A Term Denied: The Election Campaigns of Gov. Sid McMath through the Eyes of the *Arkansas Gazette*

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History

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Sidney Sanders McMath was the thirty-fourth Governor of Arkansas, 1949 - 1953. McMath was an oddity among Southern governors of the post-war era; he was a reformer, a relative progressive on race-relations. His successful candidacy and administration was an anathema to the Solid South's white-power structure and the former Confederate States. Elected to two two-year terms, McMath was defeated in his bid for an unprecedented third-term as governor. Given his administration's tacit support of civil rights, it would seem obvious why McMath lost: he was not an ardent segregationist in the era of Jim Crow. However, the fact that he was even elected to one term, let alone two, proves that argument insufficient. Rather, McMath himself claimed that it was the influence of the state's energy industry, specifically Arkansas Power and Light (AP&L), that defeated his reelection bid.[1] Other historians, however, lay the blame on a corruption scandal involving the state's highway program.[2] That being said, the aim of this paper

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is to discover what issue or combination thereof prevented Gov. McMath from being re-elected to a third term as primarily cited through *Arkansas Gazette*'s coverage of each.

Opposition towards McMath began during his first gubernatorial primary. The 1948 election that catapulted McMath from Garland County to the Governor's Mansion is inseparable from the presidential election of that same year. Incumbent Pres. Harry S. Truman, a Democrat, delivered a special message to Congress on civil rights in February of that year:

> "Not all groups of our population are free from the fear of violence. Not all groups are free to live and work where they please or to improve their conditions of life by their own efforts. Not all groups enjoy the full privileges of citizenship and participation in the government under which they live.
>
> We cannot be satisfied until all our people have equal opportunities for jobs, for homes, for education, for health, and for political expression, and until all our people have equal protection under the law."[3]

Truman's public support of civil rights earned him the utter indignation of the South and its Democratic leaders. Truman had undermined the institution of white supremacy that had persisted since the end of Reconstruction and ensured conservative one-party rule across the former Confederate States. Condemnation was swift; Sen. Harry Byrd of Virginia decried the "devastating broadside at the dignity of Southern traditions and institutions." Sen. James Eastland of Mississippi warned of the South's inevitable "mongrelization." South Carolina Gov. Strom Thurmond and Sen. Olin Johnson refused to attend an annual banquet in protest of Truman's actions.[4] Dissent swelled from the party's southern ranks

against the national party. Battle lines drawn, any candidate for public office would have to pick a side on the Truman question and address the politics of race. The Arkansas gubernatorial primary of that year was no exception.

Sid McMath established himself as the reform candidate for governor in the state's Democratic primary, which was tantamount to election in any Southern state at the time. McMath's platform championed working class interests of better roads, rural electrification, and infrastructure investment. McMath ran with the slogan, "The People Rule in Arkansas," emblematic of his populist strategy in the primary.[5] Though ostensibly a three-way race, McMath's principal opponent for the Governor's office was Jack Holt, a former Arkansas Attorney General and fellow GI. Though he led in the first round of voting that July, McMath was certainly the insurgent in the race. Holt had the support of the sitting Governor, Benjamin T. Laney, the state's leader of the rebelling "Dixiecrat" faction and a national opponent of Truman.[6] McMath competed against Laney's political clout and the state's Democratic Party mainstream in the runoff.

The primary election, now strictly between McMath and Holt, was grueling, and it was here that race emerged as a campaign issue. Holt, as evidenced by his support from Laney, was the Dixiecrat candidate: anti-Truman, anti-civil rights and pro-status quo in the state.[7] Campaign materials from his campaign charged that McMath's relative silence on race was "an indication of [his] true purpose:"[8] the overthrow of Arkansas as whites knew it. Rather than comment, McMath focused on his infrastructure platform, narrowly winning the primary by a margin of 10,000 votes in August.[9] However, he did not emerge clean of the mudslinging and segregationist politics of the campaign; he too declared "complete opposition" to Truman's civil rights message.[10] Holt's slim loss

exhibited that racial opposition existed towards McMath, but it alone was not enough to cost him the primary. The Arkansas Democratic Party then must be seen as divided more so by Pres. Truman rather than civil rights per se. McMath, in this campaign, ran as the pro-Truman candidate, not the civil-rights candidate, and won.

Another candidate was chosen the same month that Sid McMath became the Democratic candidate for governor: the new States' Rights Democratic Party nominated Strom Thurmond and Fielding Wright of Mississippi for president. The third party, otherwise known as the Dixiecrat Party, was the manifestation of southern opposition to Truman and especially civil rights in the national Democratic Party. The Dixiecrats conspired to have Thurmond/Wright listed as the official Democratic candidate across Southern states, essentially ensuring victories there and forcing the House of Representatives to decide the election. Dixiecrats would then demand the national Democratic Party withdraw its civil rights plank in exchange for the presidency. This strategy succeeded in Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, and South Carolina; now the party aimed to add Arkansas into its electoral column.[11] Gov. Laney (himself a candidate for that party's nomination) enthusiastically backed the segregationist party and used all his political might to ensure its nomination at the party's state convention in September. McMath cemented opposition towards him, his administration, and his run for a third term four years later.

Laney won over several county officials and delegates to the Dixiecrat camp at the upcoming convention. However, as noted by historian Kari Frederickson, "Arkansas political history dictated that the incoming governor typically dominated the convention." As such, McMath was able to maintain party loyalty from wavering delegates in the lead up to the convention. Though Laney delivered a damning speech at the convention calling on all Southerners to

"repudiate the shady, lousy actions" of the national party, all was in vain; Truman remained the official Democratic candidate in Arkansas and the Dixiecrats would run as a separate party on the ballot. A humiliated Ben Laney capitulated by refusing to campaign for Thurmond and admitting the incompetence of its organization, certain of defeat come November. McMath and Truman had prevailed over Laney and Thurmond.[12]

Pres. Truman won Arkansas with over sixty-percent of the popular vote on November 2, 1948; Strom Thurmond trailed in third place with only sixteen.[13] Truman's renomination and overwhelming victory in the state proved the strength of the one-party system and the fleeting political capital of anti-Trumanism in the scope of McMath's terms in office. Arkansas voted for every Democratic presidential candidate since 1876. Persistent party loyalty and Republican resentment ensured the ex-Confederate state remained in the Democratic fold despite the internal quarrel. Voting Democrat was as much political as it was traditional in Arkansas, and citizens were wary to stray from those traditions yet.

McMath's primary battle with Jack Holt was representative of the power and decline of anti-Trumanism. McMath's narrow victory represented its political clout, but it faded after election day. Party loyalty still trumped factionalism at the state party convention despite Ben Laney and his allies there; one attendee decried the speech against Truman as Republican campaign rhetoric in Democratic clothing.[14] The political dynamics in the state simply moved on from Truman as public attention now turned towards Gov. McMath's agenda. Anti-Trumanism had little clout past 1948, though the resentment it inspired within Laney's faction would remain for the duration of McMath's terms.

Gov. McMath immediately began work on the state's infrastructure upon taking office. Arkansas's roads were in dire

straits: the State Department of Transportation had not built any new roads in nigh twenty years upon his taking office. An interstate highway system had yet to be built. Farmers and other rural communities lacked paved roads to get to market or take their children to school, which contributed to a shrinking population in the countryside and statewide.[15] McMath turned to the state legislature and recommended that a referendum on highway bonds be brought to the public; the legislature agreed, and a vote was scheduled for February 15, 1949. It passed four-to-one. However, McMath doubted the highway department's competence, so he contacted federal experts in St. Louis, Missouri to investigate and properly diagnose the ailments of the state's highways. A representative from the Highway Research Board appeared before the legislature in Little Rock in April, but was prohibited from proceeding with the study, citing issues of cost.[16] The Arkansas General Assembly still seemed wary of the newly-inaugurated reformer, though he oddly maintained a popular profile nationally.[17]

McMath attempted to deliver another blow to the state's "special interests:" the poll tax.[18] The poll tax was a hallmark of Jim Crow, one of many tools used to barr African-Americans from voting in Southern states and ensuring the dominance of the white Democratic Party there. However, of all Jim Crow's despicable assurances to the white South, it was arguably the most unpopular. The poll tax helped to bar African-Americans from voting, but it had the added effect of prohibiting poor whites, evidently McMath supporters, from voting, too. Thus, McMath was capable to skirt the issue of race as he had in his primary election, nor was repealing uncommon. Gov. Huey Long of Louisiana had repealed the poll tax as early as the 1930s utilizing the same strategy.[19] However, McMath failed to pass any successful legislation on the matter in his first term, all

while earning him the enmity of the party's conservatives and ex-Dixiecrats and further invigorating their leadership.[20]

Further igniting racist fury was the issue surrounding Edith Irby Jones of Garland County. Jones was a promising student who had gained acceptance into the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS) in 1949, becoming the first black woman in the state - and South - accepted into a state medical school. The year before, Silas Hunt became the first black man accepted into the University of Arkansas School of Law to public outcry.[21] The quickening success of the Civil Rights movement in the South left the state's powerful increasingly wary. University officials responsible for the policy change were embattled, and McMath offered his full support for the University. Simultaneously, McMath sought additional funding to historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in the state, particularly Arkansas Agricultural, Mechanical and Normal School (now known as University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff). Under the banner of education, McMath was offering sincere but tacit support for the Civil Rights Movement, further inflaming the fury of the Dixiecrats.

McMath forged a conciliatory relationship with Arkansas labor in a similar but public vein, as opposed to the combative relationship of prior administrations, such as Laney's.[22] The Missouri-Pacific Railroad workers had gone on strike in October of 1949 for example. Rather than break up the strike with brute force, McMath consulted with the Governor of Missouri, Forrest Smith, to emphatically address the issue facing both states. A series of meetings began in St. Louis soon after, with McMath's commissioner of labor, C.K. Call, representing him. A settlement was reached and the workers soon returned to work, bolstering McMath's populist credentials with both his constituents and President Truman.[23] The business interests

of the state, long in control of the state government, were increasingly unhappy with the new administration.

The most contentious problem, and most important with regard to later elections, addressed by McMath in his first term was rural electrification. Mid-South Utilities, and its regional affiliate Arkansas Power and Light (AP&L), was the sole provider of electricity in the state when McMath took office. Areas that sought alternatives to AP&L were left without power. The Ozarks of northwest and north central Arkansas, for instance, were left in the literal dark.[24] However, there was a growing movement in the state that sought self-reliance through utility cooperatives. Cooperatives are democratically operated, jointly-owned entities between communities that intend to address common needs, in this case energy independence. The prospect of competition frightened the AP&L, but they had been successful in fending off the movement until then. The Rural Electrification Administration (REA), a New Deal agency, encouraged rural communities to form cooperatives in order to cheaply and quickly achieve nationwide electrification. The REA sought to achieve this by offering federal grants to these rural communities at low interest rates. The AP&L, however, argued that it should administer the funds to co-operatives as it saw fit, as it was the largest and most experienced electrical organization in the state. If allowed by the REA, the AP&L would effectively control the opposing cooperatives in the state.[25] McMath's populist politics made him a natural ally of the REA and Arkansas co-ops, and he regularly met with leaders of the latter at the onset of his administration.[26]

AP&L's wide reach in the state is best embodied by its president: C. Hamilton Moses. Moses was a spokesman of Mid-South Utilities and business leader of Arkansas with powerful ties to the state government. Moses had served as secretary in three governor's

administrations and, in 1925, Moses opened a law firm with the powerful Senate Minority Leader Joseph T. Robinson, an ex-governor of Arkansas himself. Moses became President of AP&L in 1941 after serving as general counsel to the previous president for more than two decades.[27] Moses' deep understanding of Arkansas politics, business resources, and eloquent tongue made him a reckonable figure in the state, and one used to being unchallenged. Moses met with McMath sometime during his first term, at a co-op meeting oddly enough, and insisted the governor ride back with him. Moses was clear how AP&L felt about McMath's fraternizing with the co-op movement: "We don't mind your going around talking to these co-op people, but we would strongly opposed to your helping them getting that steam-generating plant - we don't need it." Not even the maverick McMath dared to tell him no to his face. However, he continued on with the project despite his assurance to a doubtful Moses.[28] AP&L did not take kindly to disobedience, let alone from a sitting governor. This silent action might as well have been a silent declaration of war, though the battle had yet emerged from the hostilities.

McMath faced re-election in 1950 and was almost certain to compete against a conservative Democrat in the primary. It was here that former governor Ben Laney re-emerged into the political arena scarred and angry. Laney's challenge was as political as it was personal: the Dixiecrats' defeat at the state convention by McMath and his supporters two years earlier was still fresh on Laney's mind, and he desired nothing short of revenge. Laney had been humiliated and his political clout thrown into question. Coupled with McMath's attacks on the state's business elite and subtle support of civil rights, Laney would presumably be a formidable foe in the state.

Laney ostensibly ran a populist campaign. He rallied against the spectre of big government and not big business. A business man

himself with ties to the oil, cotton, and hardware industries, Laney ran on a business-friendly platform.[29] Laney was so friendly to big business interests that he even ran under the moniker of "Business Ben."[30] However, despite the supposed fiscal acumen that Laney championed in his campaign, Laney was as politically incompetent in 1950 as he had been in 1948. Despite being the business candidate, Laney championed industry in the abstract and not the specific, nor could he decide what kind of populist he was. Laney, for example, urged McMath "to be fair to power companies and rural electric cooperatives" in the state, confusingly trying to appeal to both the state's working class and the AP&L.[31] Rather than try to court the AP&L specifically in the campaign, Laney seemed to try and court his allies in the petroleum industry instead, evidenced by his campaign stops in Arkansas's oil-rich southwest.[32]

Laney seemed to be in the mindset of 1948 and not 1950. The Dixiecrat group remained a subversive force within the state, yes, but lambasting President Truman held little clout in state politics following the last presidential election two years earlier. The electorate at large had moved on to other issues, primarily road construction, of which McMath had the proven record on. In Laney's four years as governor, he did not build any new roads, nor did ever have plans to.[33] McMath managed to add over 2000 miles onto the state's highway system much to the delight of average Arkansans.[34] This, coupled with the electoral mismanagement of Laney's spiteful rather than organized campaign, made the 1950 primary otherwise "not spectacular" according to McMath.[35] He was handily reelected.

McMath's reelection calls into question several theories pertaining to McMath's later defeat in 1952. Foremost it should put to rest the theory that McMath's defeat was a result of his progressive racial policies. Though a progressive on race and civil rights at the time, McMath never presented himself as such; he was

the populist defender of the poor, white laborer. Though his policies, such as the poll tax removal, had the intended consequence of strengthening civil rights for African-Americans in Arkansas, it was veiled enough to be of little concern to Arkansas's white electorate evidently. Race relations do not seem to be a factor in the matter of his defeat in 1952. Though the admission of Edith Jones to UAMS was emblematic of the dramatic change to come of the advancing Civil Rights movement, it did little to dent the popularity of McMath at the time. McMath never explicitly endorsed civil rights, though he often came close, especially during his final year in office. Race would become an explosive issue with the Supreme Court's ruling in Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka in 1957, but that had yet to happen. Race did not defeat McMath and it never would.

The defeat of AP&L in the election too calls into question the clout of the monopoly's power in the state, though several factors were at play regarding McMath's reelection in 1950. As already mentioned, Ben Laney made no effort to court AP&L over the course of his third campaign for governor. His campaign was more petty than political and thus explains his over reliance on outdated tactics and old political allies as opposed to new ones. Ben Laney was the business candidate, but not the AP&L candidate. The AP&L were without an electoral representative in the 1950 election, explaining their seeming lack of influence in the election. Simultaneously, it is customary that a candidate elected governor in Arkansas is guaranteed a second term, which is not to belittle the success of McMath's reelection, but it was a factor nonetheless.

McMath's second term saw significant achievements in education and unapologetically bold positions in public affairs. Arkansas's health was among the first issues tackled by the administration following re-election. The quality of healthcare of Arkansas had long declined and McMath attempted to address the issue in the his first

term to no avail. However, McMath successfully passed a cigarette tax at the onset of the 1951 legislative session.[36] With the revenue generated from the new tax, McMath successfully began construction on a new Little Rock campus for UAMS and a brand new Medical Center there on West Markham Street, where it remains today.[37] McMath drew no ill will from the public on the issue of healthcare.

McMath continued to address themes of race and education throughout his administration. Little Rock was chosen to host the annual meeting of the powerful Southern Governors' Association in 1951 with McMath as its chairman. The wounds of 1948 were still fresh on the scarred politicians of the defeated Dixiecrat states. Gov. Herman Talmadge of Georgia and Jimmy Byrnes of South Carolina were quick to denounce Truman at the conference, though they were in the minority. Speaker and muckraker Harry Ashmore, invited on behalf of McMath, added salt to the wounds of the Dixiecrats was. Ashmore denounced education cuts across the south in his speech, specifically referring to the inequalities inherent in segregation itself. "The high cost of segregation has held back the overall development of our education opportunities." This was a bold statement for any southern journalist, let alone one speaking in front of all Southern governors, and one invited on behalf of one of those governors. McMath certainly felt confident at this point of his administration, with his support for civil rights becoming less and less subtle.[38] McMath was so confident in hitherto political fortune, in fact, that he announced his intention to run for an unprecedented third term earlier that year.[39] It was not meant to be.

Battle lines had been drawn in his first term, though fighting between McMath and AP&L did not begin until 1950 after his reelection. On September 12, 1951, the Spartan Aircraft Corporation of Tulsa announced its plans to locate an aluminum plant near Little

Rock. McMath was delighted. The state's bauxite industry had taken a dramatic hit after the end of the Second World War, and the aluminum plant would spur jobs in what was the state's most profitable industry prior. Aluminum manufacturing was a high-paying industry too, which delighted predominantly rural (and poor) Arkansans. However, Spartan planned on producing its own electricity through a prospective dam on the Bull Shoals reservoir; AP&L did not approve. As Spartan tried to get approval for aluminum production from the federal government, C. Hamilton Moses personally testified against the Tulsa company. Spartan was ultimately not approved next month, a hard blow to McMath and his populist base. The Reynolds Metals Company instead were approved for aluminum manufacturing and, adding insult to injury, AP&L supplied all of its electricity from Bull Shoals. Shots were finally fired in the legal arena; the war between McMath and AP&L had finally begun, and AP&L were winning.[40]

Despite McMath's loss in the Spartan case, there seemed to be hope a month after the rejection. The Rural Electrification Administration approved a ten million dollar loan for Arkansas co-ops on November 25 of that year. The AP&L immediately filed an objection to the Arkansas Public Service Commission following the co-ops' request for permission to accept the loan. Despite trying to slander the co-ops as "fellow travelers" with communists during the Second Red Scare, the commission sided in favor of the co-ops; the AP&L appealed to a chancery judge in Little Rock and had the commission's ruling immediately annulled, and so began a lengthy court process that would conclude after McMath left office. The AP&L were undermining the otherwise successful agenda of the McMath administration on the heels of the Democratic primary of 1952.

Allegations of corruption further damaged McMath's credibility into the primary. Several road contractors had claimed that they were forced to make donations to McMath's election campaign in order to be awarded contracts by the state. An investigation was begun and lasted throughout the course of what would be McMath's final year in office.[41] Three of his associates were indicted on charges of bribery over the course of the investigation. The integrity of McMath's administration was compromised by the allegations and the seeming confirmation of corruption per the indictments.[42]

Despite these dramatic setbacks, McMath projected the same confidence he had as an insurgent in 1948 as an incumbent in 1952.[43] His campaign often presented himself as not just the governor, but the inevitable winner of the primary too.[44] McMath championed the same issues of his previous campaigns for governor, education and infrastructure, even touting the success of his highway program despite the scandal surrounding it then.[45] In a crowded field with four candidates featuring a sitting congressman, the state attorney general, and even the disgraced Jack Holt again, McMath's messaged proved effective. McMath revived old campaign ads from 1948 and remade them to fit in with issues of the day's primary. The aforementioned candidates were portrayed as dolts of a corrupt establishment in the government that McMath needed more time to clean out, and it worked. Each had long careers in state politics and could be tied to the political machine promised to dismantle in 1948.[46] All but one.

Francis Cherry, a political dark horse and judge from Jonesboro, was McMath's main opponent in the 1952 primary . He served severals years in judgeship for the Twelfth Chancery Court of Arkansas, but none significant. However, this was an advantage for the Jonesboro judge unlike McMath's other competitors. He had no background in or ties with the corruption that McMath continued to

rally against. His years as judge were so uneventful and non-controversial that his record was seemingly spotless when compared to other candidates. Cherry's vague promise of bringing morality, honesty and integrity to government was popular enough that his lack of substantive policy did not matter to voters. Arkansans were desperate for the illusion of competency in government at the time and Cherry promised the people what they wanted. Campaign materials emphasized his "modest start" in the campaign and his pledge to not let corruption and false promises plague his administration.[47] McMath was no longer the insurgent, Cherry was, and as governor McMath became symbolic of the corruption that he claimed to oppose. He was no longer a reformer in the public eye, but a hypocrite, thanks in no small part to Cherry's campaign.

The primary was brutal, but McMath emerged as the winner with Cherry in second after the first round of balloting. McMath projected confidence thereafter, believing he was well on his way to an unprecedented third-term as governor. However, that confidence was misplaced; Cherry appeared to have the momentum. Cherry defied the expectations of analysts and even his supporters who did not expect to see their candidate advance to the run-off.[48] Despite this, Cherry expected to win. He refused to debate McMath prior to the run-off because he felt it unbecoming of a gentleman like himself. To add insult to injury, he implied that McMath would allegedly tamper with the voter rolls on election day on account of irregularities in the first round of balloting. Try as he might, McMath could not compete with Cherry. On election day, he lost by a humiliating margin of nearly 80,000 votes; Cherry won with over 60%.[49] McMath's career was over, but exactly how did it come to this?

The Highway Bonds scandal unquestionably helped defeat McMath in 1952. All opposing primary candidates exploited this

issue during the campaign, painting the incumbent governor as corrupt and inefficient. Some candidates ran as reformers determined to reform government, but all candidates characterized McMath as corrupt and inefficient. One advertisement proclaimed Arkansas's need for a new broom to sweep out corruption in the state government, warning that McMath's mistakes should not be rewarded with a third term. Another depicted vandals, blatantly labeled "McMath Administration Cronies," robbing a convenience store. The owner, meant to represent the average Arkansan, looks on in distress as nothing is done to stop the public madness.[50] Advertisements like those were representative of the political clout of the scandal and the increasing distrust of the public towards McMath.

Cherry's dark horse candidacy offered astute opportunity for contrast between him and the embattled McMath. He was portrayed as an outsider who embodied the people's will and desire for change in the state government. Cherry was astute and moral whereas McMath was dishonest and criminal. Simultaneously, Cherry was also an innovator in Arkansas campaigning. His use of radio made him exciting and new to the public. The donation drives that came with those campaign broadcasts also made him appear that much more like a man of the people, as he was ostensibly funded by them too.[51] Other candidates relied too heavily on their experience in state politics and government amidst a populist, anti-establishment backlash. Arkansans wanted honest change and that is what Cherry promised.

Cherry's populist credentials were undermined by his relationship with none other than Arkansas Power and Light, McMath's nemesis. Cherry repeatedly denied claims that he was funded by the electrical giant.[52] However, Cherry's Public Service Commission approved a thirteen percent rate increase for the

electrical giant at the expense of rural co-ops. The people he claimed to champion, the everyday folk of Arkansas who donated for the chance to see him as governor, turned on him. He had become what he ran against: corrupt. One comprehensive analysis wrote that Cherry's "perceived conspiracy with the electrical powerhouse . . . ultimately proved to be his undoing."[53] Where McMath failed to win an unprecedented third-term, Cherry failed to win the customary second term. He would be the first one-term governor of the state in decades. Francis Cherry, the campaigner, was the modest judge from Jonesboro intent on cleaning out corruption in government; Francis Cherry, the governor, personified both the corruption he lambasted and the business interests that McMath had inflamed.

Sid McMath triumphed over the traditional establishment of the Arkansas Democratic Party to become Governor in 1948 only have that same appeal defeat him four years later. His subtle support of civil rights and friendship with President Harry S. Truman made him enemies of the most conservative elements of the party, but he triumphed and won a second-term despite the opposition. His infrastructure plans earned him the admiration of average Arkansans and the enmity of the state's business elites. His association with the cooperative movement in Arkansas and defiance of Arkansas Power and Light only worsened his relationship with Arkansas's business community. The Highway Bond Scandal, and its questionably biased investigative committee, was the final straw for McMath. His 1952 campaign was marred by the scandal and his own overconfidence that gave his insurgent adversary Francis Cherry the edge that ultimately made him governor.

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