

Homespun humor and charm characterized Tom Berry, the governor who led South Dakota through the Great Depression.

Thomas Matthew Berry, the fifth of ten children, was born 23 April 1879 in Paddock, Nebraska, to James Baxter Berry and Cynthia Ann Ross Berry. Tom Berry worked as a ranch hand, moving to Gregory County, South Dakota, in 1897. In 1913, he settled with his wife, Lorena McLain Berry, and their four children in Mellette County. Working under the Double-X brand, Berry experimented with cattle cross-breeding and the introduction of new grasses. He and two brothers once sold two million pounds of beef on the hoof, one of the largest single livestock transactions in South Dakota history.

Berry took an active part in community affairs, promoting better schools and improved roads. Beginning in 1924, he served three two-year terms in the state legislature. In 1932, he won the race for governor, becoming the state's first chief executive from west of the Missouri River and the third Democrat in state history to occupy the office.

By the beginning of Berry's term, years of drought and depression had left the state treasury empty. In order to service the debt on rural credit bonds and relieve the tax burden on hard-pressed property owners, Berry pushed the legislature to cut the state budget and enact an income tax. During his time in office, he also called special legislative sessions to adopt unemployment insurance and license the sale of wine and 3.2 beer, a measure that brought extra revenue to state coffers.

Berry also assumed the role of state relief director in 1934 and 1935, channeling millions of federal dollars to projects around the state. In particular, he instituted the building of stock dams, which both provided livestock with water and men with work. In 1936, Republican Leslie Jensen defeated Berry in his bid for a third term as governor. Two years later, Berry lost the race for the United States Senate.

Berry was a member of the South Dakota Stockgrower's Association, Cowboys of 1902, National Cowboy Hall of Fame, and South Dakota Hall of Fame. He died of a heart attack in Rapid City on 30 October 1951 and is buried at the cemetery in Belvidere.

by Lisa Chamley

Dakota Images



Miller Studio Photo
Pierre

Tom Berry,
S. Dak. Cowboy,
Governor.

Tom Berry

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