Kansas Governors

Socolofsky, Homer E.

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THOMAS ANDREW OSBORN

Leavenworth (Republican), 13 January 1873–8 January 1877

Born 26 October 1836, near Meadville (Crawford County), Pennsylvania; son of Carpenter Osborn, a carpenter, and Elizabeth Morris Osborn; educated at common school and Allegheny College (preparatory department), 1855–57, apprenticed to Meadville printer and studied law; married Julia Delahay, 1870, 1 son; religious preference Methodist but member of no church; died on 4 February 1898 of a severe hemorrhage while on a trip to his birthplace, Meadville, Pennsylvania; buried in Topeka Cemetery.

In 1872 the &publican state convention nominated Thomas Andrew Osborn for governor. He defeated the Liberal &publican candidate Thaddeus H. Walker by 66,854 votes to 34,468, and times looked good for Osborn and for Kansas. There were many new miles of railroad track under construction, and settlers in large numbers were moving to Kansas. But the Panic of 1873, when several large eastern banks failed, turned the national economy sour and Kansas was affected along with the rest of the country. In addition to problems brought on by the panic, three crises faced Osborn during his first term—the threat of an Indian uprising, the grasshopper plague of 1874, and embezzlement by the state treasurer.

In 1873, Governor Osborn received news from southern Kansas that Indians were about to attack new settlements. He requested
the protection of federal troops, to little avail. Actually, since the Indians did not attack, it seemed to substantiate the belief of the army officers that these fallacious reports of Indian aggression were made to get federal troops and federal money into a frontier region. Another stress on Kansas settlers was a prolonged drouth in the 1870s which brought tremendous invasions of Rocky Mountain locusts (grasshoppers) into Kansas and other Great Plains states. Grasshoppers were destructive throughout the decade, but 1874 was the worst, especially for areas of recent settlement. Newly arrived settlers expected to produce sufficient bounty from their gardens to enable them to survive, but grasshoppers literally ate them out of house and home. Osborn convened a special session of the legislature to provide public relief for those in need. Laws were passed enabling counties to vote taxes or to sell bonds for relief purposes—a role considered appropriate for counties but not for the state. A third difficulty for Osborn was caused by another elected state official, the treasurer, who was involved in a variety of illegal deals using state money. To avoid formal impeachment charges and likely conviction, the treasurer resigned.

Renominated in 1874, Osborn defeated the Independent Reform candidate James C. Cusey, 48,794 votes to 35,301, with 2,277 votes cast for the Temperance candidate W. K. Marshall. During his second term another state treasurer was found defrauding the state through forgery, counterfeiting, and embezzlement. The governor responded quickly to protect the state with stricter laws for receiving and handling money. The state constitution was amended to provide for biennial legislative sessions, with two-year terms for representatives and four-year terms for senators. (As a matter of interest, each house of the state legislature reached its present size during Osborn’s four years—40 in the senate and 125 in the house.) Osborn sought a constitutional convention for substantial alterations in the state constitution, but he was unsuccessful—further evidence of Kansans’ historic resistance to additional conventions.

Osborn’s prior career in Kansas had been politically oriented, although he had had business experience in banking, journalism, real estate, and mining while still in Pennsylvania and Michigan. Following his admittance to the bar in Pontiac, Michigan, in 1857, Osborn
departed for Kansas, settling in Elwood and later moving to Leavenworth. In Doniphan County, Kansas, he was elected to the first state senate as a Republican, serving from 1861 to 1863, during which time he held a key position as presiding officer of Governor Robinson’s impeachment trial. He was lieutenant governor (1863–65) and United States marshal for Kansas (1864–67). His forced removal from the office of marshal by Pres. Andrew Johnson added to his popularity in Kansas.

In 1877, following his four years as governor, Osborn was a leading candidate for the United States Senate, but he lost to Preston B. Plumb. Pres. Rutherford B. Hayes appointed Osborn minister to Chile in 1877, and in 1880 he presided over a peace conference involving Peru, Chile, and Bolivia. He also helped settle the Patagonian boundary dispute between Argentina and Chile. President Garfield made him minister to Brazil in 1881. He returned to Kansas in 1885 and established his residence and law practice in Topeka. Osborn headed the Kansas delegation to the Republican National Convention in 1888, and he served two terms (1889–97) as Shawnee County’s state senator. From 1894 to 1898 he was a director of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad.