People and Places:
Miriam “Ma” Ferguson (1875–1961)

Randy Moore
Miriam Amanda Wallace was born in Bell County, Texas, on June 13, 1875. She attended Salado College and Baylor Female College, and married James Edward “Pa” Ferguson in 1899. Miriam became the First Lady of Texas when her husband was elected governor in 1915. As a result of Miriam’s dedication to her husband and two daughters, as well as the combination of her initials, she became known as “Ma”.

When James Ferguson was impeached during his second term, Miriam announced her candidacy for governor. Her campaign, which was meant to vindicate her husband’s reputation, was fiscally conservative, anti-KKK, and anti-prohibition. In November 1924, she handily defeated Republican nominee George Butte. Although Ferguson was the first woman to be elected governor in the United States, she was inaugurated 15 days after Wyoming’s Nellie Ross, and thereby became the second female governor in US history.

Ferguson entered the evolution–creationism controversy in October 1925, when, as head of the state textbook commission, she banned the use of biology textbooks that included evolution in public schools. That year, the state adopted Truman Moon’s *Biology for Beginners*, but only on the condition that its three evolution-related chapters be removed. Ferguson threatened to fire and prosecute any teacher who used an unapproved book, and she justified her edict by reminding Texans that she was a Christian and a mother. For the next several decades, the ban imposed by Ferguson forced publishers to produce special editions of their biology books for Texas classrooms.

Ferguson was criticized for granting contracts to her friends and political supporters, as well as for pardoning an average of 100 convicts per month. These controversies, as well as the opposition of anti-evolution crusader (and fellow Texan) Frank Norris, helped Attorney General Daniel Moody defeat Ferguson in 1926, and in 1930 Ferguson was defeated in another campaign for governor. In 1940, the 65-year-old Ferguson accepted a draft for the gubernatorial nomination, but lost to incumbent governor W Lee O’Daniel, and never again ran for public office.

“Ma” Ferguson died of heart failure on June 25, 1961. She rests beside her husband in the Texas State Cemetery in Austin, Texas.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Randy Moore is the HT Morse–Alumni Distinguished Professor of Biology at the University of Minnesota. His latest book, coauthored with Sehoya Cotner, is *Arguing for Evolution: An Encyclopedia for Understanding Science* (Santa Barbara [CA]: Greenwood, 2011).

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