

## **RED PHILLIPS' WAR WITH GRDA**

Both Red Phillips and his politics were hard to miss. Weighing in at 296 pounds and standing a little over six feet, the former University of Oklahoma lineman, class of 1915, attracted attention. And, during his stint as governor of Oklahoma from 1939 until 1943, his political maneuvers were just as noticeable.

Leon Chase Phillips, born December 9, 1890 in Worth County, Missouri became an "Okie" in 1892 when the family moved to a farm west of Clinton. Leon attended local common schools, then enrolled at Southwestern Normal and, after attending awhile, he taught in a rural school in Custer County. Soon after, he enrolled in Epworth University, later Oklahoma City University, to pursue pastoral studies. However, in 1911, Phillips transferred to the University of Oklahoma and obtained a law degree in 1916, as well as the nickname "Red" from his football team mates. Entering into the practice of law at Okemah, he also became active in politics and was elected to the state House of Representatives in 1933. Phillips' political fortunes rose rapidly and in 1935 he was selected to be Speaker of the House.

By that time the nation and Oklahoma, were suffering through traumatic times and in the throes of the worst depression in recorded history, Adding to the misery, Oklahoma also became the center of the "Dust Bowl," a natural disaster aided by man's insistence on plowing up the prairies. So, it was timely and no particular surprise, when the state electorate chose a big man for the big job of setting things right. Leon Chase Phillips became the eleventh governor on January 9, 1939. Red wasted no time in taking action and through either his political skills or intimidating size, managed to get the State Senate to "give up" certain powers. In rapid sequence he cut the number of state employees by 2000, wiped out a five million dollar deficit in the highway department, cancelled a government construction program, cut state expenditures by 1.6 million and, most appealing of all, enacted his whole program with no new taxes.

Meanwhile, over in the northeastern part of the state a new entity, the Grand River Dam Authority, first agency of its type in Oklahoma, was attempting to build a dam with no money. Well, actually there was money, twenty million dollars in loans and grants, but it was controlled by the federal government. Called the "Pensacola Project," it had been strongly supported by E. W. Marland, Phillip's predecessor. However, when he took office and although it was evident that he supported it too, it soon became apparent that his motive was to milk it like a "cash cow." Almost immediately he challenged several of the fledgling organizations' policies and replaced some members on the GRDA board.

As would be expected, there were many problems associated with building a dam whose waters would ultimately create a 48,780 acre lake. One that was particularly significant was providing access from one side to the other. This was to be resolved by the construction of a bridge across a rather narrow strip of water north of Grove. So, after negotiation with the Oklahoma State Highway Department, in July of 1938 an agreement was reached. GRDA would pay for the bridge which was estimated to cost \$369,000, and the highway department would replace other bridges and roads in the area to be flooded. However, after Phillips became governor he also appointed a new highway board that promptly voided that agreement and demanded additional compensation in excess of \$800,000! This

**new demand threatened to undo GRDA's agreements with contractors and the government, consequently the Authority continued with construction of the arched bridge that Phillips deridingly labeled "Sailboat Bridge." To underscore his disdain, when the bridge was complete and the reservoir was beginning to fill in late 1940, Phillips wouldn't approve building accesses to it. Unhappy citizens took matters into their own hands and did it themselves.**

**Meanwhile, negotiations on payment for replacement of roads and other bridges proved to be a moving target, compounded by Phillips' threats to shut down construction of the dam. But, two factors came into play, pending spring floods and the potential of breach of contract with contractors. When he was informed that work must continue, Phillips reacted by calling out the state militia to stop construction. Earlier, the Governor and Authority Chairman had agreed that Phillips would be notified prior to final details, resulting in closing the last gate in the dam. Occasionally, the best laid plans go awry, and while the Chairman had agreed, his consulting engineer, W. R. Holway, had not. On March 21<sup>st</sup> of 1940 the last gate was closed according to schedule and inundation was irreversible. An enraged Phillips charged that "Holway went down like a thief in the night and closed the gates on the dam."**

**Protracted litigation between the federal government and the state continued regarding the \$800,000, but Phillips' tenure as governor didn't, it ended in 1943. Red returned to the practice of law in Okemah and died of a heart attack on March 28, 1958, while waiting for a client at the Okmulgee post office. The following year the Government Court of Claims granted a judgment of \$800,000 to the state. Phillips had lost the battle to close the flood gate, but won the money war for replacing roads and bridges.**

















