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Review of *Forty Years a Legislator: Elmer Thomas* By Elmer Thomas

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Forty Years a Legislator: Elmer Thomas. By Elmer Thomas. Edited by Richard Lowitt and Carolyn G. Hanneman. Foreword by Cindy Simon Rosenthal. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007. xxi + 178 pp. Photographs, notes, index. \$24.95.

Written between 1951 and 1954, this autobiography covers the career of Elmer Thomas as a state senator from 1907 to 1920, as a member of the United States House of Representatives from 1922 to 1928, and as a U.S. senator from 1928 to 1950. Editors Richard Lowitt and Carolyn Hanneman deserve a hearty round of applause for having converted Thomas's original, meandering four-hundred-page-plus manuscript to an intelligible, readable work. Especially valuable to the reader are the editors' endnotes, identifying figures and issues whose political significance has dimmed and offering suggestions for further reading.

Despite his popularity among Oklahoma Democrats and his seniority in the United States Senate, Thomas has escaped the notice of historians. A De Paul University graduate and a member of the Indiana bar, he arrived in Oklahoma in 1900. After a brief stay in Oklahoma City, he moved to Lawton where he divided his time between practicing law and developing the resort town of Medicine Park. In 1907, he was elected to serve in the first Oklahoma legislature. As chairman of the

Senate Appropriations Committee, Thomas claimed credit for figuring how the state could find funds for the construction of a capitol building in Oklahoma City. He also singled out as two of his other major achievements an appropriations bill amendment that provided funding for two state fish hatcheries and a successful statewide campaign to defeat a highway bond issue.

While Thomas explains some of the stances he took during his two terms in the U.S. House of Representatives, readers will probably find the account of his senatorial years, including his filibuster against the Hawley-Smoot Tariff, more interesting. The high point of his senate career, he claimed, came in the spring of 1933 when Congress passed his amendment to the first Agricultural Adjustment Act. Because the amendment was intended to inflate prices by allowing the president to devalue the dollar, Thomas saw it as a crucial contribution to national economic recovery during the Great Depression. He also considered the part he played in obtaining funding for the Manhattan Project a major achievement. The memoir closes with arguments against imposing term limits on members of Congress. Indeed, Elmer Thomas believed that a politician's seniority in office outweighed other qualifications for election because it assured advancement to more powerful legislative committees.

Those interested in discussions of controversial Oklahoma issues during early statehood and New Deal changes in federal Native American policy will be disappointed, for Thomas mentions neither. Regardless of these omissions, the autobiography provides a welcome introduction to the lengthy career of this Oklahoma politician.

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