



AFTER 110 YEARS OF STATEHOOD, most Oklahomans would be surprised to learn that our well-known, well-loved state flag, with its blue field and Osage shield, is *not* the first state flag. Oklahoma's first flag had a red field and a blue "46" centered inside a white star, indicating Oklahoma's status as the 46th state. The red flag flew as the official state flag from 1911 to 1925.

I grew up in Oklahoma, attending school from kindergarten through a Ph.D. Even so, I became aware of the red flag only through a brief reference in an academic source on Socialism in Oklahoma during early statehood. It was one of those meta-moments I learned to pay attention to as a researcher: Oklahoma's red flag "raised a red flag" and quickly became a symbol of everything I didn't know but wanted to find out about the political landscape of my home. Could it be that Oklahoma's red flag reflected the ill-fated Socialism present early in our state history? Incessant curiosity, endless questions, and hopeful hunches propelled me down a long, revelatory road to learn more about that first flag. The journey has given me a new relationship with Oklahoma history and politics, as an Oklahoman and as a scholar. The flag, like any historical object, tells a story—and I want to know it.

I dug into the state's historical archives and spent hours searching for obscure, partial clues regarding the red flag's meaning. I was eager to find any hint regarding its inexplicable demise and

RAISING THE

utter erasure from public knowledge. I combed through newspaper articles, legislative documents, archival photographs, and more. The record was scant, but I pieced together an intriguing tale.

As an official state symbol, the red flag—rightly or wrongly—connected the new state of Oklahoma to the political tensions of the World War I era. Across the globe, red flags had become a symbol of leftist political activism during the first wave of the Red Scare, a widespread fear of communism. I found a 1917 state statute, adopted only six years after the flag became official, that made it a felony to fly a red flag in Oklahoma, punishable by up to ten years in prison. Across the U.S., red flags were synonymous with Socialism and organized labor. Internationally, red flags were associated with revolution and Bolshevism, the newly adopted communist government in Russia.

Next, I tracked down all I could find about the flag's designer, Mrs. W.R. Clement of Stillwater, Oklahoma, whose name appeared in brief newspaper accounts of the flag's adoption. To truly connect the flag with the Socialist Party of Oklahoma, I needed to know more about her political identity—next to impossible, considering women were almost a decade away from the vote in 1911. Payne County voter records indicated her husband was a registered Democrat. At the time, Oklahoma Democrats were largely "Dixiecrats." In other



I cannot help fearing that men may reach a point where they look on every new theory as a danger, every innovation as a toilsome trouble, every social advance as a first step toward revolution, and that they may absolutely refuse to move at all. —Alexis de Tocqueville, 1840

words, Mr. Clement's status as a Democrat likely indicated he strongly opposed the contemporary Socialist platform advocating for civil rights, social equality, and fair election laws. What political influence he had over his wife was impossible to substantiate.

I took a detour, looking for prosecutions using the state statute entitled "Display of Red Flag or Emblem of Disloyalty or Anarchy." It has been used only once, in the Vietnam era, when a University of Oklahoma student was arrested for waving a homemade Viet Cong flag (also red) to protest an ROTC march on the Norman campus the day after the Kent State massacre in 1970.

These bizarre connections confounded me, and my curiosity gave way to obsession. I wanted other Oklahomans to know the flag's history, so I made and sold t-shirts depicting the first flag to spread the word. In the years since, the red flag has slowly reappeared in Oklahoma's public iconography, as a symbol of determined resistance to the "red state" status quo and an expression of progressive values. Just two years ago, it was adopted as one of the many optional state license plate designs.

In 2013, the Oklahoma Historical Society unearthed the Century Chest, buried in 1913 by members of First English Lutheran Church in downtown Oklahoma City. Inside they found the only existent red flag from the era during which it flew over the state. It was interred by none other than the designer herself, who we now know as Ruth D. Clement. Other documents found in the Century Chest make her political affiliations more clear, revealing that she served as the 1912-1913 President of



Rachel Jackson views a vintage "46" state flag from the Century Chest archives at the Oklahoma History Center.

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the Oklahoma City Chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy. This connection suggests a different shade of red—that the flag wasn't designed as a Socialist symbol at all. Rather, the flag was likely designed as a confederate emblem, which, for me as a scholar of rhetoric, is a far more troublesome but no less curious turn. How fascinating that a confederate symbol could so quickly become associated with the radical left, crossing in a matter of a few years what, in our current political climate, seems like an immense divide between two ideological camps, only to be criminalized and almost forgotten by history entirely.

What might the ideologies of Oklahoma Socialists and Confederate sympathizers in our past have in common? What can the red flag tell us about how political symbols identify, categorize, and divide us?

Even after a decade and a half of curiosity and investigation, the red flag continues to call me to look for deeper meaning. And I am only just beginning to understand.

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