

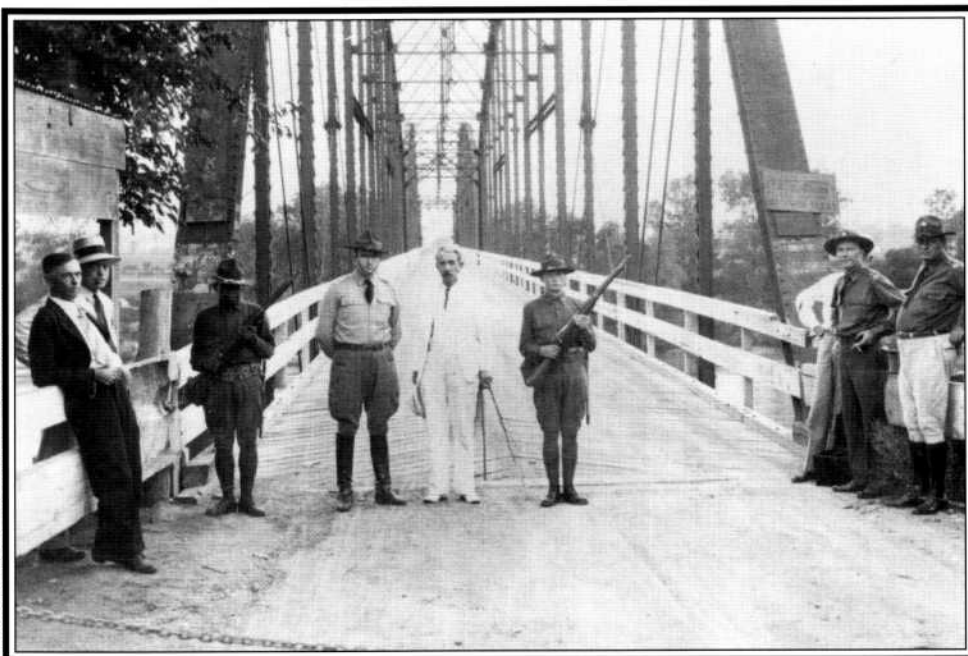
The Great Ticket Scandal of 1933

or

Alfalfa Bill Calls Out the Guard

BY DAVID W. LEVY

Photos from OU Western History Collections



Two years before he called out the National Guard to take tickets at the 1933 OU-A&M football game, Oklahoma Governor William H. “Alfalfa Bill” Murray took his troops to the Red River to free the Texas toll bridges from the oppression of their commercial operators.

The State of Oklahoma never has suffered from a shortage of cantankerous, colorful and outrageous political leaders. But even in Oklahoma, William H. “Alfalfa Bill” Murray was something quite special. Gaunt, restless, impulsive and stubborn, Alfalfa Bill Murray was a potent force in Oklahoma politics from the writing of the state’s constitution in 1907 through the end of the 1930s.

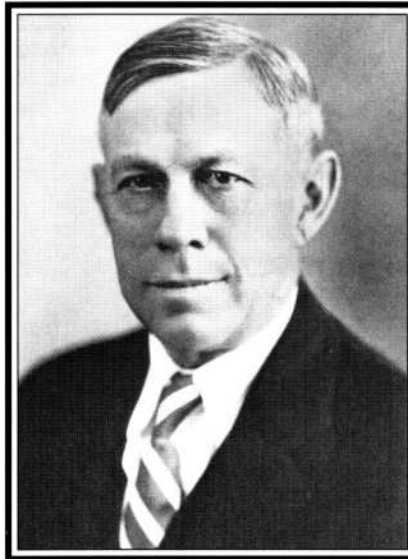
He drew his support from small, white, Democrat farmers—many of them deeply in debt, many of them tenants working other people's land, most of them fiercely loyal to Bill Murray. And he spent a political lifetime denouncing, on their behalf, the fat corporations and the banks, the bloated millionaires and the African Americans, the sophisticated cities with their spoiled, over-educated aristocrats. To much of the rest of America he was as big a joke as William Jennings Bryan had been to an earlier generation—and for the same reasons. He was crude, disheveled, seedy and unpredictable, a pugnacious howl from the backwoods.

In August 1929, Alfalfa Bill returned home from a failed attempt to establish an agricultural colony in Bolivia, and he plunged himself right back into the middle of Oklahoma politics. He ran for the governorship in 1930 and won. Part of his program was to provide help for depression-hit farmers. He advocated tax relief, free seeds, higher taxes on corporations, free textbooks for school children. His administration, however, also was characterized by two peculiar proclivities that were to come together in the fall of 1933, as revealed in the first document printed below.

The first of Murray's penchants was a profound distaste for and suspicion of higher education. To him, colleges and universities were the refuge of the rich and lazy, the drunken and dissolute. He once charged that there were too many college graduates in the state. By the summer of 1931, the governor had summarily and contemptuously dismissed five of Oklahoma's college presidents. He seems to have reserved a particular animosity, however, for the University in Norman and a very genuine enmity for William Bennett Bizzell, its president.

Murray's assaults on the University of Oklahoma and its president were bitter and unrelenting. They ranged from sarcastic public allegations that the new student Union was "a country club," to baseless charges of "flagrant immorality and corruption" on the Norman campus. Murray

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Convinced that a football ticket counterfeiting ring flourished at OU, Governor Murray ordered Athletic Director Ben G. Owen, above, to turn over ticket-taking duties to the National Guard, along with lists of ticket sellers and records of their sales.

launched unjustified claims of financial mismanagement; after investigation, all of the charges were eventually dismissed as groundless.

He fired the head of the University Hospital and issued an executive order that chiropractors be allowed to practice there. He recommended that Bizzell institute a policy of entrance examinations, proposed shifting some programs from Norman to Stillwater and suggested that both Norman and Stillwater restrict themselves to juniors and seniors with freshmen and sophomores going to community colleges.

Then he urged that each faculty member—all of whose salaries had been cut—make a "voluntary" contribution of \$2 to further his programs. Keith L. Bryant, who has written a judicious and balanced biography, *Alfalfa Bill Murray*, speaks of "the grave harm he did to higher education" in the state of Oklahoma.

The governor's hostility toward Bizzell may have stemmed from the president's friendship with Frank Buttram, a prominent Oklahoma oilman. Buttram had close ties to the University. He had married Merle Newby, who had taught violin on the Norman campus and who was the sister of Errett Newby, former registrar and a loyal and enthusiastic alumnus. Buttram was serving as the president of the University's Board of Regents.

Unfortunately for the University, Buttram decided to run for governor against Murray in the Democratic primary, and unfortunately for Bizzell, the president may have indiscreetly (and erroneously!) introduced Buttram to several audiences as "the next governor." As former President G. L. Cross has written in *Professors, Presidents and Politicians*, "Perhaps understandably, Murray had no feelings of good will toward the University of Oklahoma, its president, or the president of its board." By executive order Governor Murray removed Buttram as a regent in April 1931.

Murray's second unusual trait as the state's chief executive was his propensity to call out the National Guard. By December 1933, Bryant tells us, Murray had called out the Guard 27 times and declared martial law in 34 separate proclamations. In August 1931, he sent the Guardsmen to shut down every oil well in the state in the hope of raising prices—on that occasion he created 3,100 martial law areas, each one 50 feet in diameter. He used the Guard to open free bridges into Texas despite the injunction obtained by Texas toll bridge operators. When his friend Zach Miller of the famous 101 Ranch was arrested for not paying alimony, Governor William H. Murray sent the Guard to free him.

Continued

Sending in the troops, Bryant says, "was becoming his favorite tool of state." No detail of a "military" action was too trivial to absorb Murray's attention or to call forth his concentrated thought. One detects (for example in the eighth numbered paragraph below) the deep desire of a frustrated officer to bark precise orders to his men.

The big Thanksgiving Day football game between the University of Oklahoma and Oklahoma A. and M. was played on November 30, 1933, before 18,000 fans, the second largest crowd in University history up to that time. The afternoon was to be rendered quite humiliating enough by the Aggies' 13-0 victory. But the evening before the teams ever took to the field, Alfalfa Bill Murray thought he had spotted one more way to embarrass the University and mortify President Bizzell. Instinctively, he turned to the Guard.

**STATE OF OKLAHOMA
EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT**

Wm. H. Murray
Governor

November 30, 1933.

**TO BRIGADIER GENERAL CHARLES F. BARRETT,
ADJUTANT GENERAL:**

Sir:

You will take a troop of Guards sufficient to carry out this order, placing them under the immediate command of Colonel Flynt:

First: You will order placed two Guardsmen on every gate, or entrance, of the Athletic Field, or grounds of the University, Norman, Oklahoma, promptly at 9 o'clock A.M., Thursday, November 30, 1933, before the game starts, or any one has entered, and there to remain upon the gates, or places of entrance, until the game, or games, are over, on that day.

Second: These men so placed will take up all tickets of all who enter the grounds, or Athletic Field, and permit no one to enter without a ticket, except participants and officials of the game.

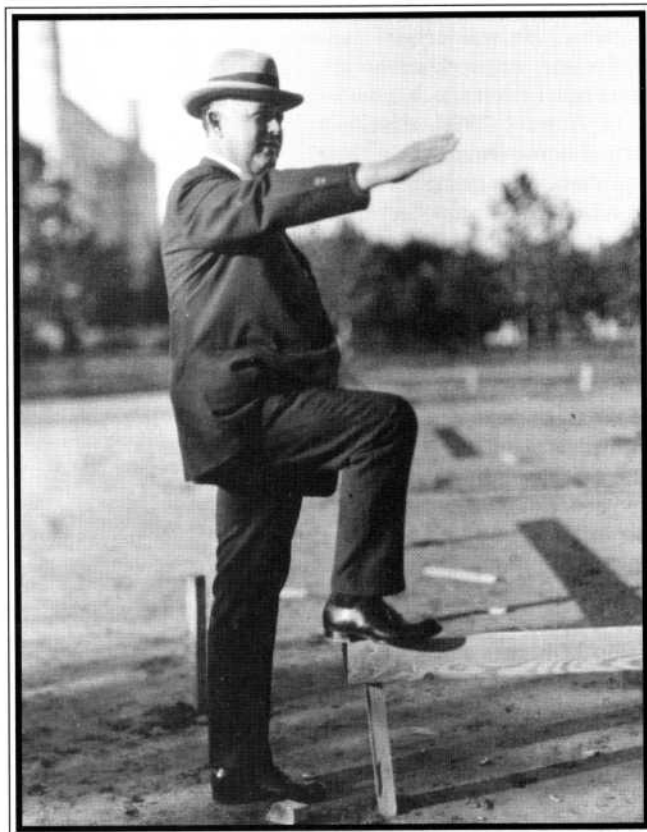
Third: Place all tickets in a box constructed like a ballot box for each and all gates where tickets are received, the box to be locked or nailed securely, and kept closed until count can be had, as herein provided.

Fourth: Colonel Flynt will call on Mr. [athletic business manager Bill] Cross, or Mr. [athletic director Ben G.] Owens [sic], or the proper authority of the Athletic Commission, for a list of all persons, or agents, who sold tickets for the games on that day, and where and when such persons, or agents, sold the tickets, and how many tickets were furnished them each for sale.

Fifth: Colonel Flynt will call on Mr. Cross, Mr. Owens [sic], Dr. Brizzell [sic], and the Athletic Commission for the amount of money reported collected

for the tickets, and you will demand of the agents, or sellers of the tickets, to pay the money to the Athletic Commission, or its Treasurer or the proper persons to receive said funds, and they are to be counted in your presence when paid to said proper authorities. Also call on them for the several amounts of money reported at each of such games at the University Athletic Field at each performance had in the past since July 1, 1930, up to and including November 30, 1933.

Sixth: After the performance is over, you will then immediately cause these boxes to be collected



President William Bennett Bizzell, above, incurred Alfalfa Bill's wrath when he publicly supported his gubernatorial opponent, OU Regents President Frank Buttram.

and the tickets counted in the presence of the gentlemen before named, and/or any authorities controlling the Field and the game, or who manage the same.

Seventh: In counting the tickets, note especially any tickets bearing duplicates of the same numbers and any other peculiar marks relating to said tickets.

Unaccustomed to the work of taking tickets, the soldiers worked so slowly that football fans were waiting in long lines at game time, and many missed the early part of the game....

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**NORMAN TRANSCRIPT,
Friday, December 1, 1933, p.1:**

MILITIAMEN START COUNTING TICKETS OF AGGIE GAME

**Only Announced Purpose Is To
Look for Duplicate Tickets,
Owen Says**

Back Receipts Checked

**Governor Does Not Explain Purpose
in Ordering Guardsmen to Norman**

Eighth: After the count of the tickets is made, place all of them thus received at the gates and counted in one box, nailed up or locked. Wrap around this box, both ways, paper seals, or slips of paper sealed around the box, and Colonel Flynt will sign his name on these slips around the box a sufficient number of times so that the seal cannot be broken, or the box opened without disclosing that fact. Do this in the presence of witnesses.

Ninth: Take the box and place it in your vault, or some vault, for safe keeping, in the Capitol Building, and there preserve it until further ordered.

Tenth: Note where the tickets were printed, and ascertain the reasons why they were printed at that place.

Eleventh: Ascertain what disposition was made of the tickets in the past and the names of all who controlled the Athletic Field and the sale of the tickets.

Twelfth: Report to me all things done, and what was learned as to money received, tickets collected, and any and all things discovered relating thereto.

For the purpose of effectuating and facilitating the execution of this order, and in order to prevent interference, the space around the entrances and/or gates to the Athletic Field is declared a Military Zone, to a distance of twenty-five (25 ft.) feet within the gates and fifty (50 ft.) feet around the gate on the outside thereof.

You are also to place a sufficient guard at both the north and south ends of the Field, so that no one could enter from either end without presenting a ticket, in conformity to the foregoing order.

Done this the 30th day of November, A.D., 1933.

BY THE GOVERNOR OF
THE STATE OF OKLAHOMA

Wm. H. Murray
Commander-in-Chief of the Militia.

COUNTERSIGNED:

Adjutant General

ATTEST:

SECRETARY OF STATE

By:

ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF STATE

Gov. William H. Murray's "army" of militiamen today was counting and checking tickets received at the Sooner-Aggie game, for the apparent purpose of looking for duplicate tickets.

"I was told that they were looking for duplicate or counterfeit tickets but I don't believe they will find any. We never had any trouble of that sort before," Ben G. Owen, Sooner athletic director, said this morning while guardsmen in an office at the Fieldhouse went over the ticket stubs and checked them with the Stadium seat arrangement.

"If there is any more to it than that, I don't know what it is," Owen said.

Lt. Col. Elmo Flint [sic], who was in charge of the guardsmen, said merely that they were counting and checking the ticket stubs and looking for any irregularities. He said he believed the count would be finished this afternoon. No irregularities had been found up to noon, Flynt said....

A unit of 55 National Guardsmen, called from their homes in Chickasha during the night, took charge of all Stadium entrances early Thursday morning under order of Governor Murray, and carefully supervised the taking of tickets for the game.

Unaccustomed to the work of taking tickets, the soldiers worked so slowly that football fans were waiting in long lines at game time, and many missed the early part of the game....

No request for information on past games had been received at the University treasurer's office early this afternoon, but complete records showing the exact number of each kind of ticket sold for each game are available there, officials said. These records have been audited, according to University regulations.

Adj. Gen. Charles F. Barrett of the National Guard told questioners Thursday that "People have told the governor that athletic money is being misused, so we are here to see that it is protected."...

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NORMAN TRANSCRIPT,
Sunday, December 3, 1933, p.1:

**TICKET CHECK
REVEALS ALL
WERE VALID**

**No Irregularities Found in
Sooner-Aggie Game, Militia
Commander States**

Stubs Sent to Capitol

**Information on Past Football
Receipts Obtained On
Governor's Order**

...No duplicate tickets were used to gain admittance to the Sooner-Aggie football game Thanksgiving day, Lieut. Col. Elmo Flynt announced Saturday as he completed a check of stubs collected at the Owen field gates and withdrew the last remnants of Gov. W. H. Murray's national guardsmen from the Sooner Fieldhouse.

"Our audit of the attendance is finished," he said. "It will be turned over to Governor Murray immediately along with audits of the past three seasons as he requested in his executive order. I do not know why the governor wants the figures, but I can say I shall report that all tickets used at the Thanksgiving day game were valid."

Ben G. Owen, director of athletics, said he was satisfied with the inspection and was glad it had been made if any question concerning receipts had been raised. "It was much better to have the investigation and satisfy anyone who would be interested in the council's affairs than to have persons dissatisfied without knowing how the council accounts are kept," he said....

Although total receipts from football games this year were not complete, it was expected they would run ahead of 1932 and 1931. Football receipts for the past few years follow: \$42,087.16 in 1932; \$48,626.61 in 1931; \$67,555.73 in 1930; \$75,815.63 in 1929; \$69,342.78 in 1928; \$61,970.50 in 1927; \$51,016.70 in 1926 and \$44,801.89 in 1925.

[Sources: A copy of Governor Murray's order can be found in the Emil Kraettli papers, Box K-7—Folder #2, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma. The newspaper accounts, as indicated, are all from The Norman Transcript during the week of the incident.] The author would like to thank Jana Vogt for calling this document to his attention.

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NORMAN TRANSCRIPT,
Thursday, December 7, 1933, p.5:

**Murray Takes Credit
For Ticket Regularity**

OKLAHOMA CITY, Dec. 7—(UP)—No duplicate tickets were found in the check of receipts and stubs at the University of Oklahoma-Oklahoma A. and M. college game because no duplicates were sold, Gov. W. H. Murray said today.

And none were sold, he asserted in the Blue Valley Farmer, "because all knew the night before of the order for the guards." He said the militia kept drunkenness and fights at the game to a minimum.

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NORMAN TRANSCRIPT,
Friday, December 8, 1933, editorial:

MOUNTAINS FROM MOLEHILLS

Governor Murray has finally revealed just why he declared martial law around the University stadium Thanksgiving day and had the national guard seize all ticket stubs for an audit....[T]he governor gives two reasons for his action.

The first was the drunkenness which prevailed at the Homecoming game. If the governor keeps up with developments as closely as he should he knew that the University authorities and Cleveland county officers had arranged to deputize a large force of officers and station them at the Thanksgiving game to eliminate drinking....It was ridiculous for the governor to declare martial law and send guardsmen to the stadium just for that purpose.

The other reason is that the governor was told six duplicate tickets showed up at one of the games. When two persons appeared for certain seats, they found them occupied, and the usher told them the occupants had duplicate tickets, the governor declares. It is entirely possible and quite probable that the usher misread one set of the tickets. That frequently happens. This was the only complaint we have ever heard on duplicates, and surely if duplicate tickets had been issued in the past numerous instances would have come to light and complaints made about them.

But when the governor is looking for a chance to lambast[sic] an individual or institution he does not like, a molehill becomes a mountain. In this case the governor climbed upon his imaginary mountain of duplicate tickets which crumbled before the audit now completed, and from his mountain he bellows forth a loud blast, scandalizing the good name of the University and humiliating the athletic officials.

The straight thinking citizens of Oklahoma will not be fooled by his loud mouthings.