

# The Blind Senator from Oklahoma

BY JAMES CREELMAN

**T**HE visitor to Washington who looks down from the gallery upon the sleepy, green-carpeted senate is sure to be impressed and puzzled, if not actually thrilled, by the presence of a blind man in that droning citadel of federalism; a senator without power to see, the youngest member of the "American house of lords," representing the youngest state in the Union.

If the story of Senator Gore of Oklahoma could serve no other purpose than to illustrate how a brave heart and persistent ambition can overcome even the greatest difficulties in life it would be worth telling. Loyalty to a set purpose, maintained resolutely through 25 years of bitter struggle, raised this poor blind American boy to a seat in the most distinguished law-making body in the world, although he sometimes lived on the verge of starvation. Nothing could shake his determination to be a senator. He had no eyes, but he had a tongue. He had no money, but he had courage. He was obscure, but he had a high ambition. He could not see the world about him, but he had a smile to win it, a perseverance to compel its admiration and support.

A few months after Mississippi was readmitted to the Union in 1870 Thomas Pryor Gore was born on an 80-acre farm 20 miles from the nearest railway.

Here the boy grew up among the creeks and pines, a stocky, gray-eyed little fellow, who could outrun any of his companions. When he was six years old the village of Walthall was established in the woods nearby and the Gore family went there to live. Young Tom attended a small school set among the trees outside of the village.

At the age of eight years the boy's left eye was blinded by an accidental blow from a stick. Three years later he was employed as a page in the Mississippi senate and boarded at the house of Senator J. Z. George in Jackson. One day, while playing with a crossbow, an arrow entered his right eye and destroyed his sight.

In spite of his affliction young Gore managed to stand at the head of his class in school and at the age of 17 years entered a normal school which was opened. Here he gradually became totally blind, yet he mastered the high school course.

While Gore was attending the high school his closest companion was a classmate, Charles H. Pittman. This youth used to read to him. One day they found an old volume of the Congressional Record. Going out to the stable, the blind student would stand for hours while Pittman read to him the speeches of the lawmakers at Washington.

During that winter Gore and his sister taught school for a few months. All the while his mother, a bedridden invalid, read to him history, biography and other subjects connected with his political plans, and he would sit by the bed, a strange smile on his blind countenance, dreaming and brooding and waiting for the day when he might take part in the great battle of politics like other men.

His great chance came in the spring of 1891. The Populist movement was spreading rapidly and he joined it. In the state campaign for a legislature to elect a United States senator he took up the cause of Barkside against George, although as a boy he had lived in George's house.

The blind orator shrank from no conflict. He even debated with Senator Money, whose tongue all Mississippi dreaded and who smiled majestically when told that his opponent was "a poor, blind schoolboy." Senator Money declared that, but for his antagonist's blindness, he would hold him personally responsible for his words—a deadly thing to say in Mississippi. Gore promptly replied, "Let him then blindfold himself and I will meet him."

In September of that year he went to the law school at Cumberland university, Tennessee, and studied law for ten months. He was one of the leading six students in a class of 42. This experience cost him \$331 and he returned to his Mississippi village with only 25 cents in his pocket. In a suit of clothes he had worn for 14 months. He had almost been compelled to leave the law school months before for the lack of suitable clothing.

Yet his unquenchable ambition to reach the United States senate grew more intense as the difficulties of his situation increased.

Gore's father had taken up the practice of law in Walthall and, on returning from the law school in 1892 the youth was welcomed as an assistant in the office. That year, too, he was a presidential elector on the Populist ticket, attacked Grover Cleveland on the stump and carried his county.

The practice of law was not an inspiring occupation in Walthall. There were actually 45 lawyers in that small, poor village. The blind advocate tried a few cases.

After a two years' effort to earn a living as a lawyer in the place of his birth Gore decided to go to Texas.

Having saved \$40, he started in April, 1894, for Texarkana, arriving there an absolute stranger with only \$21 in his pocket. He secured a boarding house and promptly offered himself to the Populist leaders for service in the approaching state and county elections. His political speeches brought in money enough to pay his expenses, but he found no chance to practice law. In the winter he went back to Walthall and for a year made another desperate effort to win success as a lawyer. He was nominated for congress by the Populists, but was defeated. Yet his speeches in the campaign attracted much attention.

On the last day of the year 1895 the sightless and unsuccessful lawyer decided to abandon the



SENATOR TOM GORE

struggle in his native spot and to go back to Texas. Before leaving Walthall he made a vow that he would never enter the village again until he could return to his neighbors a United States senator.

That year in Texas was a hard one. Gore threw himself into politics with passionate energy. He was a delegate to the Populist convention at St. Louis which nominated Mr. Bryan and seconded the nomination. In December, 1896, he and his brother opened a law office. It was a fierce struggle with the world. His father, mother and brother lived with him. Sometimes they were without a single dollar.

In April, 1899, Gore's fortunes had sunk so low that he appeared in the street with frayed clothing, broken shoes and a visage white with deprivation. One day it seemed as though he had come face to face with actual starvation, when an old negro woman paid \$2 which she owed him and that saved the situation.

When Mr. Bryan was nominated at Kansas City in 1900 Gore found his way to the crowd that surrounded the convention. He was now a Democrat.

It might help him on his way to the senate if he could make speeches in the neighborhood of a national convention.

Hurrying on to South Dakota—he had only \$7 left when he got there—Gore went to the state convention and secured an engagement to speak in the state during the presidential campaign. In this way he picked up \$1,000. Then he went back to Texas and married a beautiful girl. "It was love at first sight," he said, laughingly.

After the presidential campaign was over Gore's \$1,000, earned in the South Dakota tour, soon melted away, and little money came in to take its place. In 1901 things went so badly with him and his senatorial prospects seemed so dim, that when an advertisement of an auction of land lots in the newly opened Kiowa, Comanche and Apache reservation in Oklahoma appeared in the newspapers he decided to leave Texas and pursue his great ambition in the new country.

As a first step the elder Gore, now a white-haired man, went to Oklahoma and became a notary public in the hope of earning fees from the land-crazy crowds. In July, 1901, the blind lawyer and his brother went to the new land, driving 45 miles in a wagon to Fort Sill. Here Gore lived in a tent with his father and brother in the midst of an excited crowd. His father sat inside as a notary, while he, attired in an alpaca coat, colored shirt and slouch hat, walked up and down before the tent, waving his hand and shouting, "Here's where you get your papers out! Here's the right place to get your land papers!" In the daytime he entertained the crowd; at night he slept on the ground.

Failing to draw a land claim, the Gores moved out four miles to Lawton, an encampment on the open prairie. Here 15,000 persons were living in tents where the wild blue-stem grass was waist high. It was a Babylon of gamblers, fakirs, farmers and business men, all waiting for the opening of the land on August 6. There were grocery and hardware stores in tents; gambling tables and shows in tents; churches and saloons in tents. Even newspapers were printed in tents. Poor men, rich men, preachers, thieves were mixed up in that picturesque, dramatic hurly-burly of mules, wagons, women and children. Men were killed, children were born, robberies were committed.

Three days after the lots were sold and while Lawton was still a tented camp, there was another political mass meeting, this time in the big tent of Dick Russell, a saloon keeper. Gore was there and offered a resolution favoring the admission of Oklahoma and Indian territory to the Union as a single state.

A few days later and the men of Lawton organized a citizens' committee to get a charter and organize a city government. Of course Gore was there and of course he was on the committee. Then a commercial club was organized by the tent dwellers and Gore was on the committee to draft by-laws. He missed no opportunity that might lead to the senate.

Presently he bought a small lot for \$165 and started to build a cottage through the help of a building and loan agency. When his wife reached



Mrs. T. P. Gore

Lawton in October Gore was still in his tent. His wife fell sick and for four months he was her only nurse, save when their baby came in January. When they moved into their own cottage and furnished it with a stove and a few articles of furniture they had only \$1 left. They had to rent out three of their five rooms.

The baby was born in desperately cold weather in a room heated only by a tiny cook stove. It lived only 17 days and was buried on the prairie.

That winter tried the man in him. For months he and his fair, young wife lived on scanty portions of bread, beans and beef liver, with syrup made of sugar dissolved in water for dessert.

All through this time his wife encouraged his political ambitions.

In April, 1902, Gore managed to go as a delegate to the territorial convention that was to choose a delegate to congress from Oklahoma and his speech in response to the welcome of the delegates that there was a movement to make him the choice of the convention. He declined the honor in favor of others. It was a shrewd move and counter-balanced the fact that he was a newcomer in Oklahoma. The result was that he was elected to the territorial senate.

The fight for a seat in the United States senate was now pressed systematically. Having introduced a child labor bill in the legislature and declared his friendship for organized labor, Gore spent the year 1903 in widening his acquaintance, attending picnics, barbecues and county fairs, lecturing for anything from \$5 to \$25, shaking hands with the crowds and smiling his way into their hearts.

Then came the presidential campaign of 1904 and Gore got \$4 or \$5 a day from the Democrats for speaking in Indiana, Ohio and Illinois. He had no desire to go back to the territorial legislature, knowing that his great ambition could be better served by the publicity of service in the national campaign.

Gore fought hard for Oklahoma's admission to the Union. No man was more active in the agitation. But he would not go to the national capital.

"I won't go to Washington till I go with the right to speak and vote in the senate," he said.

The statehood bill was passed by congress in 1906. Then the political air of Oklahoma was "full of razors" as the struggle for the two new senatorships began with the primary campaign to elect a legislature. Gore's opponents were both rich men, who spent their money freely. He stayed in Guthrie, borrowing money to pay the \$4.50 a week which it cost him to live. Being at the capital, he met men from all over the state and was able to make shrewd combinations.

It was a tragic thing to see a blind man harassed by poverty fighting against his rich rivals, one a banker and the other a lawyer, but, however he bled inwardly, Gore gave no sign that he saw anything pathetic in his situation. His friends wanted him to abandon his ambition for a time and run for congress.

"It is the senate or nothing," he replied.

In April, 1907, he began to make speeches all over the state.

He spoke on street corners, from the tops of boxes, from cart tails, anywhere, everywhere, night and day. The leading newspapers ignored him, while his rivals were able to buy advertising space and one of them hired brass bands, opera houses and advance agents. In March he had mortgaged his house for \$1,000, but the money was soon gone. To get his name on the primary ballot, under the rules of the Democratic state convention, he had to pay \$375. But on the last day allowed for the payment he found himself with only \$8. In sheer desperation he made out his check for \$375 and paid it in. A Mr. Young saved him by raising the money to meet the check.

As the voting drew near the blind candidate's circumstances became more desperate than ever. He was spending about \$24 a week for traveling expenses. To get out of money at that stage of the fight would have been fatal. He made from two to four speeches a day, although he would sit up all night in hotels to save paying for a bed, and ate only one meal a day. At times he would go from one day to another on cheese and crackers carried in his grip-sack. So great was the physical ordeal that he lost 29 pounds weight.

Gore won his fight in the primary election and was elected to the United States senate by the legislature, drawing the short term. The struggle cost him \$1,100, exclusive of the \$375 he paid to get his name on the primary ballot. One of his opponents is said to have spent \$75,000.

It was a grand day for Oklahoma when her blind man got into the United States senate.

In 1908 he went home and was re-elected. When he reached Lawton a cheering crowd surrounded the carriage and took him and his wife to their cottage. As rear door broke on the air he turned to his wife and whispered, "They don't seem to know that it's only me."

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