

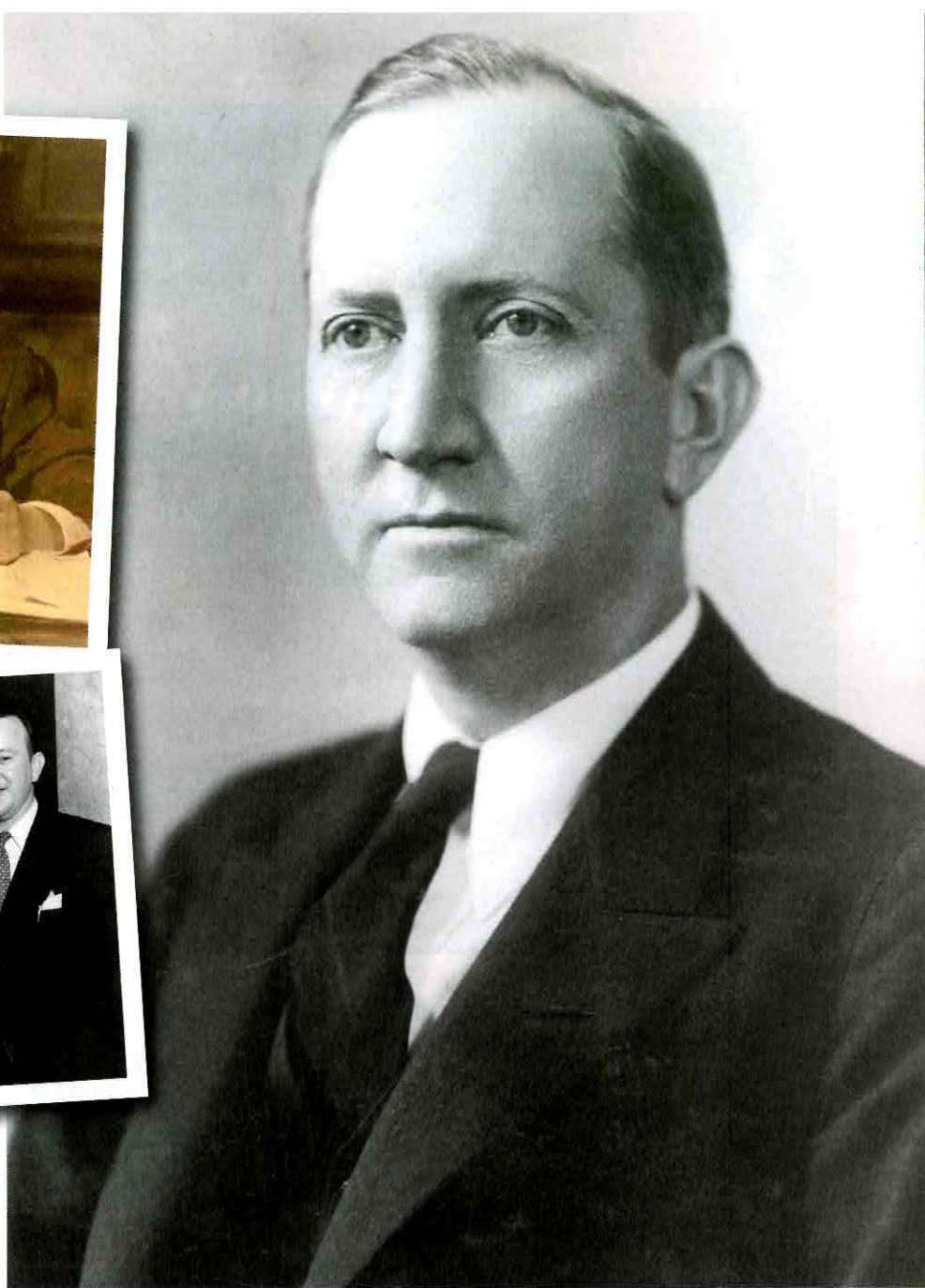
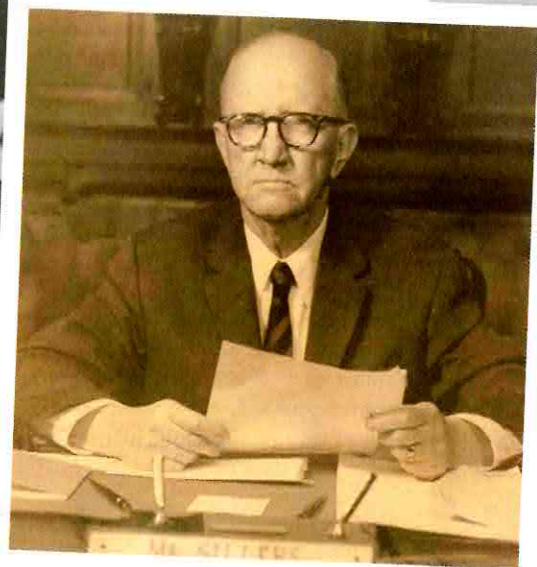


Sillers and John R. Junkin

A Name to Remember

By Sharon Levine
Photos courtesy of The DSU Archives Museum

The impact of Walter Sillers



Walter Sillers was once considered the most powerful man in the state of Mississippi. Much of his work in office still defines Mississippi today, yet despite decades spent in one of the state's most influential political positions and fifty years of service in the state legislature, Walter Sillers' name, unfortunately, is not one that most instantly recognized.

After growing up in a family with strong political ties, Sillers studied at the University of Mississippi and was practicing law by his early twenties in Rosedale. By 1916, at 27, he was in his first term in the Mississippi Legislature. After 28 years of representing Bolivar County, Sillers was elected speaker of the house in 1944 and remained in the position until his death twenty-two years later.

"He was a leader in the state of Mississippi," says his nephew, Judge John L. Pearson. "He led the House of Representatives in such a way that he was considered the most powerful man in the state of Mississippi, politically."

As a landowner and native of the Delta, Sillers' term in the legislature was marked by his pro-business stance and support of gradual reform. He fought for local businesses and worked to strengthen the

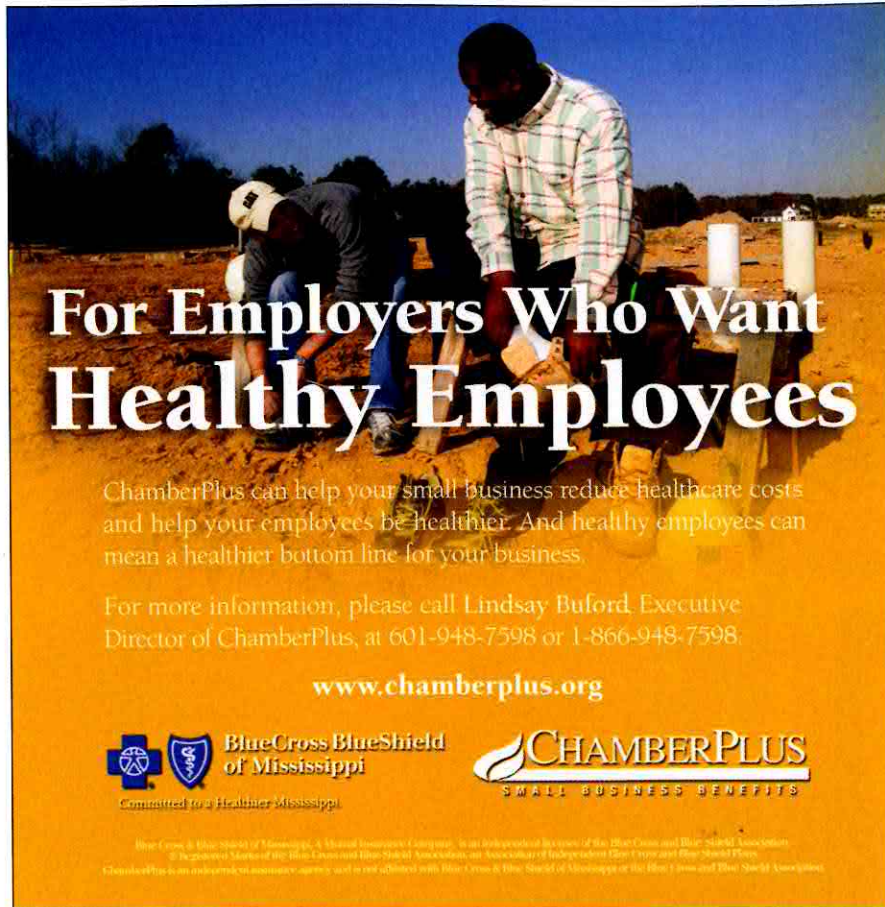
levees in order to assist farmers and the growth of the Delta. He was adamant in re-vamping the area's flood control and fought to bring federal money to the Delta after the Flood of 1927.

"Anything having to do with the river, with Delta State, with agriculture, he was the person to see. He was such a power in the state government. If someone wanted to do something with the river or if there was a land dispute, then it would be both a state and local issue and he would be involved in both," says Ben Sperry, a visiting instructor at Delta State University and author of *Walter Sillers and His Fifty Years Inside Mississippi Politics*.

Aside from Sillers' impact in the Delta region, the extent of his influence also spread across the state. Following World War II, Sillers battled Mississippi's healthcare crisis and pushed for an increase in hospitals throughout the state. He was fundamental in passing the legislation enabling the University of Mississippi Medical Center in Jackson, and for the number of hospitals in Jackson today.

Sillers' nephew attributes much of his political success to his powerful yet charismatic persona in and out of office.

"He got done what he felt needed to be done. He was convinc-




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he just didn't run over people. He used logic and argumentation, and of course he'd use whatever influence he had to get done whatever he thought needed to be done. He was smart, I've always said he could scare me to death when he got real serious—a gentleman and a good sense of humor—just a swell guy."

Despite his pro-labor political stance and support for change throughout the state, Sillers had strong opinions regarding Mississippi race relations and was a staunch segregationist throughout Mississippi's civil rights controversy. When the Democratic national convention adopted a civil rights article, Sillers became a prominent member of the States' Rights Party, better known as the Dixiecrats, whose use of the Confederate battle flag has come to represent much of Mississippi's history.

"He was revered by the members of the legislature and the people of the state, but a lot of people thought he was a devil with horns," explains Pearson, who notes that Sillers' term in office did not come without criticism.

"He didn't straddle the fence," says Pearson. "He was either for or against an issue."

Much of the impact of Sillers' opinions on race relations can still be felt today. In attempt to redirect black students from applying to the newly integrated Delta State University, Sillers founded the Mississippi Vocational College in Leflore County, now known as Mississippi Valley State University. The Walter Sillers Fine Arts building still stands on the university's campus.

Sillers was also instrumental in a lot of the legislation benefiting Delta State University, and the Walter Sillers collection at their University Museum and Archives is one of the most extensive and telling of Mississippi's history.

"It is chock-full of every possible political maneuver going on in the Delta during that time," says Emily Erwin, the director of the Delta State University Archives Museum.

"I love his collection because of how much history is recorded. It's right there in his present voice," says Erwin. "He looked out for Delta State. We were a smaller college then. It was easier to know everyone on campus and everyone on campus knew him."

The Walter Sillers Coliseum was erected at the Delta State University campus in honor of Sillers' contributions to the school.

As the longest-serving speaker of Mississippi's House of Representatives, Sillers' seat in Mississippi is not one to be forgotten.

"He's not very well known," says Sperry. "But he was everywhere for years. He's a really important person whose role needs more attention." **DBJ**



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