critics of his official conduct. . . . We consider this case against the background of a profound national commitment to the principle that debate on public issues should be uninhibited, robust, and wide-open, and that it may well include vehement, caustic and sometimes unpleasantly sharp attacks on government and public officials."¹³

This court decision was handed down after the *New York Times* requested a review of a judgment which awarded damages to Alabama public officials in a libel action against the newspaper. The Court held that the rule of law applied by the Alabama courts against the newspaper was constitutionally deficient for failure to provide petitioner (*New York Times*) the safeguards for freedom of speech and of the press that were guaranteed by the First and Fourteenth Amendments.¹⁴

Attorneys for the defense in the libel case swiftly filed a petition to transfer the case to U.S. District Court. Their petition cited constitutional questions after the Supreme Court decision the previous week and contended, "Mr. Atkinson asked for a public determination of his honesty, integrity, and fitness for the governorship and that a good faith discussion of the subject is within the constitutionality protected area of free press as outlined by the high court."¹⁵

¹³ "The Supreme Court's Opinion on Libel," *Editor & Publisher*, 14 March 1964, 10.

¹⁴ *New York Times v Sullivan*, 376 U.S. 254; 84 S. Ct. 710; 11 L. Ed. 2d 686; 1964 U.S., accessed 3 March 2015, <http://www.lexisnexis.com.vortex3.uco.edu:2050/hottopics/lnacademic>.

¹⁵ "Supreme Court Ruling Cited in Okla. Suit," *Editor & Publisher*, 28 March 1964, no page, Box 3, File 29, AHC.

The defense further declared that their editorial “was published in fulfillment of a duty and responsibility....and was a good faith canvass of the worth of the character and qualifications of the plaintiff as a candidate for the highest office in the state of Oklahoma.” United States District Court Judge Luther Bohanon, however, rejected the defendant’s petition and remanded the case to Okmulgee County.¹⁶

Atkinson’s legal team perceived The Supreme Court decision as a harbinger of the futility of protracting the case. Attorney Rucker informed Atkinson that Bohanon’s decision to send the case back to the lower court did not precipitate optimism for a favorable decision. As Rucker expressed to his client, “That does not change the situation at all as regards to this latest United States Supreme Court case, which places us in a most difficult, if not impossible situation.” The lawyer submitted that, if his client felt the legal opinion to be incorrect, he would not be offended by retention of different counsel. Rucker further expressed his frustration and pessimism, “This case has been a terrific financial drain on our firm and, frankly, we cannot see any reasonable possibility of success, in view of the law that is now facing us.”¹⁷

The lawsuit languished throughout the summer months with delays and no encouraging developments. Finally, Atkinson realized the senselessness of further pursuit and formally ceased litigation on September 4, 1964. Far too much time, work, and money had been devoted to the effort and more worthwhile interests required those resources. Just the month prior, the *Oklahoma Journal* had rolled-off the press for the first time. As owner and publisher of his own newspaper, Atkinson offered his

¹⁶ “Atkinson Lawsuit is Moved to U.S. Court,” *Tulsa World*, 19 March 1964, 2; “Court Returns Atkinson’s Suit,” *Tulsa World*, 26 May 1964, no page, Box 3, File 21, AHC.

¹⁷ Rucker to Atkinson, 26 May 1964, Box 3, File 34, AHC.

assessment of the recent Supreme Court decision which led to the cessation of his legal action. He asserted:

The ruling does not even require truth to be a safeguard against libel suits...In essence, it says deliberate malice must be shown...And malice is a term even the judges find hard to define...The Supreme Court clearly affirmed the doctrine that the First Amendment protects uninhibited, robust and wide-open debate of public issues without any test of truth. Such findings make it a matter now between the publisher and his conscience...¹⁸

Atkinson and Gaylord, now both former friends and former adversaries, maintained a relative silence between themselves for the following ten years. Each worked conscientiously to fulfill the responsibilities of owning a large metropolitan newspaper and performed civic duties obligated by their wealth and public stature.

The competing daily broadsheets encountered skirmishes along the way, many trivial and some more substantial. One of the more significant fracas resulted from the *Oklahoman's* alleged refusal to print advertising from any customer who simultaneously advertised in the *Oklahoma Journal*. Atkinson diplomatically addressed the dispute with the rival press and, surprisingly, was able to rectify the situation with little opposition.¹⁹

Some incidents were genuinely mischievous and silly such as the activity which prompted an exasperated Inez Gaylord's note to the *Journal*:

Circulation Department – The *Oklahoma Journal*.
Gentlemen, please instruct your carrier for this district not to leave the paper at this address. It happened several times last week.
We have not subscribed to it and do not expect to.
Thank you for this attention, yours truly, Mrs. E.K. Gaylord

¹⁸ "Hello, Oklahoma City, We're Here," *Oklahoma Journal*, 16 August 1964, 1; Atkinson, "editorial," *Oklahoma Journal*, 4 September 1964, 1.

¹⁹ Royce Ewing, Circle Furniture Company, "sworn statement," 23 October 1964; Atkinson to Charles Hoover, Advertising Department-*Oklahoman*, 25 October 1964; Charles Hoover to Atkinson, Publisher-*Oklahoma Journal*, 27 October 1964, Box 4, File 33, AHC.

Always gallant, Atkinson wrote back and expressed his sincere apology for the error.²⁰

The tale of these two adversaries ended with the death of Edward King Gaylord on May 30, 1974. Just five years later, in 1979, Atkinson sold his publication to Early California Industries; a firm that owned a chain of weekly papers.²¹

Frosty Troy, the *Oklahoma Journal*'s first editor, reminisced about his six month employment with the newspaper. He became disillusioned and resigned because an expected gift of company stock and a promise of free-rein in the pressroom never materialized. He said Atkinson killed off hard-hitting stories in droves, especially articles that might embarrass a congressman, or, "stepped on the wrong county commissioner's toes."²² However, Troy admitted that Atkinson initially "did a good thing in creating the *Oklahoma Journal*," and contended that it had the potential to overtake the *Oklahoman* in both circulation and substantive reporting.²³ He remembered:

For one brief shining moment the community was illuminated with unvarnished, hard-hitting, reporting the likes of which it had never seen. You'd have to have experienced what competition means to appreciate what a tonic it is. The State Capitol Press Room was a lazy, lofty perch from whence OPUBCO folk of that era peered down on mere political mortals. When the *Journal* came to town, and competition entered the arena, OPUBCO reporters were bouncing around the complex looking for stories, worried about being scooped. One even checked waste basket carbons to make sure he didn't get beat on a story and thus get a chewing from his city editor... For that one brief period, The *Oklahoma Journal* gave 50,000 residences a look at columns by people of different

²⁰ Mrs. E.K. Gaylord to Circulation Department-*Oklahoma Journal*, 10 January 1966; Atkinson to Mrs. E.K. Gaylord, 13 January 1966, Box 3, File 44, AHC.

²¹ "E.K. Gaylord, 101, Publisher, Dies," *New York Times*, 1 June 1974, 32; "Midwest City Paper Sold," *Oklahoman*, 24 March 1979, 14.

²² Frosty Troy, "Requiem for the Journal," *Oklahoma Observer*, 10 April 1979, 10.

²³ Frosty Troy, "The Journal Doesn't Rest in Peace," *Oklahoma Observer*, 10 November 1990, 6.

viewpoints—a rarity in Oklahoma City. People read stories that would never be published by OPUBCO.²⁴

Atkinson maintained that his decision to sell the *Oklahoma Journal* was founded in the belief that the newspaper evolved to the point that it could survive without his involvement, and the sale provided the financial means and personal freedom for himself and his staff to pursue his latest project—the full development of Quail Springs.²⁵

Atkinson departed from the newspaper business to develop miles of shopping, office buildings, a luxury retirement complex, and churches; his stated reason for selling his paper. Perhaps, an argument could be made that Gaylord's death also influenced the decision to sell the *Oklahoma Journal*. With his formidable nemesis gone, Atkinson's inspiration and reason to publish a daily newspaper no longer existed, and maybe, just maybe, being a newspaper publisher without a formidable adversary just wasn't fun anymore. . . .

²⁴ Frosty Troy, "Remember the Oklahoma Journal?," *Oklahoma Observer*, 10 February 1984, 6.

²⁵ Atkinson to Dennie Hall, Director- Journalism Hall of Fame, 25 January 1995, Box 1, File 19, AHC.

Midwest Shopper employee with the offensive editorial pages

(This print from a slide I found in Atkinson's papers regarding this incident)

Courtesy Atkinson Heritage Center



Conclusion

Atkinson did not let his inauspicious beginnings define his life. Through innate tenacity, skill, and a certain measure of luck, he became a wealthy self-made man by achieving success in journalism and real estate development. A difficult childhood and exploits as a young adult provided the impetus for many accomplishments. Atkinson's commitment to civic service, his affiliation with the Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce, and membership on many influential committees and boards propelled him into the world of politics and state prominence. Triumphs alone cemented Atkinson's place in Oklahoma history, but, his legendary conflict with the powerful Gaylord added to the familiarity of his name.

Atkinson's decisive land purchase in 1941 incurred Gaylord's wrath and, eventually, led to the *Oklahoman* publisher's repeated editorial repudiation against his candidacy for governor in 1958 and 1962. Gaylord utilized his power-of-the-press to thwart Atkinson's efforts and inflict public humiliation and mental anguish each time the successful businessman attempted to gain the state's highest political office. Atkinson considered a public trial, where he could specifically refute each and every malicious allegation levied by his former colleague, to be his only avenue to vindication. Denied absolution by the legal system after a protracted process, he retaliated against Gaylord in the most public, and personal, way possible: he launched a competing daily newspaper. The preceding chapters describe events that stimulated the acrimonious relationship between the friends-turned-adversaries—Atkinson's creation of a city and his two campaigns for governor. To address the void of fundamental scholarship about the relationship between Gaylord and Atkinson, I have chronicled the events and people

essential to their story and elucidated the causes and effects of their actions. My work clearly indicates that the bickering of two powerful and famous men can have tremendous ramifications. This clash of historic titans directly affected two gubernatorial races and contributed to the election of the first Republican governor in Oklahoma's history. The struggle of the two men, while personal, also influenced the plans, aspirations, and fears of two metropolitan areas when the Draper-Gaylord leadership of the Oklahoma City Chamber felt compelled to annex Atkinson's beloved Midwest City.

Understanding the acrimonious relationship between Gaylord and Atkinson is essential to the totality of the political and cultural history of Oklahoma in the mid-twentieth century. Until now, explicit examination of the famous fracas has been incomplete. Because of Atkinson's long-life and prominent accomplishments, voids still exist in scholarship devoted to this legendary statesman. To date, extensive research committed to his relationship with Stanley Draper and the annexation of Midwest City, his prodigious land developments, and his *Oklahoma Journal* have been ignored.

It is incredibly sad that two men, once friends and colleagues, ended their lives resenting each other. Their protracted dispute is evidence that stubbornness and foolish differences can affect not only the participants but also have wide-spread and lasting consequences.

I have contemplated the factors Gaylord and Atkinson found most irritating about each other and, after considerable research related to this work and thought, have formed opinions of the wellspring of the animosity. Significantly, Gaylord and Atkinson were very similar men in many respects. Both were well-educated with journalistic skills and business acuity honed during their early twenties. Each possessed intelligence, cunning,

and a meticulous approach to achieving results. Each was very successful in business and pursued a life of great wealth and civic prominence. Possibly, life parallels were a substantial contributor to the issues that developed between the men. If the old saying that opposites attract is true, perhaps, it is also true that analogous experiences and personalities repel.

Gaylord's exasperation with Atkinson began with the Midwest City land deals. Atkinson's initiative to pursue the acquisition without Gaylord's guidance or sanction was, plausibly, viewed as unforgivable insubordinate behavior by the newspaper owner. Atkinson, who once relished his designation as Gaylord's fair-haired boy, could not forgive his mentor's denigration and attacks which he presumed to be personal. I maintain that Atkinson did not brush off the negative editorials, as many politicians have before and since, because he viewed Gaylord as the father figure denied him in his childhood and the scathing criticisms caused emotional pain he could not surmount.

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