

Dakota Images

Coe Isaac Crawford, South Dakota's sixth governor, was born in Volney, Iowa, on 14 January 1858 to Robert and Sarah Shannon Crawford. Growing up on a farm, he attended school only during the winter months. At age fifteen, he left home for Rossville, Iowa, where he attended school full time and boarded with a doctor who offered him additional instruction. Crawford then taught school briefly before enrolling at the University of Iowa and earning a law degree in 1882.

The following year, Crawford moved to Dakota Territory and opened a law office in Pierre. In 1886, he was elected states attorney for Hughes County. A member of the last territorial and first state legislatures, he helped to shape much of the early legislation for the state of South Dakota. Crawford then served as attorney general from 1893 to 1897. He was an unsuccessful candidate for Congress in 1896.

Crawford moved to Huron in 1897 to become the attorney in South Dakota for the Chicago & North Western Railroad, a position he held until 1904. He lost the Republican nomination for governor in that year to Samuel H. Elrod but defeated Governor Elrod for the nomination in 1906. Crawford won the November election over Democrat John A. Stransky to become the state's first Progressive governor.

Among the notable progressive reforms passed during the Crawford administration were the direct primary law, lobbying reforms, and legislation mandating public accounting of campaign funds and prohibiting corporate contributions for political gain. There were also important railroad reforms, such as passenger rate regulation, anti-pass legislation, and measures benefiting rail workers. As governor, Crawford officiated over the laying of the cornerstone for the South Dakota capitol in 1908.

Crawford chose not to seek a second term as governor and ran instead for the United States Senate. He won the Republican primary and was elected by the Republican-controlled state legislature, taking office in March of 1909. Crawford served one term in the Senate, losing his reelection bid in 1914. He then returned to Huron and resumed practicing law.

Crawford married May Robinson in Iowa City in 1884, and the couple had two children. Following his wife's death in 1894, Crawford married her sister Lavinia in 1896, and they had three children together. Coe Crawford died on 25 April 1944 and was buried in Iowa City.

—Dan Brosz



Coe I. Crawford