

What changes came to Oklahoma in the 1950s?

Roy J. Turner completed his term in January 1951. He had achieved a remarkable building program, developed highways, and attracted new employers. He had tried, and failed, to repeal Prohibition, to establish a state merit system, and to write a new State Constitution.

The toll road between Oklahoma City and Tulsa opened to drivers in 1953. The state named it the Turner Turnpike in honor of the former governor. After leaving office, Turner returned to his ranch and continued to work in the cattle industry.

Who was Governor Johnston Murray? The incoming governor, Johnston Murray, was sworn into office on January 8, 1951, by his 81-year-old father, former Governor William H. “Alfalfa Bill” Murray. Johnston Murray was very different from his father. He had never held a state or national office. He was a patient man who avoided *confrontation*, if at all possible. He was polite and sophisticated.

He was a man of varied experience, having worked in *journalism*, petroleum, and law. Murray became chairman of the Southern Governors’ Conference, chairman of the Interstate Oil Compact, and a member of the Executive Committee of the National Governor’s Committee. Because of these and other duties, Murray traveled *extensively*, possibly more than any previous governor. He signed laws improving the mental health hospitals and combining small rural schools. He also signed a law permitting women to serve on juries.

One major difference between Johnston Murray and his father as governor was their use of the National Guard. Alfalfa Bill called out the Guard frequently. Until 1954, Johnston Murray never made use of the Guard for such purposes. In that election year, however, he stationed Guard members at polling places in Pittsburg, Adair, Leflore, and Cherokee counties, calling voting conditions in those five counties “appalling.”

“I am taking this step to assure the people they will not be *disenfranchised* (kept from voting) by *unscrupulous* (unethical) persons,” he said.

Johnston Murray turned over the governor’s office to Raymond



**Governor
Johnston Murray**
Oklahoma Historical
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Gary on January 10, 1955. For a while Murray explored a business venture in Texas. Then he returned to Oklahoma City where he practiced law and consulted for the State Department of Public Welfare. In the 1960s, his knowledge of Spanish and of South American customs was valuable when the U.S. State Department sent him to Latin America on special assignment. He died in 1974.

Governor Murray was 49 when he took office. He had been born in 1902 in Emet, Chickasaw Nation, in the home of the Chickasaw governor, Douglas H. Johnston, for whom he was named. His mother was one-eighth Chickasaw Indian, so he was the first Oklahoma governor of Indian descent.

He earned his associate's degree from Murray State School of Agriculture at Tishomingo in 1924. That year he was twenty-two, and he went with his parents to Bolivia and Argentina. He served as an interpreter and guide there from 1924 to 1928. Later, he attended night school to earn a law degree in 1946.

The younger Murray and his outgoing wife, Willie, opened the governor's mansion on weekends for public visits. They invited the people of Oklahoma to see "your mansion."

One of the candidates in the primary election of 1954 was the governor's wife, Willie. She was the first woman to run for governor in this state. The people, who had loved her as first lady, did not want her for governor. She received only a marginal number of votes.

What was the Korean Conflict? Civilian life was short-lived for many veterans. Just five years after the end of World War II, another war began in Korea. The Communists in China were invading Korea. Government officials claimed that it wasn't really a war. It was "just a little police action," with United Nations troops trying to restore peace and stop Communism. But to the soldiers who were living in foxholes and dodging bullets, it was a war.

The Army called the Forty-fifth Infantry Division back into action. The Thunderbirds went to Japan in April, 1951, for six months of intensive training. Then they headed for South Korea to be the first National



Willie and Johnston Murray greet visitors to the Oklahoma Governor's Mansion.
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Guard division to meet the invading forces. By New Year's Day, they were engaged in battle. They went through 209 days of fierce fighting without relief. They gained strategic ground and held it. They fought at battles that became known as T-Bone Hill and Old Baldy. American reporters with them at Alligator Jaws Hill described that battle as the most bloody and bitter fighting of the war.

The Forty-fifth Infantry gained so much territory that the Chinese saw them as a dangerous force. The Chinese sent larger and larger troops to attack them. These attacks were called Jen Hai, or "Human Sea." They had so many soldiers that the Thunderbirds said they "couldn't see daylight between them." The more Communists they met, the harder the Thunderbirds fought.

One of the officers of the Forty-fifth was a music teacher in the public schools in his civilian life. He had a Chinese bugle that had been captured. During one battle, he listened carefully to the enemy's bugle signals. Then, at the next attack, when the Chinese infantry was crossing a field in the open, he played their "retreat" signal. His playing sounded so real that the Chinese buglers thought it was an order and repeated it. Mass confusion occurred among the enemy troops. The Thunderbirds, who were outnumbered eight to one, took the advantage. They stopped the attack and destroyed the Chinese formation.

In April 1954 the Thunderbirds came home. The number of battle streamers on the division flag made it difficult for one man to carry. Once again, they had proved that the Forty-fifth Infantry Division could get the job done. Battle-weary foot soldiers returned home to be music teachers or tailors or to resume whatever lives they had left behind at the beginning of that "little police action." More than 74,000 Oklahomans served in the Korean War, and 1,200 of them gave their lives.

What was the Cold War? During the early 1950s, the Cold War was on everyone's mind. It was not an actual war but a long-lasting hostility between countries with Communist dictators and those with free elections. Russia seized much of Eastern Europe and called itself the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.) or Soviet Union. "Red China" was poised to take over its neighbors in Asia. Fear of Communism infected America.

The "Red Scare" swept Oklahoma, too. Worried about traitors in education and government, the legislature passed a law requiring all state employees to take loyalty oaths. Several professors from the A&M College at Stillwater (now OSU) refused to take the oath. The college

Do You Know?

Attendance at school is compulsory for children ages 5 to 18 in Oklahoma, the longest education commitment of any state in the nation.

fired them in May 1951. Then in December 1952, the U.S. Supreme Court declared the oaths unconstitutional. By that time most of the professors had found other work and were not interested in returning to Oklahoma A&M. The legislature drafted a new oath in 1953 which met with court approval.

Who was Governor Raymond Gary? Raymond D. Gary, from a farm between Madill and Kingston, was the first governor born in Oklahoma after statehood. He was born January 21, 1908. After getting a teaching degree from Southeastern State College, he taught for five years. He was elected Marshall County Superintendent of Schools. In 1936, Gary's interests moved to business. He became a furniture manufacturer and then president of Sooner Oil Company. He entered the State Senate in 1941. He remained there until voters elected him governor.

Governor Gary campaigned on road building issues. Despite the efforts of previous governors, the state's roads were still inadequate. Gary announced that he would build 2,500 miles of highways in Oklahoma.

Car sales were on the rise in America, and so was car travel. In 1956 Congress passed the Federal Aid Highway Act. It provided for an interstate highway system. Three such highways would run through Oklahoma, all of them crossing the capital city. They were I-35, going north and south; I-40, going east and west; and I-44, going northeast and southwest. I-44 included the Will Rogers Turnpike, the Turner Turnpike, and the H.E. Bailey Turnpike, all of them toll roads. With the aid of the federal legislation, Gary not only achieved his goal, but exceeded it. By the end of his term, the state had completed 3,500 miles of highways.

How did highways change towns and cities? The new highways were wider, safer and faster than older roads. Oklahomans depended less on the famous Route 66. Tourists did, too. Eventually these changes affected the state economy and shifted the population. The interstates made small towns smaller and encouraged city people to build suburbs.

When did Jim Crowism began to depart Oklahoma? The issue of desegregation had come up during the Turner years. It came up again



Governor Gary integrated drinking fountains and restrooms in the State Capitol in the 1950s.

during Johnston Murray's term. In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in the case of *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, that all types of educational segregation were unconstitutional. Governor Gary made it clear that he intended to comply with desegregation, and he set about to do so immediately. He and his aides urged Oklahomans to act responsibly and to remain calm about integration.

The state's first step was a constitutional amendment which re-organized the funding of schools. The Better Schools Amendment, passed by the people in 1955, ended separate funding for African-American schools and white schools.

Although it did not disappear right away, *Jim Crowism* was on the way out. Governor Gary carried civil rights into the Capitol itself by integrating washrooms and drinking fountains. He refused to attend meetings in any building which practiced racial *discrimination*.

These changes encouraged racial minorities to pursue their rights. A movement of nonviolent protest was spreading through the South. In Oklahoma City it became active on August 19, 1958. A group of teenagers and their advisor, Mrs. Clara Luper, staged a sit-in that day. It was at the lunch counter of the downtown Katz Drug Store. For eighteen months prior to that date, the young people involved had studied nonviolent protest. They were determined to handle the matter peacefully. Within days, Katz opened its lunch counters in three states to people of all races.

The protesters organized other events over several years. They did not always have such quick results. Many involved in the sit-ins received threatening letters and phone calls. At one point, a man threatened to bomb Luper's house. There were always some whites who spat on the demonstrators, tried to start fights, poured coffee on them, and generally harassed them. But they persisted with a peaceful approach.

What was the Oklahoma Semi-Centennial Celebration? The biggest affair in Oklahoma during Gary's term was the Semi-Centennial Celebration — the 1957 celebration of 50 years of statehood. A state agency called the Semi-Centennial Commission organized events. It staged the main event, the International Exposition, at the Oklahoma City Fairgrounds. Exhibits came from all around the state, other cities and states, and 19 foreign countries. Those included India, Belgium,



**Governor
Raymond Gary**
*Oklahoma Historical
Society*

Israel, Italy, Venezuela, Korea, Japan, and the Soviet Union. Since this was during the Cold War, it was the Soviet Union's first U.S. fair since before World War II.

Another exhibit was a model of the Vanguard rocket which would launch a satellite later that year. Visitors also saw a model of the new Navy Strato-Lab. There was even an oil rig, actually drilling for oil on the fairgrounds, during the fair. Several Indian tribes sent representatives. Historic exhibits included a two-block "Boomtown, U.S.A.," a replica of an oil boomtown.

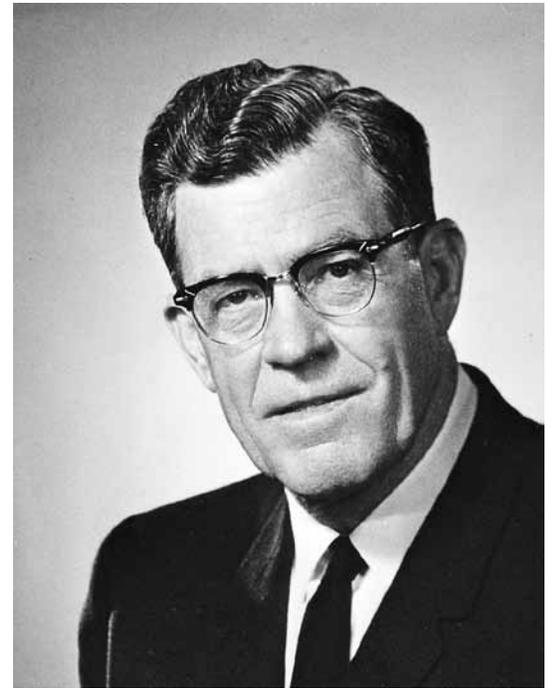
Two years later, the nation admitted Alaska and Hawaii as the forty-ninth and fiftieth states.

What changes did the Gary Administration institute in Oklahoma? Gary felt that Oklahoma relied too much on agriculture and petroleum production. To balance the economy, he and the legislature formed the Department of Commerce and Industry. Its job was bringing new industry into the state. The governor and lawmakers also wanted to increase water resources across the state. They authorized communities to make water conservation districts. Such districts could combine their resources and make contracts for building and operating water facilities such as dams. One of Gary's most important accomplishments was balancing the state budget without increasing taxes.

Gary's term ended in January 1959, and the governor returned to his farm in Madill. He later ran for governor twice and for U.S. senator once, losing all three races. When running for the U.S. Senate, he campaigned against "government extravagance." He said the national budget had been "chronically unbalanced" since the end of World War II. Gary further campaigned against importing petroleum and beef. He claimed that such imports robbed American ranchers and oil producers and made the country depend on foreign producers. Although not re-elected to any office, Gary remained active in church, civic affairs, and business until his death in 1993.

Who was Dean A. McGee? In 1956, an Oklahoma oil company entered the international financial market. Kerr-McGee stock appeared on the New York Stock Exchange, and Robert S. Kerr bought the first 100 shares. By the end of the day, the company had sold 5,300 shares.

The company had grown from Robert S. Kerr's partnership with his



*Dean A. McGee
Oklahoma Historical
Society*

brother-in-law, James Anderson. They had created a drilling company in 1930. When James Anderson retired six years later and sold his interest to his partner, Kerr began looking for a man to help run the company. Kerr's main interests were elsewhere. His talent for hiring good people was certainly at its best when he hired a young geologist, Dean A. McGee, that year.

The business went through many changes to become Kerr-McGee Oil Industries in 1946. Under McGee, it expanded. In 1947 it drilled the first successful offshore well. The well was in open water, more than 10 miles from land, at the amazingly shallow depth of 1,500 feet.

In the early 1950s Kerr-McGee looked into uranium as a source of fuel. The uranium fields were in such hot dispute that some of its workers were actually fired upon by other speculators. In July 1956, the parent company organized Kermac Nuclear Fuels.

Kerr-McGee kept growing. By 1958, Fortune magazine listed it in "The 500 Largest Industrial Corporations" in the country. McGee himself moved into the company's top position in 1963 and led it through several years of dramatic

growth. Much later, in 2006, it was merged into Houston-based Anadarko Petroleum.

Dean A. McGee developed a number of interests besides his own business. He served as a director in other companies. He was active in several organizations, including the Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce, the Urban League, and the YMCA. He also volunteered with the Oklahoma Arts Council, the Symphony Foundation, and the State Fair and Exposition Council. He also served with the Oklahoma-Arkansas Presbyterian Foundation, the Presbyterian Medical Center, the Oklahoma Medical Research Foundation, and the Frontiers of Science.

From his personal experience with a detached retina, he was interested in eye care. He turned his energies and *generosity* to eye diseases and injuries. He founded the Dean A. McGee Eye Institute. Today it is one of the country's leading institutes in eye research. McGee died in 1989.



Vacuum Tubes

How did parenting change in the 1950s? The country continued to enjoy the peace and prosperity of the post-war era. Young families continued to grow. The baby boom that began in 1946 continued throughout the next decade. It peaked in 1957 with the birth of 4.3 million babies. Americans focused on building schools and larger, modern homes for all these children.

Parents were able to provide basics as well as luxuries that they, growing up in the Great Depression and World War II, had never had. They let “boomers” enjoy their childhood. As the carefree children became teenagers (a word coined in the 1940s), these children developed music, clothing, and habits that were their very own. Until then, it had been necessary to take on adult responsibilities at a young age. But this generation had more security and more freedom than any previous generation.

Families still worried about polio. The *epidemic* had its highest rate of infection in 1952, with nearly 58,000 new cases in the country. Within a few years, though, the Salk vaccine reduced the spread of the disease drastically.

What kinds of changes in science and in business happened in the 1950s?

The general security of the time had a positive effect on science and business. Popular new products included the transistor and the television, which revolutionized America as well as the world.

People had been using vacuum tubes to conduct electricity, but the tubes were bulky and overheated easily. As an alternative, in the late forties, the Bell Telephone company had created the transistor. It cost less than vacuum tubes, was more reliable, and was very small. In the 1950s, teenagers were thrilled to listen to their favorite music on their own transistor radios instead of sharing a family radio. At the same time, the computer industry immediately began using transistors in its own products, making computers faster, smaller, and more powerful.



Older televisions used vacuum tubes which required extensive repair.

The technology of television had been developed a generation earlier, but was too expensive until after World War II. As income increased, so did leisure time. Americans bought more than 45 million TV sets in the 1950s. TV began to change family life. For instance, frozen dinners were designed so meals did not interrupt TV time. The networks created programs just for little children and teenagers. Shows and commercials affected how people spent their money, how they dressed, and how they thought.

Another important development in technology came from Communist Russia in 1957. It launched the world's first satellite, known as Sputnik. As it orbited the earth, Americans marveled at the achievement and worried, too. They agreed to make science a priority. By the end of the decade, the U.S. *established* the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). Senator Robert Kerr of Oklahoma chaired a committee that governed NASA.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What were major accomplishments of Raymond Gary's administration?
2. How was Johnston Murray related to William H. Murray?
3. Compare and contrast the two Murrays.
4. What was the Better Schools Amendment?
5. New laws recognized rights of more than one group. Give examples.
6. How was Governor Gary a leader both in practical ways and in ideas?
7. How did the Federal-Aid Highway Act affect Oklahoma?
8. Identify Dean A. McGee. Identify his career and lifetime achievements.
9. What types of technology changed American life in this decade?
10. What were some of the trends in American life?