

Robert Lee Satterwhite was the first speaker from the Texas Panhandle, attaining the speaker's office during the 39th Legislature after a protracted house election that lasted six ballots. An editor, farmer, and rancher, Satterwhite, with his lean and angular appearance, resembled the archetypal West Texan. His legislative colleagues dubbed him the "Tall Sycamore of the Treeless Plains."

Actually, although during his term as speaker he was a resident of Amarillo, Satterwhite cannot rightfully be claimed by any one locality of even one geographical area in the state. Born in Nevada County, Arkansas, on January 28, 1871, he lived in at least eight places throughout Texas and was elected state representative from four of them. During seven terms in the house of representatives spread over a 30-year period, Satterwhite represented a total of 26 counties ranging from Freestone County in East Texas to Dallam County in the northwest corner of the state to Presidio County just west of the Big Bend. In addition, he ran a losing campaign for state representative from Travis County in Central Texas. Satterwhite is most closely identified with the High Plains, however, and he is buried in the town of Panhandle in Carson County.

Robert Lee Satterwhite first came to Texas in 1885 with his parents, who settled their family in Freestone County. As a young man, Satterwhite worked two years on a farm and another four years as a printer, experiences that fashioned lifelong dual careers in husbandry and journalism. By 1893, the printing trade had encouraged him to enter the newspaper business, and in that year he established the Wortham Signal. After becoming publisher and editor of the Wortham Journal, Satterwhite worked alternately as a newspaperman and farmer until 1898, when he enlisted for service in the Spanish-American War as a soldier in the 2nd Texas Regiment.

In 1900, following the nation's return to peacetime, Satterwhite was elected to the 27th Legislature as a member from Freestone County of the house of representatives. It would be 18 years before he returned for a second term. After his first term, he relocated westward, farming in Knox County until 1909.

That year, Satterwhite moved to Tulia, where in 1913 he founded the short-lived Tulia Enterprise. After his newspaper proved a financial failure, Satterwhite moved to Panhandle in 1915 and bought the Panhandle Herald. This venture was more successful, lasting eight years while Satterwhite resided in Panhandle and another three years following his 1923 move to Amarillo.

During the time he was in Panhandle, Satterwhite was elected to the 36th and 37th legislatures. While in Amarillo, he was elected to the 38th through the 40th legislatures and served the middle of those three terms as speaker. Satterwhite's speakership in 1925 coincided with the 39th Legislature's comprehensive revision of the state's civil statutes, the last comprehensive revision to have been undertaken in one biennial session.

Satterwhite moved again in 1927, this time to Odessa where he operated a ranch for several years. In Odessa, he was elected to his final term as state representative, serving in the 42nd Legislature. After that legislature's last special session in 1932, he remained in Austin, and as a resident of the capital for the next 15 years, made unsuccessful bids in 1944 and 1946 for the lieutenant governorship and house of representatives, respectively. Finally, in 1947, Satterwhite settled in Houston, where he lived the last 12 years of his life. He died there on November 29, 1959.