

COLORADO GOVERNORS

Daniel I.J. Thornton



Scope and Content Note

The Daniel I.J. Thornton collection comprises approximately 54 cubic feet of material spanning his term of office from 1951-1955. The bulk of the information is in the subject files and correspondence. Strengths of the collection include a well-organized subject file which deals primarily with state agencies, boards and commissions, and public officials; documentation concerning the development of the highway system in Colorado; legislative topics; and the presidential campaign for Dwight D. Eisenhower. The major series include the subject file; correspondence; the Executive Record; appointments; and reports.

Biography

Governor Daniel I. J. Thornton, Republican Governor of Colorado from 1951 - 1955, was born on January 31, 1911, in Hall County, Texas. The large Thornton family lived off their earnings as sharecroppers, but when their agrarian dreams went unfulfilled, the Thornton's rode on their three covered wagons 135 miles toward new hope in Lubbock, Texas. Soon after they relocated, young Daniel Thornton became a successful and active 4H member, an experience that honed his leadership qualities. After winning three successive championships he became the president of the Lubbock County chapter, and after winning top honors at the state level he became the Texas State 4H President. His agricultural pursuits and affinity for football turned the head of one U.C.L.A. scout who convinced him to leave Texas and pursue a university degree in Los Angeles, where he graduated and met his future wife Jessie Willock. To pay for his education he operated a filling station, but after striking up a friendship with Harry Warner of Warner Brothers Studios, he signed a three-year acting contract. Realizing that his calling was in cattle ranching and not Hollywood, Thornton left acting to become an oil field derrick man so that he could save money for a ranching enterprise.

In 1937, Daniel and Jessie Thornton began their rags to riches story when they purchased a dilapidated ranch outside of Springfield, Arizona, along with a few head of cattle. By 1940 the Thornton Hereford Cattle Ranch string of cattle had swept the awards at the Los Angeles Western Livestock Show and National Western Stock Show in Denver. These accolades, along with a legendary flair for showmanship, had made Thornton a leader in the western livestock business. Due to a need for ranch expansion and their love for the land, the Thorntons moved their operation to Gunnison, Colorado, in 1941. It was at this point that their famous Thornton Triumphant Hereford Cattle strain became internationally known. In 1945 his TT Hereford's were selling for a record \$50,000 a head, and soon he became the industry's unofficial spokesman. After only ten meteoric years in the business, the Thorntons decided to disperse their prize winning herd. Over ten thousand people came to Gunnison to bid on the herd, and when the gavel fell, the TT Hereford's had been auctioned for a record \$860,264.

In 1948 Thornton was drafted to run on the Republican ballot for state senator. Aware of his popularity, the Democratic Party did not even provide a candidate, and Thornton was elected to the State House unopposed. By his own admission Thornton's senatorial debut was not a standout performance. His non-partisan voting record and Stetson 10-gallon hat turned more heads than his legislative work. Thornton and his mentor Christopher Cusack, a state senator from Denver, introduced legislation focusing on increased funding toward State Universities, the protection of cattle from disease, and the increased regulation of the stock industry.

When former governor Ralph Carr died only twenty days before the 1950 gubernatorial election, the Republican Party frantically scrambled to find someone who was willing to run in an election that seemed to be a lost cause for whoever ran against the incumbent, Walter Johnson. The charismatic Thornton was drafted once again into the political arena. Despite the odds, Thornton piloted his private plane to almost every Colorado town in an attempt to win the citizens over. His marathon campaign style, averaging eleven speeches per day, paid off when he beat Johnson by 23,000 votes on January 9, 1951.

Thornton's two terms focused on advertising the state and developing its infrastructure. Not only did Thornton raise the appropriation for state advertising from \$17,500 to \$200,000, but most often he would spend his own money promoting the state. For example, when funds for advertising ran out, he personally paid for Colorado's Rose Bowl Parade Float. Thornton became known as Colorado's travelling promoter and his pipe, 10-gallon hat, and boots became synonymous with the western mystique. He was often called Colorado's absentee governor as a result of his sojourns, and was criticized for being a playboy who spent more time in Hollywood and Washington than in Denver. Thornton's skill as the state's spokesperson paid off, however, as significant municipal and industrial growth in Colorado occurred during his term, the Air Force Academy at Colorado Springs was established, and the state earned increased national recognition.

Thornton's flair for fanfare promoted his own political ends as much as it promoted the state. Legislatively, Thornton fought for stronger state institutions and a comprehensive state fair practices act. He was the first to propose the school reorganization act, attempted to develop a parole program with rehabilitation at its core, and implemented the long-range highway plan as devised by future governor Stephen McNichols. His influence on the continuance of a 20 percent reduction in state income tax, while securing his reelection, created a legacy of debt for him, however. This was only buffered by an eight million dollar surplus created by his democratic predecessors and by deep cuts in the state's old age pension system. Obviously, Thornton's prestige suffered little by these actions as he was propelled to the chairmanship of the National Governor's Conference and to the Presidency of the Council of State Governments.

An influential factor coming out of the Thornton administration, was his close friendship with fellow Texan, Dwight D. Eisenhower, which began over a game of golf in 1948. The next day Thornton found himself collecting all of General Eisenhower's speeches. As a result of this mentor relationship, Thornton was named chairman of the Colorado Crusade for Freedom where he sharpened his public speaking skills. Thornton continued his association with Eisenhower when he spearheaded the campaign efforts to elect Eisenhower President of the United States, even before Ike had made a decision about entering the campaign. At the GOP convention, the television appearance by Thornton in support of his friend General Eisenhower, solidified Thornton's political prominence and soon rumors of a cabinet or vice-presidency post for him began to emerge. As instrumental as Thornton was to Ike's presidential victory, he was left without any high ranking federal position for his efforts. Soon after Eisenhower was inaugurated, however, Thornton became a member of the President's Commission on Inter-Governmental Relations,

was appointed to a commission that evaluated the military and economic strength of Korea, and became the Director of the Republican National Committee's Farm Campaign Division in Chicago.

Only a year after leaving the State House as governor, Thornton was unanimously selected as the Republican candidate for Colorado State Senator in 1956. Unlike his other political races, Thornton was favored to win this time, but ironically lost to the underdog John A. Carroll. After losing the senate race, Thornton retired from politics to return to his ranch in Gunnison. Attired in his customary boots and Stetson hat while smoking his pipe, Daniel I. J. Thornton died of a heart attack in Carmel, California, on January 19, 1976.

Bibliography

- American Hereford Journal. Kansas City, Mo.: Hereford Publications.
- Daniel I. J. Thornton Manuscript Collection. Colorado Historical Society. Denver, Co.
- Daniel I. J. Thornton Newspaper Clippings Collection. Denver Public Library. Western History Collection. Denver, Co.
- Gunnison County Stockgrowers Since 1894 : Tops in Cattle. Denver, Co.: Colorado Cattlemen's Association, 1967.

Series Descriptions

Executive Record

The Executive Record documents the official acts of Governor Thornton. It includes executive orders; appointments; legislative messages; pardons; extraditions and requisitions; honorary citations; and proclamations which were issued by Governor Thornton during his term of office from 1951-1955.

Subject Files

The subject files are organized by a code that had been in use since Governor John Vivian. The code related to various state agencies, commissions, boards, or subject areas. Within these files are correspondence, reports, and other supporting documentation concerning the more common aspects of Thornton's administration.

Correspondence

This series is comprised of correspondence concerning subjects not generally found in the subject files, or concerning topics that Thornton deemed especially important. There is a sub-series entitled "Legislative Correspondence" dealing with the legislation that was being introduced during Thornton's term as governor. Other subjects in the correspondence series include the development of the highway system in Colorado, the penitentiary warden (Roy Best) investigation, and Dwight Eisenhower's presidential campaign.

Appointments

This series comprises 3 cubic feet of documentation concerning the gubernatorial appointments by Thornton from 1951-1955. Information about his appointments can also be found in the Executive Record.

Reports

This series, which comprises 2 cubic feet, consists primarily of reports from state agencies, boards, and commissions. Many reports may also be found in the subject files.