

**WILLIE ROBERTA
EMERSON
MURRAY
(1908-1964)**



**POLITICS
CAME
BETWEEN
THEM**

Inauguration Day at the Oklahoma state capitol in 1951 was a family affair. Governor-elect Johnston Murray received the oath of office from his 81-year-old father, Alfalfa Bill Murray. This was the elder Murray's first appearance in Oklahoma politics since the 1930s due to his racial views.

First Lady Willie Murray sparkled like her red hair in the sun. It was a perfect day, a perfect marriage, and the start of a perfect term of office but a mean front was moving in on the Governor's Mansion that would break like a thundercloud in one of the state's most bitter divorce cases.

Willie Roberta Emerson was born in Weatherford in September 1908. Johnston Murray was born in July 1902. His father "Alfalfa Bill" Murray was the 9th Governor from 1931 to 1935 and the president of the constitutional convention leading up to statehood. Johnston's first marriage in 1923 to Marion Draughon of Sulphur ended in divorce in 1929.

Willie and Johnston married in September 1933. Winning by a mere 1,009 votes, Johnston was elected the 14th governor in 1950. Political observers claimed it was Willie's fire and ambition that had propelled soft-spoken Johnston into office.

She was a concert pianist, praised for her charm and intelligence. Her first action after the inauguration was to open the governor's mansion to public visitors every Thursday. She welcomed up to 3,000 people weekly, who waited in long lines. The partnership began to pale as the term wore on. She was outspoken and Johnston said many times that HE was elected – not her! She constantly complained of him being drunk and unfaithful. He said she bossed too much.

The state constitution prohibited Johnston from serving more than one term. Before his term was up, Willie announced she would run in 1954. It was the final straw. The campaign was considered a farce. She became the first state candidate to campaign by helicopter, with one reporter writing "it was the only thing that got off the ground". She lost the election and Johnston filed for divorce after 22 years of marriage, alleging extreme cruelty.

Willie fought the divorce. At first, she filed for separate maintenance, alleging adultery and public drunkenness. When their brawl went public, he begged for another chance. She named "the other woman", and published letters from Johnson declaring his intention to divorce. He said they were lies. After a blistering trial, the divorce was granted on the grounds of incompatibility in 1956. Willie got a settlement of \$75,000, the Oklahoma City family home and Ford automobile, and the movie of her gubernatorial campaign.

Later that year, Johnston married his third wife Helen Shutt. Politically and financially ruined, he moved to Fort Worth, but eventually returned to Oklahoma on the advice of state senator Gene Stipe to practice law. After the divorce, Willie returned to Weatherford to be near her family.

Willie and Johnston were described as "the perfect couple" – but politics came between them. She died of cancer at age 54 in April 1963. One dignitary who attended her funeral remarked, "Perhaps no other woman has ever influenced the state of Oklahoma as she was able to do."