

{ AZ Fun Facts }

George W. P. Hunt: Arizona's Horatio Alger

[BY MARSHALL TRIMBLE]



Arizona's political history is filled with characters every bit as colorful as the gunfighters, cowboys, and gold prospectors who shaped its territorial history. A good example is George W. P. Hunt, who ended up being elected chief executive seven times.

Hunt was born in Missouri in 1859. He ran away from home in the late 1870s, and after drifting to the mining towns of Colorado, a bad case of gold fever in 1881 brought him to Arizona, riding a donkey.

Arriving in Globe, he worked several odd jobs, including dishwasher, waiter, miner, and cowboy, before going into business and eventually becoming president of a bank. In 1893, he was elected as a Democrat to the territorial legislature, and became president of the senate in 1909.

It was poetic coincidence that the man destined to lead the Democratic Party in Arizona for decades would arrive on the hurricane deck of a donkey.

In 1910, Hunt was elected president of the constitutional convention and was one of the architects of the constitution that would prepare Arizona for statehood. A year later, he was elected first governor of the new state.

Hunt was a consummate politician. He could say absolutely nothing in paragraphs, but never has one man so dominated state government. He would go on to be the state's first, second, third, sixth, seventh, eighth, and tenth governor, prompting humorist Will Rogers to refer to him as "Arizona's hereditary governor." His detractors—and there were many—called him King George VII.

A Progressive Democrat, Hunt was both loved and hated. Hunt faced his biggest battles during the 1920s, when Arizona began a decades-long water war with California over the Colorado River allotment. During a heated political race, he would always use that as a campaign issue. His opponents responded by saying, "Jesus walked on water, but Hunt ran on the Colorado."

Hunt has been called "an original character in American public life." His large, bald head, drooping mustache, and obesity-challenged body lent itself to caricature by political cartoonists. He was a walking contradiction; a visionary, yet stubbornly tied to the past; he hated war, but for a handicap might have sought a career in the military; a generous man, yet with an ego so large he believed that so long as he lived, the governor's chair was his private domain.

The year 1916 saw one of the state's wackiest elections. That year, Hunt was challenged by Republican Tom Campbell. Campbell won the general election by 30 votes. Hunt protested and, on January 1, 1917, both men claimed the office. Hunt refused to vacate his office at the capitol, so Campbell functioned from the kitchen of his home. That spring, the superior court ruled Campbell the winner, but Hunt appealed to state Supreme Court. Finally, in December, the high court ruled in his favor on a technicality. The court threw out the ballots of voters who marked an X for a straight Democratic ticket and then voted for the Republican Campbell. It was clear that they intended to vote for all Democrats except Hunt.

Campbell graciously moved out of his office at the capitol after serving a year as governor without pay, and our hereditary governor returned to his old haunts. ■