The cold north wind swept across the Kansas plains and into the streets of the capital city of Topeka. The temperature was hovering near the freezing mark as most of the city's sixty-five thousand residents huddled together with thousands of out-of-town visitors to view the inaugural parade of Governor Harry Woodring. About eleven o'clock on the morning of that cloudy 12 January 1931, the Governor-elect and the outgoing Governor, Clyde M. Reed, walked out of the Statehouse and stepped into the open automobile that was to serve as their parade vehicle. Then, with nearly a dozen bands, half a dozen National Guard units, and hundreds of marchers from a score of patriotic organizations leading the way, the procession wove its way through the business district toward the city auditorium, where the inauguration ceremony was to take place.

The auditorium was overflowing as hundreds of Woodring's friends and acquaintances joined an array of state and local officials, newsmen, and curiosity seekers to witness the proceedings. Outside the building, hundreds more stood in the freezing weather to hear the program over a public-address system which could be heard not only in the immediate area, but throughout the downtown business district. When the platform party entered the assembly hall and headed toward the stage, the crowd lost its composure and began to shout and cheer, much as it would have at a University of Kansas football game. After the noisy throng finally quieted down, Guy Helvering, who was presiding, introduced Governor Reed, who gave a short
farewell address in which he recapped the accomplishments of his adminis-
tration. At the end of the speech, Reed, in "an unusual and gracious pro-
ceeding for an outgoing governor," introduced his successor and "close
personal friend" in a most laudatory fashion. After wishing him good luck
and adding that he would need it, Reed turned the platform over to Wood-
ring, who then stepped to the podium and gave one of the shortest inaugural
addresses in the history of the state.

Speaking both to a statewide radio audience and to those assembled,
Woodring began by describing the conflicting emotions that he was expe-
riencing as he embarked upon his new task. On the one hand, he claimed,
he was honored by having been chosen Governor, but his joy was tempered
by the sobering realization that he had an obligation to provide the kind of
leadership that Kansas citizens expected. Next he expressed his utmost con-
fidence in representative government and urged Kansans to take a greater
interest and a more active role in the affairs of the state. He then announced
that although he believed that "government is an agency of welfare," he did
not intend to flood the state with a large number of programs designed to
meet the "temporary" ills facing Kansas and its citizens: "It is not my in-
tention to be swept off my feet by an instant demand to meet certain con-
ditions that I consider are only passing. I shall stand firm for a safe, sound
business administration." He did not, however, spell out the programs of
his administration—he was saving that for the message to the legislature.1

Upon the completion of his speech, Woodring turned to William A.
Johnston, the Chief Justice of the Kansas Supreme Court, and took the oath
that made him Governor. With a National Guard artillery unit booming
out a seventeen-gun salute to the new Chief Executive, the ceremony ended.
That night, Governor Woodring, accompanied by his sister Lida, performed
his first official function—hosting the inaugural reception.2 For that event,
lights, flags, and flowers were used to turn the staid old Statehouse into a
large, attractive ballroom. Beautifully gowned women, tuxedoed politicians,
and uniformed officers talked, laughed, and danced until the wee hours of
the morning on that happy, festive occasion.3

But beneath the joy and gaiety of the moment lay the realization of
those present that their state, like nearly every other state in the union, was
in serious trouble. Although many people tried to ignore it, the impact of
the Depression was becoming more apparent with each passing day. The
deteriorating situation was especially evident in agriculture, which was the
basis of Kansas economy. The record crops attested to the fact that 1930 had
been a good year weather-wise. Kansas not only maintained its rank as the
nation's leading wheat-growing state, but it did so by producing a record-
breaking 186 million bushels. Production of the state's other leading staple
crop—corn—also rose to a record high. But while production was rising, prices were falling as an already saturated market became flooded. Wheat prices, which stood at ninety-nine cents a bushel in 1929, dropped to sixty-three cents in 1930 and were to decline to thirty-three cents during Woodring’s first year in office. Corn prices had likewise begun to plummet, going from nearly a dollar a bushel in 1929 to sixty-two cents in 1930. Overall, Kansas saw the value of its agricultural products drop from $548 million in 1929 to $441 million the following year, a loss of more than $100 million. The problems of overproduction and deflation were playing havoc with the incomes of thousands of Kansas farmers and were resulting in declining land prices, delinquent taxes, mortgages, and foreclosures. Two of the state’s main industries—meatpacking and milling—were also suffering serious setbacks. Overproduction, high shipping costs, and the decreasing ability of Americans to buy meat served to put a damper on the economically important packing industry. In flour production Kansas retained its number two ranking, but declining exports and reduced consumption of bread resulted in an overall decrease in production and a subsequent increase in unemployment in the milling industry.¹

The impact of the growing economic crisis did not limit itself to agriculture. Banks, too, felt the impact of hard times as dozens went broke and countless others were forced to absorb huge losses. The oil industry, which had long been a major producer of wealth in the state, was also in serious trouble. Not only had the bottom fallen completely out of the market, but one of the state’s largest purchasers, Prairie Oil and Gas Company, had stopped purchasing Kansas oil eleven days before Woodring’s inauguration. The very survival of the state’s oil industry was very much in doubt. The coal industry also saw a significant increase in unemployment as lower demands and mechanization took their toll. Throughout the state there was a growing disillusionment as citizens witnessed and experienced declining farm prices, increasing unemployment, and growing tax burdens.² All was not well in Kansas in January 1931 as Harry Woodring assumed the governorship.

The official responsibilities of a Governor fall into three general categories: ceremonial, administrative, and legislative. Although the first two consume the bulk of his time, it is generally upon the latter that an evaluation of his success is based. Woodring realized this, and he was determined to achieve legislative success. He knew that by doing so he would not only benefit his state and its citizens, he would also enhance his chances for re-election. There were, however, several obstacles. With a biennial session, which would fall in the first two months of his term, there would be no time to get his feet wet before dealing with the legislature. His legislative
record, whether good or bad, would be made in those first crucial eight weeks in office—there would be no second chance. To complicate matters further, the Governor faced a legislature that was dominated by the opposition party.6 Realizing the difficulties facing him, Woodring had attempted to prepare for them by using the period between the election and the inauguration to formulate, with great care and thought, his program. He had made numerous public statements indicating his strong desire to cooperate and get along with the Republican legislature.7

On 14 January, just two days after his inauguration, Woodring appeared before a joint session of the Kansas legislature to give the most important speech he had ever made. He started his “state of the state” message by reminding those assembled that he could only make recommendations, that they were the ones with the authority to accept or reject the measures. He asked only that they approach his proposals, as he had, in a nonpartisan fashion.8 Woodring made such an appeal because he knew that the success or failure of his program lay in the hands of Republicans, who held 37 of 40 seats in the senate and 76 of 125 in the house.9 Having made his plea for bipartisan support, he then set forth the cures that he proposed for the state’s ills. First and foremost he turned to taxes—“the paramount problem that confronts this legislature and the problem that should have prior consideration.” As he saw it, immediate tax relief and reform were absolutely essential. Immediate relief could be provided by reducing state expenditures, tightening the methods of assessment, and tapping certain additional sources of revenue. Reform, he maintained, was necessary in order to bring about a shift in the tax burden from real estate and tangible property, upon which the tax had become practically confiscatory, to all forms of wealth. To bring this redistribution about, he asked that the income tax amendment be re-submitted to the voters for approval. He also urged that steps be taken to assure that governmental units would follow a “pay as you go” plan in financing public improvements and would “not over-mortgage the public income of future generations” by excessive purchase of long-term bonds.

The idea of ultimately easing the financial burden of the average Kansas family, whose income was dropping rapidly, motivated both his tax program and his proposal that adequate funds be made available to the Public Service Commission so that it could undertake action to bring about reduction in gas, electric, and telephone rates. Turning to education, he accused the State Textbook Commission of making “needless and expensive changes” in textbooks, and he called for a complete investigation of that body. Highways and automobiles received attention as he vowed to continue the highway program of former Governor Reed, urged the licensing of motor-vehicle drivers, and asked that commercial vehicles be forced to pay a greater share

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of road-maintenance costs. Other major recommendations included creation of a crippled children’s commission, a state program to support the crippled and handicapped, the tightening of laws to protect purchasers of corporate securities, and the establishment of a separate Labor Department. In closing his lengthy message, the Governor once more reiterated his willingness to cooperate with the legislature in order to see his proposals enacted.

The Governor's message was very well received, and the favorable impression it made on legislators, newspapermen, and citizens in general did much to win the confidence of many Kansans who had questioned this young man’s ability to be Governor. Even a staunch Republican like William Allen White wrote an editorial praising the speech, calling it “an intelligent discussion of state affairs [which] was straightforward, well-advised and well-spoken.” Concerning the impression made by Woodring, White said: “One couldn’t ask more from a governor in his first inaugural. Kansas will mark up her estimate of the young governor appreciably.” White's evaluation of the new Democratic Governor and his proposed program was not atypical. Even the pro-Republican Topeka Daily Capital carried an editorial praising Woodring’s message.

In the weeks following his address, Woodring busied himself with the state's oil crisis and other administrative matters as he anxiously waited to see what action would be taken on his legislative proposals. One, two, and then three weeks passed, and except for a resolution establishing the Textbook Commission and a few minor bills raising various fees, little was done. Since the early weeks of a session normally found bills being hammered out in committee, it was not unusual that so few had received consideration after three weeks. But what bothered Woodring was that it seemed doubtful that much was going to be done. The legislature appeared to be dragging its feet, and around the Statehouse, talk was spreading that, in light of the unsettled conditions throughout the state, “the wisest course was for the legislature to pass the appropriation bills, local measures and just enough tax legislation to appease Mr. John Taxpayer, then adjourn and go home.”

Up to this time Governor Woodring had trod softly, because he did not wish to pressure or antagonize the members of the legislature; however, with three weeks of an eight-week session gone, he felt that the time had come to exert some leadership and to attempt to push through some legislation, especially on the tax issue.

Early in February the Governor let it be known that if the legislature failed to pass some major laws to help ease and equalize the tax burden, he would call it back into special session for that purpose. The threat of a special session sent shivers up the backs of many legislators, who feared a violent reaction from disenchanted voters if they were forced to return to Topeka to
do something that should have been done in the regular session. The impact of Woodring's warning was soon evident as various committees began to reexamine his message and to review tax bills previously submitted. When several committees began sending delegations to quiz the Governor on tax matters and his proposals, it became evident that the major obstacle to tax reform was the lack of leadership rather than the lack of interest. Woodring therefore concluded that the best way to lead a body that was now looking for assistance was to go before it with an even more detailed tax plan than the one included in his "state of the state" address.16

On 16 February, Governor Woodring appeared before a joint session of the Kansas legislature to deliver a special message dealing solely with taxation. He minced no words as he told of the need "to lift a part of the load now borne by real and tangible personal property, and so far as possible to distribute it to other forms of wealth which hitherto either in whole or in part have escaped the tax burden." He then set forth, in considerable detail, recommendations calling for resubmission of the income tax amendment, submission of a tax-limitation amendment that would limit the general property tax to 2 percent of the assessed valuation, creation of county assessment boards, assessment of all banks and public utilities by the State Tax Commission instead of by local assessors, taxing of bank assets, a tax on insurance premiums, tightening of the cigarette tax law, and fee increases for services performed by nine different state agencies. While he was reluctant to accept the principle of the proposed intangibles tax law, he indicated his willingness to accept it if it were the will of the legislature. The Governor closed with a plea for economy and a pledge to institute drastic reductions in departments and agencies that were under his control.17

The Governor's special message seemed to cajole a dallying legislature into action, and during the next four weeks the solons forged a record that they could be proud of. In an effort to establish a more equitable basis for future taxation, it was decided to submit the income tax and tax limitation amendments to the voters in the 1932 election. In order to improve present conditions, an intangibles tax, providing for a rate of fifty cents per one hundred dollars, was reenacted; the gasoline tax was raised from two cents per gallon to three in order to carry on the road-building program; new bus and truck mileage taxes were instituted; a bank tax law providing for the taxing of the assets of banks and building and loan companies was passed, in order to end a situation whereby those institutions were paying taxes only on their real estate and tangible property; and teeth were put into the cigarette tax law. Another act that was not a tax measure per se but that was closely related was a budget law that required all taxing districts to hold open budget hearings. It provided that budgets had to be published and
made available before a hearing took place. Governor Woodring was indeed pleased with the tax measures passed during the 1931 session, because he had advocated and worked for each of them except the intangibles tax, and he had failed only in his effort to get the assessment laws strengthened.

In addition to seeing his tax recommendations enacted, the Governor saw the legislature act favorably on nearly every other request made in his initial message. The continual pleas for economy apparently had some impact, for the legislators cut biennium appropriations nearly $1 million below those of the previous session. Although Woodring was disappointed when the legislature refused his recommendation that utility companies be forced to pay the full cost of the Public Service Commission’s actions to establish fair utility rates, he was pleased when it appropriated $100,000 for that purpose. The Blue Sky Commission received additional powers to police the sale of stocks, thus giving Kansas, according to the commission’s chairman, “the best securities law in the United States.” Probably no legislation made the Governor happier than that establishing a permanent Crippled Children’s Commission and providing a program of state and county care and support for crippled children and for individuals who were otherwise handicapped. Upon leaving the office of Governor, Woodring was to say that, as far as a permanent program was concerned, this was “the outstanding accomplishment of my administration.”

Besides enacting measures that the Governor championed, the legislature also passed a number of other statutes of great importance. These included laws that placed holding companies under the supervision of the Public Service Commission (P.S.C.), gave the P.S.C. the right to supervise oil proration, outlawed corporation farming, prohibited utilities from engaging in merchandising, created a state aircraft board, and gave county commissioners the power to levy a tax to care for the poor. In terms of the number of bills passed, the 1931 session was not prolific, for it passed only about 329 measures, of which a mere 46 had statewide application; but, as can be seen, the quality of them was impressive.

Of the several hundred measures sent to Governor Woodring for his signature, all except two were approved; however, his veto of those two—a resolution creating a committee to investigate the State Highway Commission, and a capital punishment bill—was to cause quite a stir. As the road-
building program of Governor Clyde M. Reed gained momentum in 1929 and 1930, the Highway Department, which was under the control of a six-man State Highway Commission, became the state's largest agency both in terms of the number of its employees and the funds that it spent. Before long the air was filled with rumors of graft and corruption in the letting of contracts and with charges of employees being forced to make political contributions. With such reports circulating, it was not surprising that Republican Senator Claude Bradney of Columbus, at the beginning of the 1931 session, introduced a resolution creating a committee to investigate the activities of the Highway Commission. Both parties supported the measure, which passed by large majorities in both houses.

Although Governor Woodring was extremely anxious to uncover any graft and corruption that might exist in state government, especially if it could be attributed to the Republicans, he realized that a probe might produce certain undesirable consequences; but the legislators had failed to take this into consideration. For example, because no new contracts could be let, nor could projects under contract but not yet under construction be permitted to start, the seven or eight months required for a highway investigation would delay the employment of hundreds of road-construction workers, set the road-construction program back at least a year, and result in the loss of a $2.2 million federal highway grant. The last would result from the stipulation that funds not used for the stated purpose by 1 September 1931 would revert to the federal government. Therefore, in order to put large numbers of unemployed men back to work, to prevent delay in the highway construction program, and to save more than $2 million in federal aid, Woodring vetoed the Bradney resolution.

With this unexpected action, which came on 13 March, the next-to-last day of the session, "Kansas beheld the strange spectacle of a Republican legislature voting to investigate the activities of a Republican administration and being thwarted by a Democratic governor." Legislative reaction to the veto was mixed, the most bitter criticism coming from those leaders of both parties who had worked to push the resolution through. Senator Bradney angrily denounced the action, claiming that "Governor Reed's friends demanded their 'pound of flesh' for voting for Woodring last fall, and Governor Woodring paid . . . by protecting Reed's highway commission." Beyond the legislative halls, however, reaction to the governor's action was overwhelmingly positive. The most famous editorial writer in Kansas, William Allen White, not only got out of his sick bed to write a laudatory editorial for his Emporia Gazette, but he also sent a personal telegram to Woodring, calling his veto "one of the manliest things I have ever seen come out of any governor in all my forty-five years I have known Kansas
politics." The *Topeka Daily Capital*'s editorial praised the Governor for "passing up a partisan political opportunity, in order to promote the state highway program."

Governor Woodring's second veto, which came on the last day of the session, was to raise more controversy and attract more attention than the first. Early in the legislative session, Democratic Representative Donald Muir of Harper, who hoped to cut the crime rate, introduced a bill restoring the death penalty (Kansas had abolished capital punishment in 1907). At the time the measure was introduced, Governor Woodring, without giving it much consideration, indicated that he would sign the bill if it were passed by large majorities in both houses. The Muir capital punishment bill quickly found its way to the floors of the house and senate, where it was passed by more than a two-thirds majority. As the bill went through the legislative mill and it became increasingly apparent that the responsibility of approving or rejecting the measure would fall ultimately on him, Woodring began to give the matter considerable thought and study. When the bill finally reached the Governor's desk, the legislators expected the approval that had originally been promised. Woodring, however, shocked everyone by vetoing it. In his veto message, which is still a classic condemnation of capital punishment, Woodring used historical and sociological studies to support his contention that "the proposed legislation is unsound in theory, that it has been demonstrated to be bad in practice, and that its adoption would be most unwise from every viewpoint." He saw no need for Kansas to go back to "the dark ages in our criminal laws." This courageous veto was to pay big dividends for Woodring, because it won widespread approval and acclaim for him in Kansas and throughout the nation.

The smoke from the Governor's two vetoes had not cleared when the legislators adjourned, packed their bags, and headed for home. Technically, adjournment would not come until March 17, but by the evening of March 14, to all intents and purposes, the 1931 session was over. In exactly two months the legislative record of the Woodring administration had been created. How successful had he been? Contemporary opinion held that he had done very well. According to political observer Milton Tabor, "The governor batted nearly 1000 per cent in his suggestions for new laws." In a personal letter to the Governor, William Allen White said, "You have come through the Legislature splendidly." Even Clif Stratton, the chief political writer of the pro-Republican *Topeka Daily Capital*, came to the conclusion that "the governor did a right good job of getting a Republican legislature to enact his legislative program into law. In fact a better job than some Republican governors in the past had been able to do." Woodring, too, was pleased. He had seen nearly every request that he had made to the
legislature enacted into law, and so it was not surprising when he indicated that “it had been a constructive and outstanding session.”

Kansas Republicans and Democrats rarely agree on anything, but in the spring of 1931 they tended to agree that Governor Woodring had done a good job in getting legislation passed. His success rested on several factors. Of great importance was his ability to win the confidence of the lawmakers. This he did almost immediately by showing them that he was an able and competent individual. The legislators who came into contact with Woodring during his first few weeks in office were amazed and impressed by his grasp of legislative, administrative, and political affairs. If they had not known better, they would never have guessed that they were dealing with a man who had just entered politics.

A warm personality was another asset that the new Governor utilized effectively. His pleasant, friendly “let’s be pals” attitude was quite different from that of his predecessor, and the legislators enjoyed it. Conveying a sense of sincerity which was quickly translated into a feeling of trust, he was able to convince the members of the legislature and the public at large that he was deeply interested in the welfare of the state and its citizens. When he said, “I am working for only one thing always—the interests of the average and majority citizen,” people believed him.

Woodring’s accessibility was just as important to his success as were his ability and personality. It did not take legislators of either party long to discover that getting in to see the Governor was no problem. Furthermore, once they got to see him they always received a warm welcome. He was always willing to listen to their views and ideas and to explain his stand on a certain issue. The Governor’s “open door” policy was not limited to public officials, for anyone wanting to see and talk with him on any subject received the opportunity. The open door was more than a gesture. Even during the long, busy days of the legislative session he would take time out from his hectic schedule to visit with job seekers, newspaper reporters, hand-shakers, and school children. The number of visitors generally averaged more than one hundred a day and sometimes reached three hundred. Woodring’s accessibility both impressed those who met with him and endeared him to many Kansans who read in the newspaper about this busy man who always had a “handshake and a smile for everyone.”

Personal attributes were responsible for much of the smooth sailing experienced by the Governor during the legislative session, but considerable credit must also go to his decision to delay questions of patronage. When the legislature convened, the Governor announced that, with one or two exceptions, he was not going to submit appointments that needed senatorial approval until late in the session, and appointments not requiring approval
would be made only after the session was over. One major benefit of this action was that it discouraged thousands of Democratic job seekers from pressing their claims at that particular time, thereby freeing the Governor for more important and pressing matters. It also left the senate free to concentrate on vital issues. Most importantly, it avoided much of the controversy, ill will, and anger that nearly always develop in legislative bodies when political appointments are considered. The decision was also sound from a public-relations viewpoint, because “the average citizen took it to mean here was a Governor who thought more of the state’s business than he did of patronage.”

Finally, a great deal of credit for the former banker’s quick and successful transition from private to public life, as well as for his legislative success, must go to several very capable advisers. Guy Helvering, the master politician, continued to be the guiding light on political affairs, but he was inexperienced in state legislative matters. In the latter area, however, the Governor’s private secretary, Leslie Wallace, and his legislative counsel, Carl Rice, provided much of the valuable advice and assistance that enabled him to carry out his legislative responsibilities so successfully.

No sooner had the session ended than Woodring turned to the problems of patronage. Before the senate adjourned, it had approved his appointees to a half-dozen important positions, but the bulk of the positions were yet to be filled. The Governor had at his disposal about a dozen really important jobs, primarily on key commissions and boards, and several hundred other positions such as inspectors, clerks, stenographers, and game wardens. There was no dearth of applicants to fill those few hundred positions, for more than six thousand job-hungry Democrats appealed to “Harry” to repay them for their role in putting him in the governor’s mansion. After all, each would claim that it was his efforts that had given Woodring the votes needed to squeak out the victory. The Governor was literally besieged: on some days there were so many expectant appointees that it was nearly impossible for anyone to get in and out of his office.

The Governor used great care in making his appointments, generally relying on proven businessmen and attorneys, nearly always those who had actively supported his bid for the governorship. Woodring was always a good judge of men, and this was reflected in his appointees, most of whom won high praise from both parties. One appointment, however, caused considerable controversy: that was the State Highway Commission’s appointment of Woodring’s choice, Guy Helvering, as State Highway Director. Republicans were especially upset, because this gave the Democratic State
Chairman control of the patronage in the largest state agency.\textsuperscript{50} While such fears were to prove well founded in that Helvering did use the department for political purposes and while, as will be seen, his actions were to become a major issue in the 1932 election, the state highway program did make great progress under his leadership. Helvering proved to be just as effective in administering the Highway Department as he had been in administering a political campaign, and, as a result, Kansas surfaced more miles of highway (3,321) in 1931 than did any other state in the union.\textsuperscript{51}

Of all the problems facing Governor Woodring when he assumed office in 1931, the most pressing revolved around the calamitous conditions in the Kansas oil industry. In the late 1920s Kansas retained its number four ranking among the oil-producing states; however, the industry was experiencing difficulties. The basic problem was overproduction: Kansas, like the other oil states, was “drowning in oil.”\textsuperscript{52} Consequently, crude oil that sold for $2.31 a barrel in 1926 was down to $1.00 a barrel in the summer of 1930. Following the discovery of rich deposits in eastern Texas in the fall of 1930, it fell to $0.18 a barrel. On top of the low prices, Kansas oil producers received another blow in December 1930, when the Prairie Oil and Gas Company announced that, due to surplus stocks, it would stop purchasing crude oil in Kansas and Oklahoma as of 1 January 1931. The consequence of this was to shut down thousands of shallow “stripper” wells in eastern Kansas. Working to save the strippers were the Independent Petroleum Association (I.P.A., an association of small producers) and a special state-appointed three-man committee headed by Alfred M. Landon, an Independence, Kansas, oil man. Efforts of the I.P.A. and Landon to negotiate an agreement with Prairie and other companies to purchase the “distress” oil failed, and when New Year’s Day, 1931, arrived, Prairie shut down. During the following weeks all efforts to provide markets for the stripper production were unsuccessful.\textsuperscript{53} It was at this point that Woodring assumed his responsibilities as the state’s Chief Executive.

The new Governor was vitally concerned by the turn of events, because Prairie’s action had shut down nearly fifteen thousand Kansas oil wells. This not only added to unemployment, it also deprived more than six hundred operators, and ultimately the state, of the economic benefits of the “black gold.”\textsuperscript{54} Woodring faced two problems: the need to find markets for the stripper wells and the need to provide some sort of long-range solution whereby Kansas oil production could be held in line with demand. An immediate solution to the first problem was absolutely essential, because if the strippers were shut down for any length of time, salt water would breach the wells and permanently destroy them. As Governor-elect, Woodring had pledged to assist the troubled oil industry. Although he was aware of the
critical nature of the oil situation, Woodring, whether due to more pressing problems or to negligence, waited for more than two weeks after assuming office before taking any action. When he did go to battle, it was on three fronts: first, against Prairie, for it to continue purchasing the stripper oil; second, against Standard Oil of Indiana, which was the largest ultimate purchaser of stripper production; third, against President Hoover, who could use his position to help the troubled producers.55

On 28 January, Woodring sent telegrams to President Hoover and to E. G. Seubert, president of Standard Oil of Indiana, saying that he was “astonished and appalled” that twelve thousand oil wells were being allowed to be destroyed. He asked President Hoover to use his influence to bring about a settlement, and then he added: “If the great leaders of the oil industry, moved by avarice and self-interest, refuse to adjust the intolerable situation confronting the Kansas fields then a tariff on oil holds out the only hope in sight as the solution to our problem.”56 The Governor also appealed to Seubert, as the biggest purchaser of Kansas oil, to use his influence to settle the stripper problem by February tenth. If he failed to do so, Woodring warned, “every resource of the Kansas government will be invoked to get the desired results.”57 Two days later, following an unproductive conference with Prairie’s president, W. S. Fitzpatrick, an angry Woodring fired off two more telegrams, one to Fitzpatrick and another to Seubert. After reminding both men of their moral obligations to Kansas producers and chiding them for attempting to pass the buck, he made some subtle threats. To Fitzpatrick, whose firm was contemplating retail sale of oil in Kansas gas stations, he indicated his conviction that if a settlement were not forthcoming, such products “would not be received favorably.” To Seubert he hinted at the possibility of a state probe into the relationship between the supposedly separate Standard Oil Company of Indiana and Standard Oil Company of Kansas.58

Apparently this last warning had the impact that Woodring had hoped for, because Seubert immediately sent a negotiator to Topeka to confer directly with the Governor about terms of a possible settlement. Some headway was made on these negotiations, and on February seventh, Governor Woodring was able to announce that a temporary solution to the stripper problem had been found and that the prospects for a permanent settlement were good.59 The temporary settlement, by which Standard of Indiana agreed to purchase 300,000 barrels of stripper oil in the next sixty days, was of great significance, because it enabled the wells to start pumping again, and it gave the Governor time to work out long-term agreements. Woodring took full advantage of the extra time he had won, and in March and April he successfully concluded agreements with Standard and other major com-
panies to purchase nearly all of the state's stripper production. Although he relied heavily on the advice and assistance of Alf Landon and Thurman Hill of the Public Service Commission, Woodring personally did most of the negotiating with the oil company representatives.

Finding markets for the oil from the stripper wells solved the immediate problem, but Woodring was now interested in ways to protect the industry in the future. He increasingly came to accept the idea of an oil tariff as a solution to the domestic problem; thus, he actively supported efforts of Kansas Congressmen to such ends, and he continued to urge President Hoover to support an oil tariff or to use the flexibility of current tariff legislation to ease the burden. Another solution that he supported, but not so enthusiastically, was state proration. Landon and independent Kansas producers were urging that state machinery be established to control oil production by the allotment of quotas (proration). Such control could be used to conserve oil resources and, more importantly, to raise prices by limiting production. In early March a proration law, which gave the Public Service Commission the power to set quotas, was passed by the house but killed in senate committee. Reaction from the small oil producers revived the measure, and it was subsequently passed. Although Woodring was hesitant about approving the bill because he was "unable to reconcile restrictions on the production of natural resources in Kansas with the free importation of oil," he nevertheless signed it because of the widespread support it had among the state's independent oil men. With the passage of the bill, Kansas became the first state in the nation to provide an effective proration system, and other oil-producing states soon followed the Kansas example as they passed laws giving state agencies power to control oil production by allotting quotas. Woodring also continued to work for the oil industry by actively supporting the activities of the loosely knit Oil States Advisory Committee, which made one of the first attempts to bring order to the oil industry by interstate cooperation. Although he by no means solved all the problems of the Kansas oil industry, Woodring did perform a valuable service by finding markets for stripper production, by providing for oil conservation and higher prices through proration (oil was back to eighty-five cents a barrel by the end of 1931), and by helping to lay the basis for interstate cooperation in meeting oil problems.

In the meantime Woodring had started a battle for reduction of utility rates—an endeavor that would ultimately provide him with his greatest public support, favorable nationwide publicity, satisfying victories, and demoralizing setbacks. Woodring had long been bothered by the fact that since the World War the citizens of his state had witnessed a decline in the cost of nearly everything except utilities. This meant that Kansans were paying the
same utility rates in bad times as they had in good ones. Furthermore, technological developments had lowered the operating cost of the utilities, but the resultant savings were being passed on to the stockholders rather than to the consumers. The new Governor wanted to correct this "undesirable" situation.67

That Woodring intended to challenge the utility companies became apparent in his opening message to the legislature. In it he asked that the Public Service Commission (P.S.C.) be given "sufficient funds to properly perform its functions," which would "result in lower rates for all public utilities."68 While failing to finance the project as he had suggested, the legislature did provide a major weapon to fight the utilities when it appropriated $100,000 to the P.S.C. to be used specifically for securing lower gas and electric rates. A companion law gave the commission the authority to examine the books of holding companies associated with utility companies operating within Kansas. Although the state now had the financial and legal tools to help bring about reductions in rates, Governor Woodring did not wish to use them except as a last resort. Because he hoped to reach his objective by getting the companies to act voluntarily, he conferred with officials of various gas and electric companies and requested that they reduce consumer rates by at least 10 percent.69 This "soft" approach was extremely successful, for during 1931 more than two hundred cities and towns benefited from lower rates for electricity, and more than fifty experienced reductions in gas rates. The following year was even more successful, with nearly six hundred communities seeing reductions in rates for electricity, and eighty having lower gas rates. In all, nearly two out of every three communities in the state profited from voluntary reductions in rates.70

There was, however, one important and powerful individual who would not go along with the reductions—Henry L. Doherty, president of the Cities Service Company, which supplied gas to nearly one hundred Kansas cities and towns, including most of the larger ones. Henry L. Doherty's life was a real rags-to-riches story. Born in Columbus, Ohio, in 1870, he quit school at the age of twelve in order to go to work as an office boy for the Columbus Gas Company. Serving later as an engineer and manager for various utility companies, he soon amassed a sizable fortune. Then in 1910 he formed Cities Service Company, a conglomerate which by 1931 had grown to include more than one hundred utility companies with assets of more than $660 million. The headstrong multimillionaire watched over his empire like a mother hen, making all major decisions himself; therefore, if one wanted to deal with Cities Service, he did not deal with a vice-president or some other underling: he dealt with Doherty.71 Woodring was determined to get the Doherty interests to lower their gas rates, not only because of the large
Governor Harry H. Woodring campaigning for reelection in Kansas, 1932.

James A. Farley, James Roosevelt, and Harry H. Woodring (left to right) planning for the 1932 Democratic National Convention.
number of communities that were involved, but also because their rates were higher than those of any other company in the state.

Realizing that Doherty would never come to Kansas to see him, Woodring decided to go to New York. In late April 1931 the Kansas Governor traveled East to meet with the utility magnate. Armed with data on gas rates throughout the state, Woodring appealed for Doherty to adopt a plan that would provide lower consumer rates through a reduction in the “gate-rate.” Doherty listened attentively, promised to consider the proposal, and indicated that he would probably send representatives to Kansas to confer on the matter. Pleased with the tenor of the meeting, Woodring returned to Topeka to await the Cities Service negotiators. Time passed, but nothing happened. Every time Woodring asked the Doherty people to begin discussions, they asked for a delay. Six, eight, and then ten weeks passed after the New York meeting, and still no negotiators appeared.

As the days of June ticked off, Woodring’s patience began to wear thin, and he became increasingly convinced that Doherty had no intention of reducing his rates. Finally the Governor came to the conclusion that it was time to act, and on June twentieth he instructed the P.S.C. “to proceed to force reductions.” This announcement alarmed Doherty at least enough to have H. C. Caster, his general counsel in Kansas City, open negotiations. On 26 June, Woodring informed Caster that he was tired of the delays and was giving Doherty until the second of July to cut his city “gate-rate” from forty to thirty cents per thousand cubic feet; if such action were not taken, he would have the P.S.C. take steps to force the reduction. Whether it was wise for Woodring to issue such an ultimatum is open to question. On the one hand, it ended any hope for voluntary reduction, because it made Doherty determined to avoid taking any action that might make it appear that someone else was telling him how to run his business. On the other hand, it seems unlikely that Doherty would ever have taken action voluntarily. Had he been sincere about voluntary reductions, he had had plenty of time to institute them.

When the 2 July ultimatum date arrived, Doherty’s representatives asked, as they had so many times in the past, for an extension of time. The angry Harry Woodring refused their request and announced that all peaceful negotiations were off and that the P.S.C. was being ordered to proceed. He served notice on the Cities Service Company that it could expect a real battle. “We are in this fight to obtain reasonable gas rates,” he said, “and when the smoke clears away and the casualties are counted, the gas company may find that it is not as big as the state of Kansas.” Later that afternoon, Blue Sky commissioner Carl Newcomer announced that he was banning the sale of all Cities Service stock, except first preferred, in Kansas. While

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Woodring, in all likelihood, coordinated this latter action, he publicly denied that he had had anything to do with it. He did, however, indicate that he would support Newcomer’s position.  

The irate Henry Doherty immediately swung into action. On 3 July he not only sought an injunction to stop the state of Kansas from banning the sale of Cities Service stock, but he also utilized the application for injunction to charge “His Excellency” (Woodring) with conspiracy to “compel and coerce” him to accede to demands for lower rates. Several days later, Doherty lashed out again, this time with a three-thousand-word telegram to Woodring condemning his “arbitrary and reprehensible” actions to bring about reductions. He also blamed Woodring for inaugurating and forcing an unnecessary fight. The lengthy telegram then proceeded to accuse the Kansas Governor of being a tool of the Kansas City Star. The crusading but generally responsible Star had been quite vocal in urging rate reductions, and Doherty was convinced that the paper was out to “impair Cities Service’s credit and to cripple its operations.” Doherty won a partial victory on 14 July, when the United States Supreme Court said that Kansas could not halt the sale of Cities Service stock. Nevertheless, the real winner of this July 1931 clash was Woodring, for a major result of the affair was a great deal of favorable publicity for him in Kansas and throughout the nation. Newspapers in every state, including the New York Times, carried a blow-by-blow account of the encounter. In nearly every news story Woodring was portrayed as a warm-hearted champion of the little man who was being pitted against the cold-hearted “Robber Baron,” who was out to exploit the consumer for his personal gain. Such stories served to increase the antagonism between Woodring and Doherty, and this was to play a major role in the 1932 gubernatorial campaign.

While Woodring and Doherty engaged in bitter rhetoric, the P.S.C. prepared to open hearings to assist it in determining what a fair rate would be. The proceedings were originally scheduled to begin on 18 August 1931, but lawyers from both sides needed extra time to prepare, and so it was October sixteenth before the hearings finally got underway. This marked the start of legal maneuvering that was to last throughout Woodring’s term and well into that of his successor. The gas-rate hearings continued for five months, with Doherty’s lawyer claiming that the forty cents per thousand gate-rate was reasonable, and the attorneys for the state claiming that the charge was excessive. Finally, in mid March 1932, the testimony came to an end, and the commission retired to consider its findings and determine what the rate should be. During the hearings, Doherty offered to cut his price from 40 to 35 cents per thousand, but Woodring refused to accept and ordered the commission to proceed. On 19 July the commission ordered a
gate-rate reduction of 10.5 cents per thousand—from 40 to 29.5 cents. At this point it appeared as if Woodring had won his fight for lower rates; however, Doherty was not through. With a battery of topnotch corporation lawyers, he took the case into the federal courts, where on 5 January 1933, just four days before Woodring left office, a three-judge panel ruled that the 40-cent rate was not unreasonable and therefore could stand. At that time the crushed Harry Woodring said, "I am rather disgusted with the whole attempt at regulation of utilities." The Governor had made a very creditable record in rate reductions, but he grieved because he had let the "big one" (Doherty) get away. Although the ruling of the federal court was a blow to Woodring, it was only a temporary setback for Kansas, because when Alf Landon became governor in 1933, he continued the fight against Doherty, and in 1936 he succeeded in getting Cities Service to reduce its rates by 20 percent.

Of all the problems that Woodring faced as Governor, none were more continuous and pressing than taxation and economy—two problems that went hand in hand. As the depression deepened in 1931 and 1932, Kansans found it increasingly difficult to meet their tax obligations; thus, as tax delinquency increased, state revenue decreased. This situation created several difficulties for the Governor: first, it subjected him to considerable pressure to lower taxes; second, it made it extremely difficult for him to balance the budget. In spite of the difficulties, Woodring was convinced that he could do both.

When farm prices dipped to disastrous levels in the summer of 1931, a ground swell arose for the convening of a special session of the legislature in order to provide relief for suffering Kansans. Numerous legislators, "general store" politicians, well-meaning citizens, and crackpots had ideas about how to provide the necessary relief, but they rarely agreed with one another. Some wanted to lower taxes and cut state salaries; others wanted to raise taxes and provide more work relief; while still others wanted to raise the gasoline tax or shorten the working day of state employees. There was no dearth of ideas as to how the state legislature might improve the situation.

While Woodring was sympathetic with the aims of those people who were calling for a special session, he resisted their pressures, because he was convinced that such action would create more problems than it would solve. In spite of his announcements that he would not call the legislators back to Topeka, the demands for such action continued. By fall the most vocal calls were coming from two leading Democrats, former Governor Jonathan Davis and State Representative Donald Muir, both of whom were demanding
lower taxes by legislative action. When Davis and Woodring exchanged harsh words over the subject of a special session, the former joined with Dr. John Brinkley to try to compel the Governor to take the desired action. In mid October, Davis and Brinkley secured the use of Representative Hall in the Statehouse for a meeting of the Taxpayers Education League. When Davis used that occasion to “call” a special session of the legislature and suggested that the legislators not only lower taxes but also impeach Governor Woodring, a real fight for the 1932 Democratic primary appeared to be shaping up between the two men. Woodring continued to resist such pressure, and when the sixty-year-old Davis remarried in December 1931, his interest in politics temporarily subsided, and he stopped pressing for the session.85

Woodring’s reasons for refusing to call the legislators back were not limited to his belief that they could accomplish little; they were also due to his feeling that he could effectively bring about tax relief by other means. Although he had no direct control over the state tax levy, he could use his influence with the members of the State Tax Commission to get what he desired. When Woodring took office, the state levy was 1.43 mills, but declining collections were pressuring the Tax Commission to make up the loss by raising the rate to 1.75. Violently opposed to any tax increase at that time, the Governor went before the commission in August 1931 and pledged to reduce state expenditures to a point where such a raise would not be necessary. Convinced of his sincerity and determination, the commission decided to retain the 1.43-mill level. The next year he repeated the performance, and this time he was so convincing that it cut the levy to 1.33 mills, the lowest rate since 1916.86 Woodring was also instrumental in securing another break for taxpayers when, in February 1932, he used his influence to get the Tax Commission to lower the assessed value of real estate by 14 percent on farm property and by 8 percent on city property.87 While the tax rates went down only slightly under Woodring, nevertheless they did go down. But at the same time that tax reductions helped relieve distress, they also created a bigger problem: lower taxes meant lower state revenue, which in turn made the problem of balancing the budget extremely difficult.

How to balance the budget—that was the question. There were two general means that could be employed: increase revenue, or reduce expenditures. Woodring saw no real choice, because it was evident that the tax burden was already more than most Kansans could bear. This left the other alternative—reduction of state expenditures. Since state appropriations were less than $10 million a year, there did not appear to be much fat that could be trimmed off.88 Nevertheless, Woodring was determined to succeed, and shortly after taking office, he instituted an austerity program unlike any that
the Sunflower State had ever seen. By eliminating a number of state jobs, by forcing certain institutions to use surplus funds, and by postponing construction, repairs, and improvements at state colleges and universities, Woodring succeeded in saving the state $900,000 during his first year in office. This record pleased but did not satisfy him; thus, he announced his intention to cut expenditures by $2 million during his second year in office. He hoped to do this by reducing salaries and drastically cutting operating expenses at state institutions. In the early spring of 1932 the Governor announced that he was voluntarily reducing his $5,000 salary by 10 percent, and he asked all other state employees to do the same. After he used a "big stick," all the personnel in departments under his control quickly complied, and they in turn were followed by paid members of state boards and commissions. The last holdouts were elected Republican officials. While there was no legal way that the Governor could reduce their salaries, he succeeded in getting them to fall into line by indicating that he would make a campaign issue out of their refusal to cooperate in his economy program.89

State penal institutions also contributed to the economy drive by cutting expenses, but higher education made the biggest sacrifice. The Kansas Board of Regents reduced the budgets of the five state schools more than $900,000 by cutting faculty salaries 10 percent, reducing extension work, closing certain departments, not filling faculty vacancies, postponing building programs, and doing minimum repair work. Through such means during his second year in office, Woodring succeeded in saving the state $2 million and, consequently, in balancing the budget.90 Unfortunately, cutbacks of institutional funds had adverse effects on the programs and facilities of nearly all institutions—especially those of higher education. Public-school children did, however, receive a break from the state when Woodring convinced the State Schoolbook Commission, which was already under fire as a result of the legislative investigations, to reduce the price of schoolbooks by 25 percent.91

As Governor, Woodring took a very active interest in the National Guard, but he was very pleased that he never had to call on it for other than disaster duty. It was his interest in the Guard that led to the organization of the 35th Division. This division had not become a reality, because ever since 1918 the three states designated to form the unit—Kansas, Nebraska, and Missouri—had been unable to agree on a Division Commander. With Woodring leading the way, a Commander was agreed upon, the division was completely reorganized, and it subsequently became one of the most effective National Guard divisions.92 The Governor's interest in the Guard and the American Legion helped to keep him abreast of military and national-defense developments—matters in which he was soon to become deeply involved.
The headaches, heartaches, and pressures of being Governor were tremendous; but Woodring did not mind, for he enjoyed his new position. He loved the give-and-take of politics as well as the sense of importance and power that came with the post. But politics also brought at least one major change in his personality, and that was a diminishing ability to forgive and forget. Perhaps it was the nature of the job which made him increasingly hostile to those people who crossed swords with him. At the same time that he began to display intolerance and vindictiveness toward those who would not play ball with him, he was developing a deep sense of obligation toward those who assisted and supported him. The Governor increasingly became a man who believed that when he did someone a favor, that person should return the favor whenever he was in a position to do so. The person who failed to reciprocate was no friend of Harry Woodring’s. This was a reaction that he was to continue to have throughout his political career.

In most ways Woodring remained the same. This was certainly true of the high moral standards that he both maintained and demanded of those who worked in his administration. Although he no longer attended church regularly, he continued to exhibit the precepts of Christian morality that his family had instilled in him. He appeared to have especially strong feelings about drinking. As he put it, “Being Kansas born, I naturally believe in prohibition and in the strictest possible enforcement of it.” Whether this statement represented political expediency or a true feeling is uncertain, but while there may be some room for doubt concerning his moral view on the use of alcohol, there is no question of his abhorrence for and intolerance of anyone who drank to excess. Just as repulsive to him as the drunk was the man who could not do his job. Consequently, he did not tolerate incompetency in any position, and he did not hesitate to remove or call for the removal of any man, regardless of his background, who was not doing his job.

Woodring worked hard at being Governor, frequently putting in ten or more hours a day, six days a week, at his office; but he also enjoyed his leisure. After a hard day at the office, the nattily dressed bachelor would hop into his new 12-cylinder black Cadillac (the first 12-cylinder car in the state) and head for the governor’s mansion, a three-story, Victorian style house of brick and terra cotta. Since it had thirty-two rooms, it was more than big enough for Harry and Lida, so they frequently invited old friends to come to Topeka and spend several days with them. When company was present, the evening would usually be spent in consuming a home-cooked meal and playing bridge. If there were no houseguests, Harry liked to go to a movie, a concert, or, occasionally, a party. Although the bachelor Governor enjoyed a full and active social life, he was by no means a man about town.

If the Governor wished to engage in some physical activity, he went to...
the executive stable, saddled up "Governor," and went for a short ride. Being a competent horseman, he frequently took a ride in the morning and evening; however, except for his riding, he received very little exercise. He gave up tennis and hoped to begin playing golf; but the latter never caught his fancy, so he abandoned it. Woodring maintained his interests in sports, but as a spectator rather than as a participant. Every year he traveled to several horse shows as well as to the Kentucky Derby. Football increasingly caught his attention, and he became quite interested in the gridiron fortunes of Washburn University in Topeka.97

Being Governor required considerable travel—an aspect of the job that Woodring thoroughly enjoyed. Any Governor is highly sought-after as a speaker, and he was no exception. During his term in office he traveled to nearly every county in the state, speaking before professional meetings, church groups, veterans organizations, agricultural clubs, and scores of other service and civic organizations. His position also required out-of-state travel to such places as French Lick, Indiana, and Richmond, Virginia, for governors' conferences; to New York City to see Henry Doherty; and to Washington, D.C., to confer with various officials on federal-state matters. But the out-of-state place that the Governor visited more than any other was one that few people had yet heard of—Hyde Park, New York.