Harry H. Woodring

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"Is this true?" shouted Missouri Senator Bennett Clark on the floor of the Senate. Many found the first reports hard to believe, but word of the cabinet shake-up soon spread throughout the capital and across the nation. Secretary of War Harry Woodring had been fired. Washington was stunned. It was early on that spring afternoon that President Franklin D. Roosevelt made the startling announcement that he had asked for and received the resignation of his controversial Secretary of War. On that day—20 June 1940—Harry H. Woodring achieved the dubious distinction of being the only man ever booted out of the Roosevelt cabinet.

Throughout his tempestuous tenure in Washington, Woodring had become embroiled in numerous feuds with Roosevelt, and the President had always attempted to accommodate his contentious War Department head. When, however, the question of aid to the Allies arose, Roosevelt determined that he could no longer tolerate Woodring’s divergent views. Roosevelt was a strong advocate of providing that aid, but Woodring, whose position on the issue had wavered in the past, had become a strong opponent of that course. The President could no longer accept obstructionism in his War Department. Secretary Woodring had to go.

The action created a furor in Congress, but such a response had frequently followed Harry Woodring. A number of congressmen called for an investigation into the dismissal of this patriotic American; others condemned his isolationism and the controversy within his department. Amid this at-
mosphere of confusion, Harry Woodring and his family quietly bid a short and pleasant farewell to Roosevelt at the White House, then headed back to Kansas in the family station wagon. Thus ended his Washington career, a major chapter in the colorful and controversial life that had begun fifty-three years before in Elk City, Kansas.

A warm spring rain was gently sponging the lush green countryside of southeast Kansas as the first light of day appeared in the eastern sky. Most of the twelve hundred residents of the small, thriving town of Elk City were not yet stirring, but in a small pink frame house on Montgomery Avenue the excited Hines Woodring was anxiously awaiting the opportunity to broadcast news of his good fortune to his many friends around town. On the previous night, 30 May 1887, the fifty-one-year-old grain dealer had become a father for the sixth time. The birth of this child, however, was something special: it was the first boy. This new addition to the family was like a dream come true for Hines Woodring and his thirty-eight-year-old wife, Melissa, who, after more than twenty years of marriage and five daughters, had practically given up hope of ever having a son. The proud parents first named the new child Jacob Cleveland, but after several days they had second thoughts and decided to call him Harry Hines instead.

To Hines Woodring the birth of his son was quite gratifying, because it meant that he now had a male heir to carry on the family name as well as its traditions. These factors meant a great deal to the new father, who was very proud of his family heritage, even though it was not an especially distinguished one. The Woodrings pointed with pride to their lineage, which could be traced back to the Vautrin family which lived in the Lorraine section of France about the time of the Protestant Reformation. Some members of the family had become Huguenots, and when religious persecution of protestants began in 1572, they fled to Kirrberg, in Alsace. In the years that followed, the family became moderately successful farmers, soon winning a respected position in the community. It was in Kirrberg that the German influence caused the name to be changed from Vautrin to Wotring.

All went well in Alsace until the early eighteenth century, when increased persecution of Huguenots, plus continual warfare along the French-German border, forced many inhabitants to flee. One of those choosing to leave was John Daniel Wotring, who, in the summer of 1739, loaded his family on the ship *Robert and Alice* and headed for America. Arriving in Philadelphia, the family remained there for two years before moving first to York County, Pennsylvania, and then to a Moravian colony at Graceland, Maryland. From Graceland the family, whose name gradually changed to
Woodring, spread north into New Jersey, south into Virginia, and west to Kentucky.\(^6\)

One of John Daniel Wotring's grandsons, John Wotring, took his new bride, Christina Wolf, to Hardin County, Kentucky, in the spring of 1796. A year later the first of their twelve children, Jacob, was born. Jacob was quite satisfied to scratch out a living on his small farm; thus, he grew to manhood, married Mary Hahn in 1822, raised six children, and died without ever leaving the hills of central Kentucky.\(^7\) Although Jacob was content to spend his entire life in one place, such was not to be the case with his fourth child, Hines, who was born near Elizabethtown, Kentucky, on 28 January 1836. Growing up on a backwoods farm in the 1840s and 1850s was difficult, for it was no easy task raising livestock, clearing land, and harvesting crops. Since the financial returns from farming were rather limited, Hines Woodring supplemented his income by buying and selling grain and by painting houses and barns. Although such a life had its drawbacks, it also had its compensations, for it instilled in Hines Woodring a fondness for hunting, horse racing, and out-of-door living.\(^8\)

When the Civil War came in 1861, Hines Woodring, like so many other young Kentuckians, was unsure about which side he should cast his lot with. While his sentiments were with the Union, he had reservations about joining its cause, because all four of his brothers had joined the Confederate Army. A reluctance to fight against his own kin, coupled with an unwillingness to join them, led to several years of indecision for Hines. Consequently, he remained on his farm until March of 1865.

At that time he traveled north to Lafayette, Indiana, where he enlisted in Company B, 154th Indiana Volunteer Infantry. It was less than two weeks later that General Lee surrendered to General Grant, thus ending the long and bitter war; however, because he had just entered the Army, Private Hines Woodring was not immediately mustered out. Instead he was promoted to corporal and sent to Stevenson Station, Virginia, where he guarded commissary supplies until his discharge in August 1865.\(^9\)

Feeling that his family would not accept a "Yankee," Hines Woodring decided not to return to Kentucky. Instead he traveled to Boone County, Indiana, where he took up farming. It was here that he met, fell in love with, and, on 30 September 1866, married Melissa Jane Cooper, the daughter of Burnside and Eliza Bennett Cooper of Thorntown. The following year the first of five daughters, Mary Lou ("Effa"), was born. During the next four years Hines Woodring struggled to eke out a living on his small farm, but as the westward movement gained momentum, he longed to become a part of it. Stories of rich, cheap land in the west, along with encouraging letters from his younger brother, Dr. William Woodring, who was living in
Montgomery County, Kansas, convinced him that it was time to move on. So, in the early spring of 1871, he sold everything he had and headed for the "promised land."

With nothing more than the clothes on their backs and a few dollars from the sale of their farm, Hines and Melissa Woodring and four-year-old Effa set out for Kansas. Although he had come west to farm, Hines Woodring changed his mind when he arrived at the Territorial land office at Humbolt and learned that, as an inducement to settlers, free lots were available at Elk City, forty-five miles to the southwest. To obtain a lot, one simply had to build and settle on it. Never one to pass up a bargain, the Civil War veteran accepted the offer and moved to the new town, where he built a home and established a butcher shop. This new business venture failed to prosper; consequently, seven months later the Woodrings moved to a farm seven miles to the northwest. For the next six years "Hi" Woodring, as he was now called, made a living by growing corn, wheat, and sorghum on the rich farmland of Montgomery County. It was during this period that three more daughters, Dolly, who died at age three, Claudine, and Lida were born. These were difficult years, for living in a flimsy, drafty house in which one froze in winter and sweltered in summer was not conducive to good health. Furthermore, Hi and his family faced the problems of contaminated water, outlaws, dust storms, drought, prairie fires, flash floods, and grasshoppers. In spite of such obstacles, farming was generally profitable for families that had several males. But for a household with only one male, it was too burdensome; thus, in 1878 Hines Woodring moved back to Elk City and entered the grain business. Upon returning to the village, which now numbered nearly four hundred, the family moved into the small pink house north of Duck Creek, where Grace was born in 1882 and Harry in 1887.

From the time of his arrival in Elk City in 1871, Hines Woodring began to take an active role in local affairs. In the following years he served, at various times, as School-Board Clerk, City Clerk, City Treasurer, Councilman, and Mayor. Although not active in state or national politics, Hi—except during the 1890s, when he became a Populist—openly proclaimed his allegiance to the Democratic party and voiced support for its candidates. Busy as he was with his business and political pursuits, the jovial, outgoing grain dealer still found enough time for social and religious activities. He was a founder and one of the most active members of the local chapter of the Grand Army of the Republic (G.A.R), as well as a leading member of the Masons. Religion also played an important role in his life: he was for many years a deacon and Sunday School teacher in the First Christian Church. Of the many activities enjoyed by Hines Woodring, none provided
him with more satisfaction than horses and horse racing. This love, which he had developed as a child growing up in Kentucky, always stayed with him; and limited though the family finances were, he nearly always owned at least one race horse, which he would send around the county-fair circuit. This love of horses was one of the few things that Hines passed on to his son.¹⁴

Elk City was an ideal place to be raising a family in the 1880s and 1890s. Thanks in large part to two railroads—the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe and the Missouri Pacific—the town was quite prosperous; its grain elevators, flour mill, sorghum mill, bedspring plant, brickyard, and many lesser establishments provided employment for anyone who wanted work and was willing to do it. Discovery of both oil and gas in this area in the late nineties added to the prosperity. By the turn of the century the outlook for Elk City was indeed bright, and predictions were being made that the population would soon climb to two thousand. The economic prosperity of the town also accounted for other material assets, such as gas street lights, broad sidewalks, a good telephone system, and fine schools. Large trees and attractive homes lining the wide streets made the village on the banks of the Elk River a beautiful place in which to live. Added to this were the river and several creeks for fishing and swimming, and rolling hills for running and hiking—all of which made a first-rate place for a boy to grow to manhood.¹⁶

But the many merits of growing up in a town like Elk City were of little consequence to Harry Woodring. While other boys were swimming, wrestling, playing marbles and baseball, he was unable to engage in such activities. Two factors served to deny young Harry a typical childhood. The first of these was his being dominated by four overprotective sisters; the second was the increasingly difficult economic plight of his family.

Because of his numerous business, civic, and social activities, Hines Woodring did not spend much time at home. As a result, the task of rearing Harry fell upon his mother and his four older sisters. Since the sisters were between five and twenty years older than Harry, their relationship to him was more like that of mother to son instead of sister to brother. Not wanting to see their little brother get injured in any way, the sisters made sure that he was rarely out of their sight. Because they kept “Son,” as they always called him, with them all the time, he never had the opportunity to engage in the activities usually enjoyed by boys of his age. Instead of playing baseball, exploring, or engaging in a good mud fight, Harry grew up keeping spotlessly clean, playing house or dolls, or doing needlework. His being surrounded by women and having little contact with his father affected Harry’s dress, speech, and mannerisms. These effeminate characteristics were amusing to other boys, and after first calling him “Sissy,” they settled on “Daughter,” a
name that plagued him until he was in high school. There were some positive aspects to being raised by his sisters, the most notable being an appreciation for and a basic love of reading; thus, from an early age, Harry was surrounded by books. As he grew older, he read more and more in the area of history, politics, and current events. These reading habits were never lost; consequently, he was always aware of what was happening on the state, national, and international scenes.

As influential upon "Son" Woodring's early development as the domination of his four sisters was his family's financial situation. The income of a small grain dealer in a Kansas farm town was never very large, and it was all that Hines Woodring could do to provide his wife and children with food, clothing, and the other necessities of life. The family got by well enough until 1893, when Hines, while working at the mill, fell and broke his hip. Because medical treatment was inadequate at that time, the injury failed to heal properly, and thereafter Hi Woodring could walk only with great difficulty. As a consequence of this injury he was no longer able to perform the physical tasks generally required in operating a mill. He was able to do some light work and to serve in an advisory capacity at a larger mill, but such jobs were intermittent. Since the family breadwinner was no longer able to work steadily and since no other member of the household was capable of taking up the slack, the economic condition of the Woodring family became extremely difficult. In the lean years that followed, young Harry came to know, understand, and appreciate the true meaning of poverty. It was not extreme poverty, for the members of the family never went hungry or wore rags, but neither did they experience the standard of living enjoyed by most other residents of Elk City.

The economic plight of the Woodring family forced Harry out into the "cruel world" at the age of nine. A desire to help carry a share of the financial load led him to embark on his first business venture—selling popcorn. Each day after school the ambitious fourth grader would run home to pick up the corn just popped by his mother or sisters and would go from door to door, selling his product for five cents a bag. This humble beginning was never forgotten by the boy from Elk City, who, years later, was to say on numerous occasions, "I made enough money peddling popcorn from house to house to buy my own clothes, and I enjoyed it."

With the rise of Populism in Kansas in the early 1890s, Hines Woodring temporarily turned his political allegiance from the Democratic to the Populist party, campaigning locally for its candidates. Such efforts paid dividends in 1897, when Hi was rewarded for his campaign activity by the newly elected Populist Governor, John W. Leedy, who appointed him a Deputy State Grain Inspector, at a salary of $75 a month. The new position, which
required that the family move to Parsons, alleviated financial pressures. This proved to be only a temporary boon, however, because Hines lost his job when the Republicans regained control of the Statehouse in 1899. Shortly thereafter the Woodrings returned to Elk City and moved into an attractive two-story house on Maple Street.21

Again, hard times returned. Although the two eldest daughters, Mary Lou and Claudine, had married and moved away, there was still a house to be paid for and five mouths to feed on the irregular income and the small pension of a sixty-four-year-old Civil War veteran. To help pay the family's expenses, Harry, who was just entering his teens, began taking any job that would add a few pennies to the family coffers. The young lad was no longer afraid of getting dirty or engaging in work; thus, while other boys his age were seeking to avoid work, "Daughter" Woodring was trying to find it.22

The financial needs of the family, along with considerable teasing by other students, made the thought of quitting school rather appealing to Harry, but his sisters, especially Claudine, who had been a teacher before her marriage, convinced him to remain in school. Attending Elk City Grade and High School through the tenth grade, Harry always proved to be an excellent student, especially in math, government, and history.23 Going hand in hand with his interests in the last two subjects was an interest in politics. Although he was not exactly certain what the designation meant, Harry, from the time he was a very young boy, proclaimed that he, like his father, was a Democrat. The youngster soon discovered that such claims were hazardous to one's health in a Republican state like Kansas, for on a number of occasions he was snowballed and beaten up because of his political affiliation.24

When the Woodrings moved into the house on Maple Street in 1899, their new neighbor was O. T. Hayward, president of the First National Bank of Elk City. During the next several years the bank president had many opportunities to observe the honesty, reliability, and perseverance of the boy next door; therefore it was not surprising that he offered the sixteen-year-old high-school student a job as janitor and errand boy at the bank. In his new position Harry made the fires, swept the floors, washed the windows, cleaned the spittoons, and ran errands; for all this he received five dollars a month.25 No one ever started any lower in the banking profession than Woodring.

During this period he was maturing rapidly, and the youngster who had been teased and ignored by his peers became increasingly popular with members of both sexes.26 After the first semester of his junior year at Elk City High School, Harry decided to change schools. This was a difficult decision, because he had a job and numerous friends and he was doing well
in school; however, he believed that the county high school, with its broader curriculum, would offer him more. His mind made up, the boy from Elk City, in January 1904, enrolled in the Montgomery County High School, at nearby Independence, Kansas. Upon Harry’s departure, the editor of the *Elk City Enterprise* noted that one of the town’s “rising young men” was changing schools.27

Although Harry did well at his new school, he was not satisfied with the type of education that he was receiving. By this time he had developed more than a casual interest in the operations of O. T. Hayward’s bank, and he hoped to find permanent employment there when he completed his education. The high-school courses he was taking would be adequate, but he desired something with a more utilitarian value—courses that would help him in the bank. A business-school education was what he really wanted, but that seemed to be out of the question. While such schools could be found in Kansas City, the tuition and the cost of living there were more than the family could afford.

Never one to be defeated easily, Harry searched for and finally found a solution to his problem. Living in Lebanon, Indiana, were Louisa and Samuel Cason, an aunt and uncle. A business school—the Lebanon Business University—had recently opened in that town. What a set up!—he could live with Aunt Louisa and Uncle Samuel and attend the “University.” When Harry convinced his mother to write her sister to see what she thought of the idea, the response was just what the boy had hoped for: the Casons would love to have Harry come to live with them; after all, they had no children of their own, and he could be their “son” for a while. Arrangements were made, and in June of 1904 the boy from Elk City traveled to Lebanon, where he was to spend ten enjoyable months at the beautiful home on South Meridian Street.28

Shortly after his arrival, Harry enrolled at the “University,” which was a less-than-reputable commercial operation offering courses in bookkeeping, typewriting, commercial law, banking, correspondence, and office practice. Fortunately, the school’s manager-teacher, Henry F. Raber, was a better teacher than he was a businessman, and Harry learned well the subjects and skills that were taught. This education was to be of considerable value to him in the years that followed.29 Having completed all the courses that he felt were necessary for his future success, the young man returned home in the spring of 1905, his formal education ended.30 Although he came close, he never did earn a high-school diploma.

Upon his return to Elk City, Harry was given a job as a bookkeeper at the First National Bank. The same good work habits, the care, and the conscientiousness that had always characterized him continued, and two
years later he was rewarded by promotion to assistant cashier. These were happy but not carefree years for the young bank employee. Since his father was no longer able to do any work, the burden of caring for his parents and his sister Lida was now squarely on his shoulders. This responsibility to his family caused the young banker to question seriously his future in Elk City. He had a steady job, but it did not pay especially well; furthermore, his future in the bank did not appear bright, because the once thriving village was now in a state of decline. The oil and gas finds of the 1890s were playing out; hundreds of Elk City citizens were leaving for new fields; and it was evident that the village had already reached its peak and was now on the way down. Such a community is unattractive to any businessman, but it is especially discouraging to someone in the field of banking. Under these circumstances Harry Woodring began to look for greener pastures.  

An opportunity to move came early in 1909, when Harry was offered a job, which he accepted, as an assistant cashier at the First National Bank of Neodesha. Neodesha, a thriving town of three thousand, which lay twenty miles northeast of Elk City, was, at that time, the center of the Mid-Continent Oil Field. The rapidly expanding gas and oil industries provided the basis for the economic expansion of the town. Since new people were arriving daily, new businesses were being established, and land values were going up. Neodesha was definitely a town with a bright future, and Harry Woodring was glad to be a part of it. The twenty-two-year-old assistant bank cashier worked hard at his new job, and within a few months he was promoted to cashier. Feeling more financially secure than at any time in his life, he purchased a home on North Eighth Street and brought his parents and his sister Lida to live with him.  

The move to Neodesha in 1909 ushered in what proved to be the nine most uneventful years in the life of Harry Woodring. The routine was nearly always the same: five days a week he would walk to work, put in the short work day that made a bank employee the envy of his neighbors, walk home, work in his garden, and spend the evening reading and looking after his parents. Because of a deep sense of obligation to his parents, he insisted on remaining at home and helping Lida look after them; consequently, he engaged in few outside activities, and he had few friends. Occasionally he would go to a movie, play tennis, or have a date with Helen McDonald, whose father, J. C. McDonald, was President of Standard Oil of Kansas. One was more likely, however, to find him spending a quiet evening at home. Sunday would find Harry at the First Christian Church, where he was one of the most faithful and hard-working members. Although his interest in state and national politics was increasing in these years, he did not engage in any political activities.
At the time that the United States entered World War I in the spring of 1917, it is highly unlikely that anyone, including those closest to him, would have predicted a bright future for the thirty-year-old introvert, who appeared to be destined to spend the rest of his life as a cashier in a small-town bank. When the newly enacted Selective Service System went into effect, it did not call Harry Woodring; and because his mother, father, and sister were dependent upon him, he was not inclined to join. For a time it appeared that the war would pass him by, but when his mother suffered a stroke and passed away in January 1918, Harry felt that a major burden had been taken off his shoulders; he was then free to leave his family and join the Army. He agreed to remain at home until the spring thaw permitted burial of his mother’s body. Interment came on 5 May 1918, and later that afternoon Harry was on his way to Washington, D.C., to enlist in the United States Army. On his own initiative he was giving up the secure life of a banker for the uncertain but, in all likelihood, more exciting life of a soldier.

The nation’s capital was a beehive of activity when Woodring arrived in May of 1918. Everywhere he went, people were busy doing their share to help win the war that would “make the world safe for democracy.” The young man from Neodesha would have liked to spend several days touring the city, but he had more pressing matters to take care of. Since he was not one to take a major decision lightly, the choice of which branch of the military to serve in was of great importance. In order to be sure that he got both sides of the story, he visited both the War Department and the Navy Department to discuss the opportunities that each offered. On his return to the War Department, he encountered a young lieutenant in the Tank Corps, who told him of the advantages and opportunities in this new branch of the Army. Convinced that the tank was the weapon of the future and that the Tank Corps was the branch most likely to offer opportunity for promotion, he moved in that direction. He enlisted on May 8, and three days later Private Harry Woodring was on his way to the Tank Training Center at Camp Colt, near Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

The training of Tank Corps personnel that took place at Camp Colt consisted of both basic military training and specialized training in tank tactics and equipment. The camp was under the command of a bright, aggressive young officer, Maj. Dwight D. Eisenhower, who had more than his share of problems—the biggest being the lack of tanks. Although the weapon of the future was on the drawing board, America had not yet started to produce them; therefore, Eisenhower had only one tank, a French Re-
nault, with which to train the ten thousand officers and men stationed at Colt. Under such circumstances, training was limited primarily to that of a basic nature.40

Upon his arrival at Camp Colt, Woodring, because of his clerical background, was immediately sent to the personnel section of Casual Company Number 1 (the camp’s administrative company), where a typist was needed. For the next three months Private Woodring lived a rather leisurely and pleasant life, processing records of new recruits and making up pay records.41 His job frequently necessitated working late or arising at two or three o’clock in the morning to help process the records of incoming personnel. Although such a position meant irregular working hours, it also meant extended periods of free time. On some days it meant no work at all; consequently, there was considerable opportunity for sleeping, playing tennis and baseball, and writing letters home. Under such circumstances, securing a pass was no problem, and Woodring and his buddies frequently went into Gettysburg for supper, church, a dance, or a movie.42

Although the nature of his duties exempted Harry from some facets of military life, such as reveille and K.P., he did receive training in close order drill, radio and telegraph operation, riflery, and the care and operation of machine guns and light artillery. Except for a violent reaction to his typhoid shots, several instances of food poisoning, and dysentery, Woodring was quite pleased with army life. His satisfaction certainly had to stem from other than monetary reasons, because the deduction of a $15 allotment to his father left him only $8 a month.43

From the time that Woodring arrived at Camp Colt he expressed a desire to become an officer, but it soon became apparent that competition for entrance into Officer’s Training School was very stiff. His first attempt to gain entrance into the school was unsuccessful, but in August he tried again and succeeded.44 His joy was short lived when he realized that he had won only half the battle; the mark of success was in finishing the school rather than in getting into it.45 The purpose of the schooling and of its difficulty was best described by the Camp Commander, then Lieutenant Colonel Eisenhower, who stated that it “was intended primarily as a place of elimination of unfit candidates for commission, and . . . it was purposely made as intensive as possible, in order to quickly eliminate the unfit.”46

On 25 August 1918 Woodring, along with five hundred other enlisted men, entered the Tank Corps Officers Training School, thus beginning five grueling weeks of training. The physical demands were great, for the days were long and hard, with vigorous physical training, close order drill, rifle-range firing, and cross-country hiking requiring a physical stamina that Woodring did not know he possessed. Just as strenuous were the mental
demands that resulted from classroom instruction and follow-up examinations in such subjects as communications, tank operations and tactics, reconnaissance, artillery principles, and administrative affairs. Predictably, the "wash out" rate was high, and Woodring himself frequently felt that he would not make it. On September 9, less than three weeks into the program, he wrote in his diary: "Hanging on to school by a thin thread." On the following day, after three interviews with evaluating officers, he sheepishly wrote: "Bobbing up and down but still here." A week later he was almost ready to give up, because he was convinced that there was "little hope for me." Still, he carried on, working as hard as he could. When the original 500 students dropped to 300 and then to 250, he still remained; then on 24 September he survived the final cut, thus making him one of the 150 members of his class to earn a commission. On 6 October, in what he described as "one of the greatest satisfactions of my life," Woodring was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Army Tank Corps. Two days later he received his new assignment: he was to return to Casual Company as its Personnel Officer. He was pleased to return to Casual, because he had many friends there, and he understood the operations of the Personnel Section. As the new lieutenant settled into his first assignment, the war in Europe was rapidly coming to a close. Several weeks later the Armistice was signed, and one week after that, Camp Colt was abandoned, and most of its personnel, including Woodring, were sent to Fort Dix, New Jersey, for mustering out. At Dix he continued to function as a personnel officer until his discharge on 15 December 1918.

Woodring's encounter with the Army during the war was both pleasing and gratifying. Because of the nature of his duties, the winning of a commission, and the many fine acquaintances that he had made, he left the military with a positive attitude towards it and its leaders. Perhaps one of the most satisfying aspects of his "Army days" was the start of many friendships that were to last a lifetime, including those with Dwight D. Eisenhower and Floyd L. Parks (later a lieutenant general of World War II fame). But even more important to Woodring was the change that the Army made in his personality. The new way of life brought about a metamorphosis in him; the introvert of Neodesha emerged as an extrovert at Camp Colt, and before long he had a large circle of close friends. The man leaving Fort Dix in December 1918 was also quite different in that he had a confidence in himself that theretofore had been lacking. The bumps and bruises of army life had also done much to dull and eliminate some of his effeminate traits. As one close relative said, "Harry was a different man when he came out of the army—he was a man—it took the sissyness out of
him. It was no question that the Army had been beneficial for Harry Woodring.

After being discharged from the Army, Woodring returned to Neodesha, uncertain about his future plans. His old job was awaiting him at the First National Bank, but because he felt that there was little opportunity for advancement in that position, he decided to look elsewhere. One thing was certain: he wanted to remain in banking. Thus, after failing to obtain a job as a state bank examiner, he accepted a job as assistant cashier at the Mid-West National Bank in Kansas City, Missouri. For the next three years he lived a quiet life, working in Kansas City during the week and returning home on the weekends to visit his father and sister or to take out Helen McDonald, whom he had continued to date intermittently for a number of years. One of the things that Harry liked most about dating Helen was that when he went to pick her up he had an opportunity to visit with her father, J. C. McDonald. Every time the two men got together the talk inevitably turned to banking and finance, for in addition to being President of Standard Oil of Kansas, McDonald was President of the First National Bank of Neodesha. McDonald was quite impressed with Woodring's knowledge of banking, and as time passed, he became increasingly fond of him. This relationship was to pay big dividends to Woodring in March 1922, when a major reorganization of the bank was undertaken, and McDonald asked him to become its managing director. The thirty-five-year-old assistant cashier jumped at the opportunity, returning home to undertake his new job.

For the next seven years Woodring ran the bank in an efficient and businesslike manner. With common sense and a good eye for property values, he succeeded in creating one of the strongest banks in southeast Kansas. Woodring's business acumen not only made money for the bank's stockholders; it also resulted in some handsome returns for himself. By making some wise investments, both locally and in a bullish stock market, he accumulated enough funds to purchase a controlling interest in the bank and make himself vice-president. His success soon won for him the respect and admiration of local civic and business leaders, as well as the community at large. Word of his effectiveness soon spread to others in his profession, and they honored him with a term as Vice-President of the Kansas Bankers Association.

Being a small-town banker brought with it a number of community responsibilities, and soon Woodring found himself thrust into a number of business, civic, and fraternal activities. The cordiality that had emerged at Camp Colt now became a major asset, and the personable, yet soft-spoken, bachelor gained an increasingly wide circle of friends and acquaintances. As
the 1920s rolled on, Woodring emerged as one of the major "work horses" of the community.

Much of his time was spent in promoting the economic well-being of Wilson County and the surrounding area, for the success of his bank was dependent on the prosperity of the entire section. Because agriculture was of primary importance to the area, Woodring worked hard to promote programs that would aid farmers and increase their production. As an active member of the Grange and the Farm Bureau, he came to gain a deeper understanding of the many problems facing the farmer. The desire to help the tiller of the soil increase production led him to play a major role in creating Southeast Kansas Incorporated and the Wilson County Banker-Farmer Lime and Legume Project. In the latter program, Woodring, who believed that bankers should serve as liaison between agricultural specialists and farmers, gained state and national prominence by establishing a program whereby county bankers brought farmers together with county farm agents and state agricultural experts to set up test areas in order to demonstrate the value of certain methods of fertilization. The results were so successful that other farmers, after witnessing the increased yields, quickly adopted the new methods. In May 1926 even Governor Ben S. Paulen came to Wilson County to observe the project and to talk with the man responsible for it, Harry Woodring. The Governor came away quite impressed with the program and its coordinator.58

In 1927 Woodring joined with a dozen other prominent leaders from a nine-county area to form Southeast Kansas Incorporated, a regional organization designed to promote the agricultural, industrial, and commercial development of the area. For several years the Neodesha banker served as chairman of the group's Agricultural Committee.59 While serving in that capacity, he became increasingly concerned over the damage that annual flooding inflicted on the rich Kansas farmlands. In the spring of 1927 devastating floods hit the valleys of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, and because of his knowledge in this matter, Woodring was sent as a delegate to the Mississippi Flood Control Conference, which was held in Chicago in June. Coming away from the session with the firm belief that flood control was a government responsibility, both at the state and the federal level, he called on Governor Paulen to take action that would help alleviate the problem of flooding.60 The Governor responded favorably to the proposal by calling a statewide Flood Control Conference in September, and subsequently he appointed Woodring to serve as a member and Secretary of the ad hoc Flood Control and Water Conservation Commission, the body that was largely responsible for the drafting of the Kansas Conservatory Act of 1929. The
Sunflower State was now headed toward effective flood control, and the man from Neodesha had done much to start it on its way. 61

Although he was busy working at the bank and promoting areawide economic development, Woodring still found time for many other activities. It was in these years that he became an avid bridge player, and he and his sister Lida frequently had another couple over to their house for an evening of cards. Home gardening activity also began to increase in 1926, when he bought a large two-story house set on a four-acre plot at the corner of First and Wisconsin streets. Harry and his elderly father spent considerable time outside, working on the grounds and maintaining the large vegetable garden that graced the east side of the home. 62 As in the past, he continued to be one of the most active members of the First Christian Church, where he taught Sunday School, sponsored the Christian Endeavor group, and served as a deacon. 63 Although he spent considerable time working at his home, church, and bank, he increasingly engaged in activities outside their purview. He was now going out more than ever: afternoons were spent on the tennis courts; evenings at the movies; and Saturday nights at nearby Independence, watching the fights. 64 Membership in the Masons, who had numerous activities, also added to his social life.

Of all the activities, both business and social, that he engaged in during the 1920s, none offered Woodring more enjoyment and satisfaction or meant more to his subsequent career than did his membership in the American Legion. In June of 1919 the Tank Corps veteran had become a charter member of Neodesha’s Seward-Ayers Post of the American Legion. 65 During the next three years in Kansas City he maintained his membership in that organization, even though he was not active in its affairs. Then in 1922, upon his return to Neodesha, he plunged into the post’s activities with unbounded enthusiasm. 66 His superior cooking ability, which he had gained from his sisters, was a major asset to Woodring and the local group, for he was able to turn their picnics, fish frys, and stag dinners into first-class feasts. His culinary magic, along with his pleasing personality and tremendous enthusiasm, soon made him one of the most popular and respected members of the group. When, in 1925, Harry’s fellow Legionnaires elected him to the first of two consecutive terms as Post Commander, they had no idea that the election would start Woodring down a road that would lead to the Statehouse and the highest echelons of the federal government. 67

Under Woodring the Seward-Ayers Post became one of the largest and most active in the state. His success in acquiring new members soon caught the attention of state Legion officials, and in 1927 he was made Chairman of the State Membership Committee. Although the national membership of the Legion was increasing, the fortunes of the Kansas group were sagging, for
it had lost nearly 1,800 members during the preceding year. Woodring met
the challenge of declining numbers with his usual zeal and enthusiasm, and
in the following year the state organization added more than 1,000 men to
its rolls, increasing its membership from 17,924 to 19,009.68

As State Membership Chairman, Woodring had the opportunity to visit
posts throughout the state. Before long he was known by Legion officials all
over Kansas as one of the most dedicated and hard-working members of the
Kansas Department. His labors were rewarded in September 1928, when, at
the state convention held in Pittsburg, he was elected State Commander.69

Heading one of the most active Legion departments in the country was
practically a full-time job, requiring the expenditure of considerable amounts
of time on business and administrative matters and even more time at­
tending and promoting local Legion activities. Each week found Com­
mmander Woodring visiting two, three, or four local posts in order to partic­
ipate in or observe one of their activities. Believing that one of his major
responsibilities was to make the public aware of the programs and activities
of the American Legion, Woodring used every possible opportunity to appear
before local civic and service groups to tell about his organization. Wherever
he went, he used his position and influence to meet local politicians and
businessmen and to speak to the Lions Club, the Rotary Club, and other
civic groups. Before long he was known to thousands of people from one
end of Kansas to the other.70 As State Commander, Harry Woodring began
to experience a new way of life, which included attending conferences and
conventions, making speeches, traveling, meeting people, and being wined
and dined. While it was a new and busy style of life, it was also exciting,
and the man from Neodesha loved every minute of it.

As Woodring became more deeply involved in the activities of the
Legion, his interest in the bank declined. At the same time that his en­
thusiasm for business started on the downswing, he began to toy with the
idea of entering politics. This new interest, which had long manifested itself
in a keen awareness of state and national affairs, was stimulated by the
growing awareness of his oratorical skill as well as by the sense of influence
and power that he experienced while serving as a spokesman for twenty
thousand Legionnaires. Because he had the glitter of politics in his eyes, the
prospect of spending the rest of his life as a small-town banker became less
and less appealing.71 Furthermore, Woodring had always liked a challenge,
and banking no longer seemed to be able to provide that challenge. Since he
had risen from janitor to vice-president and majority stockholder of a suc­
cessful bank, there did not seem to be much more to achieve in that
profession.

Early in 1929, shortly after the death of his father, Woodring began
seriously to consider selling his interest in the First National Bank. In March, when he heard that some directors were trying to "sell out from under him," he beat them to the punch by selling out first. Two weeks later he severed all relations with the bank and announced that his plans for the future were uncertain. Thus, the moderately wealthy bachelor had, at the age of forty-one, retired from the occupation that had been so good to him. His retirement from banking came at a most fortunate time for Woodring, because seven months later came the great stock-market crash and a subsequent rash of bank failures. In leaving his profession of nearly twenty-five years, Woodring brought one career to an end, but he was about to embark on a new and more exciting one.