

**ELVA
SHARTEL
FERGUSON**
1869-1947



**ORIGINAL
PIONEER
WOMAN**

People can observe history, write about it, or make it. From prairie wife to newspaperwoman to Oklahoma Territory First Lady, Elva Ferguson did all three.

Elva Shartel was born in April 1869 in Novelty, Missouri, and married Thompson Ferguson in Sedan, Kansas in June 1885. They participated in the 1889 Land Run, but later sold their claim and returned to Sedan, purchasing the Sedan Republican. They returned to Oklahoma Territory for the 1892 Cheyenne-Arapahoe Land Run, settling in Watonga.

Elva drove a covered wagon packed with their household goods, with her young son by her side and her baby son on her lap. Thompson drove another wagon, filled with the printing press and supplies they used in Sedan. The muddy streets and wild saloons didn't give Elva confidence this was a place to raise her sons.

From their ten-dollar-a-month home and office, they published the Watonga Republican. But life was difficult in the rowdy frontier town. Shots were fired into the newspaper office, and their home was set ablaze when a saloon owner wanted to "burn the editor" out of town. At Christmas, Elva was homesick with little money to celebrate, when the local baker brought a huge basket of everything they needed to make Christmas special.

Since western Oklahoma Territory was agriculture country, they were often paid in corn, butter, eggs, potatoes, or any commodity the Fergusons could use. After Thompson became postmaster from 1897 to 1899, their cash flow problem improved, allowing them to purchase a three-story Victorian home in 1901.

When Theodore Roosevelt became president in September 1901, he needed to select an "honest man" as new Territorial Governor. After several names were offered and rejected, Thompson was offered the job, though he felt unqualified. Elva disagreed, and gladly moved the family to Guthrie in January 1902, when Ferguson became the sixth – and longest serving – Territorial Governor.

During his tenure, Ferguson reduced deficit spending, increased funds for education and prison reform, organized the Board of Agriculture, set teacher qualifications, and promoted participation in the 1903 St. Louis World's Fair. He required ranchers to fence their land to prevent crop damage, allowed osteopaths to practice in the Territory, and upgraded mental institutions. Most of all, he supported statehood.

They moved back to Watonga in 1906, where Thompson ran the newspaper until his death in February 1921. Starting in 1927, novelist Edna Ferber stayed in Elva's home, learning about pioneer life. She published "Cimarron" in 1929, based on Elva's life. The 1931 movie was nominated for seven Academy Awards, winning for Outstanding Production, Best Writing-Adaptation and Best Art Direction.

In 1933, Elva was inducted into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame. She published "They Carried a Torch – The Story of Oklahoma's Pioneer Newspapers" in 1937. She dedicated the book to her son Walter, who rode by her side when they first arrived in Watonga. She died in December 1947 at age 78, leaving behind a remarkable record of her life and times as a pioneering newspaperwoman.