

Colorado Governors

Teller Ammons



Scope and Content Note

The Teller Ammons collection comprises approximately 21 cubic feet of record material spanning his term from 1937-1939. Major record series included in the collection are correspondence; miscellaneous; reports; petitions; **Executive Record**; Budget & Efficiency Investigations 1938; and speeches and messages. The correspondence series makes up the bulk of the collection and is organized by subject or correspondent. Strengths of the collection include documentation concerning water rights controversies, federal programs instituted to fight the poverty created by the Great Depression, and Ammons' efforts to make the state more financially sound and efficient.

Biography of Teller Ammons

Teller Ammons was one of the youngest men ever to become governor of Colorado. He was elected shortly before his fortieth birthday in 1936. Teller was the son of former Governor Ellias M. Ammons, who served as the state's chief executive from 1912 to 1914. Ammons was born in Denver on December 3, 1895, and was named

after his father's friend, U.S. Senator Henry M. Teller of Colorado. His family moved to Colorado in 1871, five years before the territory became a state. He received his early education in Douglas County rural schools where he lived on his father's cattle ranch. He then moved to Denver and graduated from North High School.

Ammons later served in the U.S. Army in France for two years during World War I. After the war, he homesteaded on a ranch in Grand County but returned to Denver in 1923, where he went to work for a newspaper. He eventually became a clerk in the office of Mayor Ben Stapleton. While in this position he studied law at Westminster Law School and obtained his law degree in 1929.

His first venture into public office came in 1930 when he was elected a state senator from Denver. He was re-elected in 1934, but resigned in 1935 when Stapleton appointed him Denver City Attorney. During his legislative career, Ammons was chairman of the Senate Temperance Committee and he introduced the bill abolishing hanging as Colorado's form of capital punishment. He also was instrumental in passing the bill authorizing the gas chamber to be used for executions. He became a major power in the Denver Democratic Party organization and in 1936 was elected governor. He ran again in 1938, but was defeated by Republican Ralph L. Carr.

As governor, he aroused public opposition by retaining the proceeds from a newly enacted state income tax, earmarked only for schools. Despite strong pressure from many special interest groups, Ammons refused to tamper with the funds. During the previous administration, old age pension payments had used up eighty five percent of all excise tax revenue, resulting in the state being without funds to pay its own operating expenses. Ammons then pushed through a service tax so that the state would have a source of funds to pay its expenses, but he was severely criticized for that as well.

Although these funding arguments dominated his term, Ammons guided the state through the treacherous financial shoals of the latter years of the Great Depression. He also accomplished the establishment of the State Game and Fish Department and the State Water Conservation Board. In addition, he took the first steps to stop the bickering between Colorado, Nebraska, Kansas and New Mexico concerning rights to the water that originated on the eastern and southern slopes of the Rocky Mountains in Colorado.

The most publicized aspect of his administration was the "microphone scandal". This investigation resulted in the conviction of a **Denver Post** reporter, a private detective and an attorney on a charge of eaves-dropping on the governor. In December, 1938, shortly before Ammons took office, Jack H. Gilmore, the private detective, and newspaperman Walden E. Sweet placed microphones in Ammons' soon-to-be

occupied statehouse suite. Both reportedly were in the service of Earl H. Ellis, an attorney. They later held that their motive was a quest for information to prove wrongdoing among high state officials, although they ultimately uncovered very little.

Ammons had been puzzled because the names of his appointees were appearing in the **Denver Post** before the appointees, themselves, had been notified. "One day," Ammons reminisced, "a man came into my office, called me over to the window and whispered that there were microphones in my office." A search disclosed that he was right. There were two microphones in the ventilator shafts, hooked up to a telephone line leading to an apartment belonging to the private detective five blocks away. The "microphone scandal" rocked the state government, led to a grand jury investigation, conviction of the three men on eaves-dropping charges, disbarment of the attorney and publication of numerous private conversations between Ammons and his aides.

None of the recordings contained any testimony damaging to the governor's integrity. "I don't know to this day what they were trying to get on me," Ammons said. "It was embarrassing to a lot of people, but the worst thing was what my mother said, 'I didn't know Teller used that kind of language.'"

Looking back on his stormy term, Ammons calculates he could have avoided many of his troubles if he had been more conciliatory. "I suppose I brought a lot of it on myself," he said, "but when I took office, I resolved that I would not be dominated by any man or any faction or any newspaper."

Teller Ammons married Esther Davis on September 9, 1933. They adopted a son named Davis Ammons. During World War II, Teller became an Army Officer Selection Board Member. Later he became an executive in the military government of Guam. After returning from the war, he practiced law in his Denver firm until his retirement. He saved enough money to begin an annual series of trips to Africa, Alaska, India, Australia and South America. His wife died on October 18, 1967, while they were on safari in Kenya. Teller Ammons died four years later on January 16, 1972, at the age of seventy-six at St. Luke's Hospital in Denver.

Bibliography - Governor Teller Ammons

Abbott, Carl, Leonard, Stephen, and McComb, David. **Colorado**. Colorado Associated University Press, Boulder, Colorado, 1982.

Athearn, Robert G. **The Coloradans**. University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 1976.

Colorado State Archives. **Records of the Office of the Governor, Teller Ammons, 1937-1939.** Correspondence.

Newspaper Files of Teller Ammons. Denver Public Library Western History Collection.

Ubbelohde, Carl, Benson, Maxine, and Smith, Duane. **Colorado History.** Boulder, Colorado, Pruett Publishing Company, 1972.

Wickens, James F. **Colorado in the Great Depression: A Study of New Deal Policies at the State Level.** Denver, Colorado: University of Denver, Unpublished Thesis, 1964.

Periodicals

Denver Post, 1/17/1972, p. 2.

Rocky Mountain News, 6/23/1955, p. 38 and 1/17/1972.

Series Descriptions

Executive Record

The **Executive Record** contains executive orders; appointments; legislative messages; pardons; extraditions and requisitions; honorary citations; and proclamations which were issued by Governor Ammons during his term of office from 1937-1939.

Correspondence

Included in this series is correspondence between Governor Ammons and his constituents, state agencies, and other public officials. The correspondence is organized generally by subject. Important documentation exists concerning water issues, federal programs such as Social Security and the Civilian Conservation Corps, labor issues, and the New York World's Fair.

Speeches and Messages

Ammons' Inaugural and biennial address comprise this series.

Reports

Reports from this series include reports from state agencies on various topics.

Petitions

These petitions concern the "Townsend Plan" which was a pension plan proposed to the federal government.

Budget and Efficiency Investigations

There are four boxes of material concerning the Budget and Efficiency Investigations of 1938. The series is organized by state agency.

Miscellaneous

Included in this series are appointments and resignations; vouchers; newspaper clippings; and State Board of Public Welfare Minutes.