

“Two Governors for the Price of One”

by Scott Sosebee

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(May 24, 2022) Texas in the 1920s, like much of the rest of the South—and the nation—had become caught in the grips of a social and cultural battle. The reform impulse of the Progressive Era, as well as the horror of World War I and the U.S.’s involvement in international affairs, had led to a reactionary conservative movement that saw a degradation of the nation’s social morality and advocated for isolationism in foreign matters. Some groups, such as the Ku Klux Klan, took advantage of such conditions to advance their racist, nativist viewpoints. In Texas, the Klan became politically prominent and a very visible force at the ballot box. Their emergence would help to lead to one of the most unlikely “comeback” in Texas political history, the “restoration” of James E. Ferguson to the top of Texas’ political pyramid.

James Ferguson had been the Governor of Texas from 1915 until 1917 until he had been impeached, convicted, and removed from office for numerous crimes and indiscretions. His removal, however, did not end his political ambitions and he searched for a way to re-emerge and be politically viable. The order that had removed him from office had precluded him from holding office again, but that did not mean that his wife, Miriam, was forbidden to do so. James and Miriam Ferguson had seen the political signs of the times, the reform impulse and, most of all, the emergence of the KKK, and what they saw was that it looked like a good time for “Fergusonism.” The Klan had been an object of Jim’s ire for years, an attack that he intended to continue, but it was the social upheaval that seemed tailor-made for the Ferguson’s unique populist-tinged message. In many ways, the social conflict spreading across the nation was an urban-rural divide, or even a modern-traditional culture chasm. If the Fergusons could find a way to put their feet in both camps of the split—anti-Klan and pro-rural—then they could make electoral hay. Thus, it became time to dust off the “Farmer Jim” campaign and bring with him “Ma” Ferguson.

Miriam had to be the centerpiece of Jim's strategy due to the fact that he could not run, and thus in 1924 Miriam entered the Democratic primary for governor. Utilizing the campaign slogan of "two governors for the price of one," and running a folksy campaign that depicted Miriam as the typical farm wife—something she decidedly was not— as well as constant attacks on the Klan and the rise of modern culture, Miriam finished second in the 1924 gubernatorial primary. Because no candidate had received over fifty percent of the vote, Texas law dictated a run-off. Her run-off opponent, Felix Robertson of Dallas, was openly affiliated with the Klan, which led the Fergusons to send even more vitriol toward the hooded racists. In a bit of a surprise, Miriam handedly won the run-off.

During the campaign James Ferguson had taken the lead, and for years most chroniclers have considered Miriam not much more than a figurehead when she was governor. However, such a view discounts Mrs. Ferguson's influence on policy during her tenure. Her signature achievement—the pursuit of an anti-mask law directed at the Ku Klux Klan—was one in which she deeply believed. She also was much more influential in formulating policies directed toward rural issues, such as tick eradication and more support for rural education, than she is credited. In fact, Jim seemed much more content run his newspaper and let Miriam deal with the trappings of being the governor of Texas.

Perhaps Miriam should have insisted that Jim stay where she could watch him. It seems that Jim and his paper began to engage in a strange exercise—charging very high advertising rates to firms and other concerns who had business with the state. And those same businesses tended to get more than their share of lucrative state contracts to build roads, bridges, and other construction projects. There was also controversy surrounding some insurance surety bonds written by the Ferguson's daughter, as well as dealings with textbook contracts.

Miriam had originally pledged to serve only one term, but when the time came for re-election in 1926 she changed her mind. However, Texas had begun changing once again. Miriam's previous victory had signaled the end of the Klan influence, and most Texans had at least come to a truce over the social divide. Once again economics took center stage in a Texas election and Dan Moody, a young, dynamic, crusading state attorney general who was a part of the "business progressive" wing of the Democratic Party, beat Mrs. Ferguson in the primary.

This time the Ferguson's did not leave Austin but remained to continue to try to influence Texas' political landscape. Miriam seemed to keep her counsel, probably as a ploy, but Jim used his newspaper to sling mud and anything else he could find at Dan Moody. However, Moody remained popular and served another term. But the onset of the Great Depression gave the Ferguson's another opportunity, and in 1932, once again echoing a populist, rural flavored campaign, Miriam Ferguson became the first (and until Bill Clements in 1986, the only) Texan to serve two non-consecutive terms as governor. Her second term tended to disintegrate much like the previous one—into controversy, scandal, and payoffs. Miriam did not run again in 1934, and although she did mount a campaign in 1940, the age of the Fergusons in Texas politics finally came to an end.

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