

Chapter 01 – Introduction

Announcer: Voices of Oklahoma presents *Oklahoma Leaders*, a book featuring stories of influential men written in 1928. You'll be introduced to names you'll recognize and we will learn about interesting details of their lives. Notably, these men lived many years beyond the publication of this book to make even more contributions to our society. Listen to another episode in the series *Oklahoma Leaders*.

Barry Evans: Cyrus Stevens Avery

Cyrus S. Avery, of Tulsa, Oklahoma, one of the dominant and most constructive forces in the development of the new state of Oklahoma, one of the leading road builders in America, a wealthy real estate and oil operator, an important factor in the building of Tulsa, a man whose courage and foresight have made him known to millions of people in the nation, was born in Steventville, Pennsylvania, August 31, 1871. He carries the full name of both his grandfathers — Cyrus Stevens and Cyrus Avery. He belongs to the twelfth generation of Averys in America, a family whose history fills two large printed columns and that includes many notable and outstanding figures. The Averys, who came to America from England in 1607, were active, vigorous men and women, ingenious and inventive. One member of the family, B. F. Avery, of Louisville, Kentucky, years ago invented some farm machinery; out of these inventions grew the B. F. Avery and Sons Plow Company. The family includes manufacturers, bankers, farmers, and salesmen; and some of its members have been big businessmen. One notable example is John D. Rockefeller.

The father of Cyrus Avery, Alexander James Avery, was a merchant in Steventville. He was a community builder, a breeder of livestock, a hard-working, jovial man, and a good storyteller. So industrious was he that he used to tell his son that he should work twice as hard on Saturday as on any other day, because the next day was Sunday when they could not work at all. He was a Pennsylvania Democrat, the only one in the whole community; but such was the affection in which he was held by his friends that he was

permitted to fire a cannon and stage a big celebration every time a Democratic president was elected. The mother of Cyrus was Miss Ruie Stevens. She was a former school teacher, who was born in Pennsylvania, a woman with a most remarkable personality. Broad in her views, very forceful and commanding, she breathed the spirit of ambition into her two daughters and son.

As a boy, Cyrus was full of life and fun and enjoyed existence thoroughly. He learned from his father that when once he had embarked upon an endeavor he should permit nothing to stand in the way of its accomplishment. He learned also that optimism is the keynote of happiness, that the greatest difficulties in life are those in the mind of the individual himself. He early formed the habit of confidently undertaking any task which his judgment considered sound.

The panic of 1873 swept away the fortunes of Alexander Avery, but that optimistic man met the disaster with the decision to move his family to the new country of Indian Territory. Speedily this move was executed, and the Averys were soon established on Spavinaw Creek in Eastern Oklahoma, amid physical surroundings almost identical with those familiar to them in Pennsylvania. Land for cultivation was procured through easy arrangements with the Indians, and the newcomers fared very well considering their pioneer surroundings. The mother reverted to her former occupation of school teaching and thereby aided in keeping the larder filled. The father farmed, traded in livestock, and managed to maintain his family in comfort. Cyrus worked with his father, hunted, studied under the tutelage of his mother, and enjoyed life to the fullest. In Missouri, thirty miles from his home, was a school, which he entered and attended two winters, by riding back and forth from his home on Monday mornings and Friday evenings. Then he attended a summer institute, won a first-grade certificate, and began to teach school. He was nineteen years of age and full of determination to achieve great things.

For three years he taught school. Then, when he had saved a small sum of money and had confidence that he would be able to secure enough additional funds with which to complete his education, he entered William Jewell College at Liberty, Missouri. His confidence was justified, for during the four years he spent in William Jewell he found it necessary to secure only one hundred and fifty dollars from his parents. He waited on tables, bought some pigs, and fed them the scraps from the kitchen table, after which he sold them

as hogs at a handsome profit; he managed a lecture course for his college and during the summer vacations traveled for a girls' school, for which he solicited students. Most of the time while he was in school he was in comfortable financial circumstances. As he had inherited an intellectual tendency from his mother, he delved deeply into literature, history, and science, and read widely. He was old enough to realize the benefits of an education and sought to achieve the fullest possible results from his attendance at college.

Immediately after his graduation he married Miss Essie McClellan, of Liberty, Missouri, and moved with her to Oklahoma City, where he began to sell insurance for the New York Life Insurance Company. That was in 1897 when Indian restrictions in Eastern Oklahoma made the operation of business there more or less undesirable for white men. His attachment for the eastern part of the state was strong, however, and he was determined to return whenever conditions warranted. This they did in 1904. Vinita, then the active business and legal center of Northeastern Oklahoma, appealed to him, and he settled there. In going, he rode past a little town which, he observed, was without lights, and had pigs running loose on its streets. That town was Tulsa.

In Vinita he opened an insurance business, formed a connection with the Phoenix Mutual Life Insurance Company, to loan money for it, and began to engage in the farmland and oil lease business. The oil business was then in its infancy, but through his operations, he secured a number of very valuable leases. He organized the Avery Oil and Gas Company, with Harry Sinclair as his partner, and rapidly became one of the business leaders in his section.

By 1907 Tulsa had emerged from the small unkempt town through which he had passed three years before and was a thriving community. Vinita had failed to grow as Avery had hoped that it would, and he decided to transfer his business operations to Tulsa. Arrived in Tulsa, established a farm loan agency, which was his chief occupation for the succeeding four or five years, during which he developed the reputation of being the best-informed man on farm lands in Northeastern Oklahoma. Few were the farms which came back to him because of bad judgment on his loans, but a number he purchased when their Indian owners, determined to secure a little ready money, came to him to dispose of their land. In a comparatively short time he was a large land owner, with holdings very valuable not only for agricultural purposes but also for oil. As his property increased he began to develop a real estate business and laid out several additions, which he improved and sold to Tulsans. Also he was

quite active in the oil business, in which he made substantial financial progress.

His extensive operations, his fearlessness, and energy marked him as a man of large caliber, and he became an outstanding figure in the life of the young City of Tulsa. His public spirit and vision caused him to be of great aid in its progress and growth. Elected to the board of directors of the Chamber of Commerce, he was in the forefront of everything that had to do with the larger business and civic life of the city. Because of his holdings in lands near Tulsa, roads were of particular interest to him, and he set about actively to improve them. One day he was visiting his parents in Noal, Missouri, to which they had moved from the Spavinaw country, when he learned that Governor Major had declared a holiday " to pull Missouri out of the mud. " This so impressed him that when he returned to Oklahoma he induced Governor Cruce to declare a similar holiday in Eastern Oklahoma. He also won the co-operation of Gene Lorton, editor and owner of the Tulsa World, and with his help raised \$ 25,000 in Tulsa for road purposes, which aroused much public interest and discussion in the good roads idea.

That was in 1912. The next year the voters of the county demanded that Avery be made a member of the board of county commissioners, and despite the fact that he refused to make the race and did not ask a man for a vote, elected him. He accepted the election, was promptly made chairman of the board, and started, with a vigor that characterized all his movements, to give Tulsa some roads. But he found himself virtually powerless to accomplish anything; under the law, the boards of county commissioners of counties in Oklahoma could do no more than build bridges and approaches to them. Such a condition was not to be tolerated, so he assembled road boosters from over the state, and with the aid of Elmer Thomas, who was then state senator, secured the passage of a new road law for Oklahoma, which gave county commissioners the right to build the roads they needed in their counties. As this accomplishment came toward the close of his term, he was promptly re-elected for another two years.

From Missouri he brought to Tulsa D. Ward King, inventor of the split-log drag, a practical and very successful road builder, to make a speech on road building. From King, he learned, really for the first time, how to build roads at small expense. With this information and a new law, he set to work. By the close of his second term Tulsa County had one hundred and fifty miles of roads

as solid and well-kept as a pavement, except during a rain. And, to the surprise of everybody in the state, even after a rain they were ready for use within twenty-four or thirty-six hours. Avery had them dragged regularly and properly; he saw to it that they were maintained carefully. He showed what an active, aggressive county commissioner can do for his county when he knows his business and puts energy and strength behind his efforts.

In 1917, war was declared, and Avery went off the board of county commissioners to conduct the War Loan Drives in Tulsa and to serve on the District Exemption Board. The Secretary of Agriculture appointed him agricultural adviser for twenty-three counties in Northeastern Oklahoma. Like so many other patriotic men, he virtually abandoned his business and devoted his full energies and means to the successful prosecution of the war.

So outstanding had become his leadership that in 1920, when Tulsa was laying plans for the development of a giant water system, he was one of the four men appointed on a special water board to handle the water project. Under the direction of this board, a fund of \$ 25,000 was raised for a preliminary survey of the project and a plan was developed whereby the city should go fifty miles to Spavinaw Creek, on which Avery had lived and with the water of which he was familiar, and from it pipe water to the city of Tulsa. A \$ 7, 500,000 bond issue was voted, and this sum was spent by the board, with the result that Tulsa has one of the finest water systems in America. Avery, as a member of the board, actively represented it both in the East and in Tulsa, in a number of very important legal disputes, which were successfully conducted without loss to the city.

By the time the water project was completed, Governor Trapp persuaded Avery to come to the State Capitol in Oklahoma City and take charge of the affairs of the newly organized Highway Commission. He accepted the chairmanship of the commission and threw himself with whole-hearted zeal into the task of doing for the State of Oklahoma what he had done for Tulsa County. Because efficiency marked his every step, under his firm leadership the commission began truly to pull Oklahoma out of the mud. Millions of dollars were spent on hard-surfaced roads, and the entire system of the state was organized and maintained on a schedule that soon made roads passable in every county. Avery operated the commission without fear or favor, despite the fact that many of his acts created political antagonism and brought down severe criticism upon his head. He had assumed the responsibility of giving

Oklahoma good roads and he let nothing stand in the way of fulfilling that responsibility.

His achievements began to win recognition for him abroad. In 1925 he was appointed, by the Secretary of Agriculture, a member of the Joint Board on Interstate Highways; and when this board appointed a sub-committee of five members to select and number the roads of America, he was made a member of that committee. Thus with four other men, he shared the responsibility of creating and developing the present National Highway System in America. A year afterwards, at Detroit, he was elected a member of the Executive Board of the American Association of Highway Officials. For several years he had been president of Albert Pike Highway Association. Therefore he soon became one of the very foremost roadmen in America, much in demand at road gatherings throughout the nation, and his judgment and advice were sought on road matters in virtually every state in the union.

But during the political campaign of 1927, storm clouds broke over him. Henry Johnston, candidate for governor, made his race partly on the promise that he would change conditions in the Highway Department, which he criticized as being inefficiently and expensively managed. After his election he demanded the resignation of Avery, but Avery refused to resign. A bitter political contest ensued, in which the power of the governor's office finally gave Johnston victory. Avery retired, but only after the Legislature, in compliance with the Governor's wishes, passed a new act governing the affairs of the Highway Department and abolishing the old board of commissioners. Despite the fine work that he had done, Avery was forced to step down and out. He was very sorry to leave his post, and road enthusiasts, the state over, expressed regret over his going.

Today Mr. Avery is again actively engaged in the operation of his private business. To the east of Tulsa, he is laying out a large real estate addition which in time will become one of the finest of Tulsa's residential sections. He is a man of large means and generous nature, who gives of his time and money freely to the public affairs of his community. He has three children, one son who has graduated from the University of Oklahoma and is in business with him, another who is a student in the University, and a daughter eleven years of age who is in the grade schools of Tulsa. He is a Baptist, a Rotarian, 32nd Degree Mason, and a Shriner.

Oklahoma owes much to Cyrus Avery. He is one of her big, constructive citizens, who, in achieving success for himself, has also given the state the full benefit of his finest constructive capacity. With national renown as a road builder, he has a warm place in the hearts of the two-and-a-quarter million citizens who use roads in Oklahoma.

Announcer: Cyrus Avery was 91 when he died in Los Angeles, California on July 2, 1963, he was buried in Rose Hill Cemetery in Tulsa, Oklahoma. A street in southwest Tulsa, Avery Drive, was named for him.

In 1997, the National Historic Route 66 Federation established a Cyrus Avery Award, which has been presented to individuals for outstanding creativity in depicting Route 66, and to organizations for noteworthy preservation projects.

In his honor in 2004, the City of Tulsa renamed the Eleventh Street Bridge, which carried US 66 over the Arkansas River, the Cyrus Avery Route 66 Memorial Bridge.

In late 2012, artist Robert Summers unveiled "East Meets West", a sculpture in Cyrus Avery Centennial Plaza at Southwest Boulevard at Riverside Drive in Tulsa. The bronze depicts Avery stopping his Ford on the 11th Street Bridge as the vehicle frightened two horses pulling a wagon laden with oil barrels. This bridge is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

You have just heard a brief biography taken from the book, Oklahoma Leaders, written by Rex Harlow, published in 1928 and available on Amazon Books. Listen for future episodes of this special series Oklahoma Leaders on this podcast and the oral history website VoicesOfOklahoma.com.

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