

Wyoming's "Other" Governor Ross: The Story of William Ross, Husband of Nellie

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Although few residents realize it, November 29 is a state holiday in Wyoming. Known as Nellie Tayloe Ross Day," the holiday commemorates the contributions to Wyoming by Ross, the first woman governor of any state. Born in St. Joseph, Missouri, in 1876, she came to Wyoming with her husband, William Ross, in the early 1900s.

Nellie Ross was not only the first woman to be elected governor of any state, but she also had once served as the state's first lady. William Ross, born in Dover, Tenn., in 1873, came with his wife to Cheyenne early in the 20th century from Nebraska where he had gained his legal education. Throughout the next two decades, as a Cheyenne trial lawyer, he represented a variety of clients. He had success with many, but one of his clients was the defendant in the so-called "Indian club murder" in Cheyenne in 1912.

A respected railroad worker, J. Warren Jenkins, was charged with murdering his wife in their home (that once stood on the site of the Memorial Hospital parking lot). Mrs. Jenkins, somewhat older than her husband, owned considerable property.

The incriminating evidence in the case turned out to be buttons from what the prosecution claimed was the blood-soaked shirt that Jenkins was wearing when he murdered his wife. Jenkins couldn't explain why the shirt was burned that day in the couple's stove. Police, in searching the house, found the still warm but fire-resistant buttons in the stove when they investigated the scene.

Attorney Ross was unable to shake the prosecution's assertion that Jenkins had killed his wife for her estate. Jenkins was convicted, sentenced to hang and, as if he already didn't have enough difficulties, the judge fined him \$1,000. Jenkins was hanged in the State Penitentiary in Rawlins on Nov. 14, 1913.

In November 1922, Ross, a Democrat, was elected governor of Wyoming. (His opponent, John Hay of Rock Springs, had defeated the incumbent Republican governor, Robert Carey, in the primary election that summer).

Soon after his election, Ross proposed a constitutional amendment to allow the State to collect severance taxes on mineral production in the state. The legislature authorized that the amendment be voted on in the general election of 1924, halfway through Ross' term as governor. Throughout the fall of 1924, Ross campaigned throughout the state for passage of the amendment. In late September, 1924, he was speaking in Laramie to a group at "Old Main" on the campus, advocating passage of the amendment when he suddenly became ill. Admitted to the hospital in Cheyenne the next morning, he died four days later from an apparent ruptured appendix.

Because his death came a month before that year's general election, the law required that a new governor be chosen in that election. Both parties were caught unprepared to run candidates for an office they thought would not be up for election until 1924.

The Republicans nominated the House Speaker, E. J. Sullivan of Casper, while the Democrats turned to Ross' widow, Nellie Tayloe Ross. Even though she had never served in any elective office before, she was elected governor, becoming the first woman in the United States to hold that office. She pledged she would follow through with many of her husband's policies, but one of them already had met electoral defeat. In the same election where she became governor, the

constitutional amendment for a severance tax that her husband had campaigned so strongly for, went down to defeat. The measure actually gained more voters in favor of it than were opposed to it, but under the Wyoming Constitution, the measure had to gain a majority of voters casting ballots in that election. It failed to gain that margin by just a few hundred votes.

Later, Mrs. Ross lost in a re-election bid, but went on to be superintendent of the United States Mint in the Franklin Roosevelt administration. She died on Dec. 19, 1977, at the age of 101.

And it wasn't until 1969 that a severance tax, along the lines proposed by William Ross, became law in the state of Wyoming.