

## Communists, Poetry, and Oklahoma History: The Life of Zoe Agnes Stratton Tilghman



*By Mallory Newell*

In August 1936 an article in the *Daily Oklahoman* titled “Mrs. Tilghman Busy Using Experience,” describes Zoe Agnes Stratton Tilghman as “one of the most versatile authorities in the state on such subjects as Oklahoma history, music, art, industry, geography and flora and fauna.”<sup>1</sup> Throughout her career as a poet, storyteller, and historian, she produced numerous works that left an imprint on Oklahoma’s literary history. Her accomplishments include publication in such prestigious periodicals as the *New York Times*, the *New York Sun*, and *Literary Digest*.<sup>2</sup> She was willing to give advice to writers who were just beginning their careers. During her lifetime she promoted Oklahoma history and literary works of all kinds. Before her marriage to lawman Bill Tilghman, Zoe Tilghman worked as a teacher for three years.<sup>3</sup> Education was a profession that she returned to at many stages of her life, not only in the traditional classroom sense but also through her books and participation in public programs and organizations. The

Oklahoma Federal Writers Project (FWP) and the Oklahoma Poetry Society showcased Tilghman's dedication to the encouragement of new writers and to furthering the study of Oklahoma history. Her life story is a testament to her dedication to achieving those goals. Despite her dramatic flair, she was still an important part of Oklahoma history; her stories, although not strictly historical, documented an important part of the state's history.

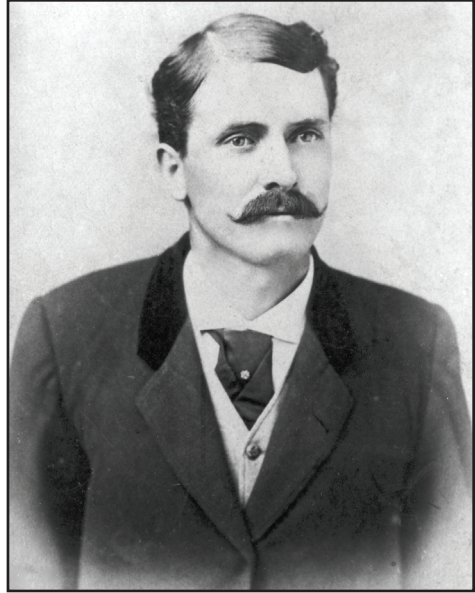
Tilghman was born in Greenwood County, Kansas, in 1880. Her father, Mayo E. Stratton, was a rancher and her mother, Agnes M. Stratton, stayed at home.<sup>4</sup> In 1887 the Stratton family moved to a ranch in present-day Osage county, where they lived until 1893 when they transferred to a claim in the Cherokee Outlet.<sup>5</sup> Zoe was able to give a firsthand account of Oklahoma as the state was formed. Her books were dedicated to producing images of the state that were as accurate as possible. Drawing on her own knowledge of Oklahoma history and experiences during its formative years she worked to create an image of early Oklahoma. Growing up on a ranch in the Cherokee Outlet allowed Tilghman to become familiar with the landscape of Oklahoma. She learned the names of the local plants and animals as well as the habitats of the local wildlife. The knowledge came in handy later when she worked on *Oklahoma: A Guide to the Sooner State* for the FWP.<sup>6</sup>

The majority of her early education took place at home. She was taught by her mother, but did complete some education in public schools in Arkansas City, Kansas. Later she attended the University of Oklahoma (OU). Tilghman spent one and a half years in the preparatory school and moved on to complete two years in the college beginning in 1897.<sup>7</sup> Her first poem was published during her time at OU in the school literary magazine *Umpire Magazine*, of which she was the literary editor. She wrote the poem because they lacked one for their Christmas issue.<sup>8</sup> In 1947 Tilghman received her bachelor's degree in education from Central State College in Edmond, Oklahoma, where she was a member of Phi Alpha Sigma honor society.<sup>9</sup>

On July 15, 1903, at the age of twenty-three, Zoe Stratton married William "Two Gun Bill" Tilghman, the famed US marshal of Oklahoma Territory.<sup>10</sup> Her experiences with him and her exposure to the outlaw culture were important influences on her early writings. During her marriage to Bill she developed a romantic image of lawmen that she was determined to protect. In 1924 Bill was killed while on duty in Cromwell, Oklahoma.<sup>11</sup> After his death Zoe wrote *Outlaw Days: A True History of Early Day Oklahoma Characters*, which focused on some of the more infamous gangs of Oklahoma.<sup>12</sup> Tilghman also wrote a comprehensive biography of her late husband titled *Marshal of the Last*

## THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

*William Tilghman at Dodge City, Kansas, 1882 (12366, Jim McLaughlin Collection, OHS Research Division).*



*Frontier: Life and Services of William Matthew (Bill) Tilghman, for Fifty Years One of the Greatest Peace Officers of the West* that helped to enhance his image as a hero. Her novels portrayed the marshals as a group of men who were almost incapable of making a wrong decision. The early books show her ability to make history entertaining, creating an image of the West as an exciting and romantic place to live rather than a dangerous one.<sup>13</sup> In 1939 Tilghman sued a newspaper for \$100,000 because they ran an article claiming that the US marshals were cowards. They specifically referenced Bill in the article, claiming that a witness had observed him hiding under a bed during a chase. In truth, he was involved in the capture of many notorious gangs and individuals such as the Dalton gang and Al Jennings.<sup>14</sup>

In a review of her biography of her husband Rupert N. Richardson said, “One does not expect a work written under such conditions to be objective: and certainly this book is not definitive.”<sup>15</sup> The conditions that Richardson referred to were the lack of tangible sources. The reviewer noted most of the information that Tilghman used in her book was based on recollections her husband had recounted to her about events that had happened decades before. Additionally, Richardson discounted the biography as a serious work, stating that the book was a “labor of love” written by a devoted wife. While the volume is an important work in terms of literature of the West, *Marshal of the Last Frontier* is not a scholarly work.<sup>16</sup>



*Buffalo hunters Jim Elder and Bill Tilghman, 1873 (12368 Jim McLaughlin Collection, OHS Research Division).*

Her introduction to *Outlaw Days* demonstrates Tilghman's tendency to wax lyrically about outlaw history: "Here the tragedy of crime is stripped of its glamour and the outlaw shown to be without the gallantry and dashing courage credited to him by the cheap novelist and writer of exaggerated heroics."<sup>17</sup> A review of her work *Quanah, the Eagle of the Comanches* by Gaston L. Litton described her writing as poetic, and he stated that she spent a great deal of time giving a descriptive picture of the landscape.<sup>18</sup> Even in Tilghman's most scholarly works, her literary background remained an integral part of her writing. Her ability to paint a scene made her books interesting to a wider audience. However, Tilghman was well known for her romantic image of the West and later was criticized by historians of outlaw history for the picture she created in her books. Her writing was biased heavily toward the officers of the law. Additionally, she portrayed American Indians in an unflattering way. Throughout her career as a writer, in both her books and articles, Tilghman's portrayal of American Indians remains consistent. She relies on stereotypical behaviors as a basis for her characters. The only exception was her biography of Quanah Parker. In 1925 she wrote *The Dugout*, which was approved as a textbook in Oklahoma, Texas, and Kansas.<sup>19</sup>

Throughout her long career Tilghman taught periodically at different levels ranging from elementary school to university courses. At one point she returned to teach a night class on writing at OU in the exten-

## THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

sion division.<sup>20</sup> Tilghman was also involved in a poetry correspondence course for the *Writing Guide* based out of St. Louis, Missouri. She wrote the course and handled all of the work produced by the contributors.<sup>21</sup> In the 1950s Tilghman returned to educating children.<sup>22</sup> During this period she wrote several books for children in order to share her love of history with younger generations. The majority were about American Indians including *Katska of the Seminoles*, *Sacajawea*, *The Shoshoni*, and *Mika the Osage Boy*. In 1955 Tilghman also penned *Oklahoma Stories* and *Stories of Oklahoma*. She took traditional Oklahoma stories and endeavored to make the accounts interesting to younger generations. Additionally, she explained in the introductions to her books that she drew upon her own experiences with Oklahoma history when writing.<sup>23</sup>

As her career progressed, Tilghman produced numerous articles pertaining not only to Oklahoma history but also the American Indians who lived in Oklahoma. One of the first articles she published was entitled "The Wives of Walking Sun." The article appeared in the November 1919 edition of *Outlook*.<sup>24</sup> She did not restrict herself to writing books and articles; she branched out to other aspects of American Indian culture. She was involved in musical endeavors that took traditional native songs and chants, such as the planting song of the Osage women, and transcribed them. Tilghman was involved in several projects on which she collaborated with others to create songs about topics in Oklahoma history, and she wrote several manuscripts including chants and songs used by American Indians.<sup>25</sup> Tilghman understood the importance of American Indians to the culture and history of Oklahoma, despite her stereotypical portrayals of indigenous people.

Tilghman was involved in an unorthodox method of promoting Oklahoma history in the late 1950s. She was contacted by a movie producer in Hollywood who was interested in using a scene from her book *Marshal of the Last Frontier*. Additionally she worked as a consultant on the television show *Death Valley Days*. She was asked to appear in the prologue and epilogue of the episode "The Wedding Dress."<sup>26</sup> Through her work with motion pictures and television she was able to reach the public on a national scale. Through these collaborations the public saw Oklahoma through Tilghman's eyes.

From 1925 to 1934 she was the literary editor of *Harlow's Weekly*, an Oklahoma City newspaper, where she had a column entitled "Among Oklahoma's Literary People." During her time as editor she was sent contributions from writers all over the state. She provided encouragement and gave constructive criticism to the contributors. Additionally, Tilghman was a charter member and president of the Oklahoma Writ-

er's Club. She was elected twice to the presidency while absent because her reputation as a writer and literary personality boosted membership.<sup>27</sup> Authors such as Louis L'Amour contacted Tilghman asking for her literary advice.<sup>28</sup> Tilghman was active in many other programs and organizations. She was a member of the 1889er Society, which was comprised of people who participated in the land run of 1889. Additionally, Tilghman was a member of the McDowell Club of Allied Arts as well as a charter member of the Oklahoma Author's Club, serving as its president from 1916 to 1917.<sup>29</sup>

During the 1920s and 1930s, when the United States was experiencing the Great Depression, women writers and historians were facing difficult obstacles in obtaining jobs in universities and getting articles published by major historical journals. Previously, jobs outside of women's colleges were dominated by men. However, during the Great Depression females were limited strictly to women's colleges because other institutions began hiring only men for open positions because employers argued that the men needed the money in order to feed their families. Also open to women were jobs in the museum field.<sup>30</sup> Outside of teaching and publishing in journals, female authors faced other roadblocks. They were more likely to be unemployed and not equally recognized within their profession, specifically the historical field.<sup>31</sup> Female writers in the 1930s were largely unrecognized as a literary force.<sup>32</sup> In her capacity as a historian, Tilghman did not have a problem publishing articles in major journals. She had two articles published in *American Anthropologist*: "The Origin of the Name Wichita," and "Source of the Buffalo Origin Legend."<sup>33</sup> During the 1930s Tilghman was also able to procure employment outside of a women's college on the Federal Writers Project as well as at *Harlow's Weekly*. She produced at least two books during this time, *Quanah, the Eagle of the Comanches* and *Prairie Winds*.<sup>34</sup>

Female writers of the 1930s were often overshadowed by the male writers of the decade.<sup>35</sup> Women in the historical profession were faced with the difficult task of obtaining a job that made full use of their intellect and education. During this time period females were still viewed as intellectually inferior; however, they continued to write articles and participate in professional conferences.<sup>36</sup> Tilghman was recognized for her work with *Harlow's Weekly* but her other literary accomplishments were barely mentioned.

In comparison with other women writers of the time in Oklahoma such as Angie Debo and Muriel Wright, Tilghman had little in the way of formal training. Debo and Wright had high levels of university training. The works that were produced by both Debo and Wright were

## THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

more scholarly than the works that Tilghman produced. Her books showcased her literary talents more than her ability as a serious historian. The works produced by Debo and Wright are still used today in research.<sup>37</sup> Other female historians and anthropologists who worked during the 1930s and 1940s were often criticized as being too literary, with critics often describing the texts as written for a popular audience and, therefore, not of scholarly significance.<sup>38</sup> Tilghman fell into this category to many of her reviewers as well. A popular criticism of her work was the lack of sources.<sup>39</sup> She relied heavily on the stories her husband Bill had told her of his time as a marshal. The lack of hard evidence to support her claims frustrated much of her audience.

Many of the women writers in Oklahoma who were contemporaries of Tilghman focused more on anthropological aspects of Oklahoma culture and spent tremendous amounts of time conducting field research. They used American Indian history as a means to critique society rather than using their own experiences. For example, women writers commented on gender inequality and used smaller cultural groups to mirror American society as a whole. One characteristic that she shared with her fellow women historians was the idea that Oklahoma had a unique history that needed to be shared with the rest of the country.<sup>40</sup>

To combat the unequal atmosphere that surrounded the field of history during the Great Depression women formed societies and organizations that allowed female historians to share their ideas and present papers in a friendly atmosphere. Groups such as the American Association of University Women and the General Federation of Women's Clubs were only two of the many programs that existed.<sup>41</sup> Throughout her life Tilghman was involved in several women's organizations. She was a long-time member of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) and had also been a member of the Oklahoma Federation of Women's Clubs, from which she received first prize in the annual poetry contest in 1915.<sup>42</sup> She gave lectures for these organizations on literary topics and taught a class on poetry for the YWCA.<sup>43</sup>

Tilghman was an exception to the obstacles that women of the time faced. She not only managed to procure and maintain a job that allowed her to use her skill as a writer but she also gained the recognition that she deserved as a literary personality and historian. Throughout the Depression Era she was rarely without work; she was able to publish her articles and travel around the state giving lectures about her literary pursuits. The one obstacle that Tilghman encountered was gaining correct classification for her literature. Many of her books are classified as historical fiction. In the introductions of her books Tilghman makes clear that she had written the books to be historically accurate.

During the 1930s many female writers were interested in the spread of fascism and communism.<sup>44</sup> The political tensions of the decade affected Tilghman in her capacity as a writer as interest in communism was a growing trend in the literary and fine arts community.<sup>45</sup> She shared this fascination with communism, especially during her time in the Federal Writers Project when she demonstrated her staunch position as an anticommunist.

She demonstrated her passion for the literary works and history of Oklahoma no more than when she was employed with the Oklahoma FWP from 1935 to 1939, during which she organized the Oklahoma Poetry Society. The FWP was a component of a larger government works project, the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The WPA was started in 1935 by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt as a way to create jobs during the Great Depression. The WPA was well-known for its public construction programs, creating structures such as buildings, parks, and bridges. One purpose of the WPA was to employ people to benefit the community by working on public projects and fine arts. The FWP fell under the category of Federal One, which was comprised of the FWP and programs for art, theatre, and music. The philosophy fit with Tilghman's goals of sharing Oklahoma history with the rest of the country.

In 1934, one year before being appointed as assistant director of the FWP, she put out a call to the poets of Oklahoma with the goal of organizing the Oklahoma Poetry Society. The goal of the group was "promotion of interest and the recognition of Oklahoma writers."<sup>46</sup> Tilghman's first love in the literary world was poetry. She wrote poetry through every phase of her life. After she released her poetry anthology *Prairie Winds* in 1930 she continued to write hundreds of poems.<sup>47</sup> As a part of her work with the society, she gave lectures about local writers to further promote Oklahoma literary works.<sup>48</sup> In order to encourage new writers as well as the existing members the organization held an annual poetry contest.<sup>49</sup> The contest was extended to include universities and high schools. In the 1950s the poetry society included a junior unit.<sup>50</sup> Tilghman worked hard to make the organization a success and to encourage new poets, admitting anyone who had an interest in poetry. In the first year of the society's existence, membership reached more than one hundred writers.<sup>51</sup>

In 1936 the poetry society produced an anthology that showcased the talent of its members. The compilation of poems included Tilghman's own work and that of other seasoned poets such as William Cunningham as well as the work of new, upcoming poets.<sup>52</sup> The book was purchased by schools and libraries across Oklahoma. In his column



## THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

“The Way I See It,” fellow writer Kenneth Kaufman stated that within the poetry anthology, well-known names appear alongside lesser-known poets. Additionally, Kaufman said the anthology was “a cross section from almost the beginnings of poetry in Oklahoma . . . down to the youngsters who haven’t properly speaking, broken into print yet.”<sup>53</sup> Tilghman was effective in accomplishing her goal in creating this society. She was able to encourage beginning writers as well as promote and secure recognition for Oklahoma poets who had been in the literary world for years.

One goal of the FWP was to create a guidebook to the state.<sup>54</sup> The book was meant to create a “contemporary history of the people by the people” and was to be the most comprehensive volume on Oklahoma that had ever been compiled.<sup>55</sup> The book was comprised of every type of fact from historical information to the local flora and fauna. The purpose of the guidebook was to make the entire history of Oklahoma accessible to tourists without having to go to the library and do extensive research.<sup>56</sup> No social message was to be promoted, just a compilation of facts that guided tourists through Oklahoma.<sup>57</sup> Given the political atmosphere at the time when the guidebook was written, the idea that no social message was to be promoted was not really possible. To many the guidebook provided a way to encourage “a more noble standard of social behavior.”<sup>58</sup> The FWP published *Oklahoma: A Guide to the Sooner State*, though not during Tilghman’s time with the project. In addition to the guidebook, the FWP was instrumental in collecting oral histories of former slaves and the Indian-Pioneer Papers, which are now housed at the Western History Collections at the OU and the Research Division of the Oklahoma Historical Society, as well as indexing the feature articles of the *Daily Oklahoman* for the years 1925 to 1936.<sup>59</sup> The FWP created a database of Oklahoma musicians and created two documents concerning Oklahoma farm cooperatives of the 1930s and community sales of local products including type of product and average gross profit. The latter reports were never published.<sup>60</sup>

The guidebook was structured topically; the introduction informed the audience about the origin of the name Oklahoma and general information about the state, and chapters became increasingly detailed as the book progressed.<sup>61</sup> Included was a series of essays ranging in subject from history to natural resources to folklore. The book then progressed into descriptions of Oklahoma towns and cities, ending with a selection of tours that guided visitors all over the state.<sup>62</sup> The publication was destined to become part of a larger national project that educated a wide variety of sightseers about the wonders of the United States. The national project focused on providing entertaining



*WPA workers separating Bermuda grass roots from the soil in a vacant lot in Pryor, Oklahoma, May 21, 1937, photograph by Jim Slack (20778.AG.SCS.OKLA.5635, Edd Roberts Collection. OHS Research Division).*

tours that allowed travelers to explore major points of interest in every state.<sup>63</sup>

Tilghman, in her capacity as assistant director for the project, was responsible for editing. She looked over every page produced by the employees and checked for factual errors, including discrepancies in boundary lines and any other grammatical or miscellaneous mistakes.<sup>64</sup> During her time with the FWP she was involved in almost every aspect of the creation of the guidebook. She was able to use her vast knowledge of Oklahoma history and folklore to educate visitors about the events that she found fascinating.<sup>65</sup>

Tilghman was hired at the FWP at its inception by the newly appointed director William Cunningham.<sup>66</sup> She acted as the assistant director of the project until 1938 when the project was shut down due to funding problems. When the project recommenced in 1939, Angie Debo was the director.<sup>67</sup> During her five years with the FWP she worked on numerous assignments, almost all related to the creation of the guidebook. While assistant director, Tilghman corresponded with M. W. S. Sterling of the Bureau of American Ethnology at the Smithsonian Institution about the creation of a Comanche language dictionary.<sup>68</sup>

## THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

*The Federal Music Project, part of Federal One, began in 1935. Pictured is a rehearsal of the Oklahoma Symphony with guest artist, tenor Donald Dickson. Victor Alessandro conducting, c. 1935 (19730, Oklahoma Historical Society Photograph Collection, OHS Research Division).*



She had previous knowledge of the Comanche language because of her studies with the system of phonetics used when recording American Indian languages.<sup>69</sup> Her knowledge of the phonetics was useful when she worked on the origin of names project with the FWP.

Outside of the guidebook assignments, Tilghman wrote a manuscript detailing the founding of Oklahoma City, written in honor of the fiftieth anniversary of the Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce. The document entitled *The Making of a City* was a brief survey of the history of the city until 1938, highlighting contributions made by the chamber of commerce to the growth and development of the city. The manuscript, however, was never published.<sup>70</sup> She also was involved in the task of indexing the feature stories in the *Daily Oklahoman* for the years 1925 to 1936.<sup>71</sup>

The work that Tilghman completed for the FWP made full use of her abilities as both a writer and a historian. Her assignments fell into four general categories: brief histories of geographic areas, short biographies, local histories, and book reviews.<sup>72</sup> Some of her assignments included writing about early Tulsa; Platte National Park; and writing biographical blurbs about Stand Watie and his capture of a supply train during the Civil War and Roy Cashion, a Rough Rider who participated in the Spanish-American War.<sup>73</sup> Many of these tasks drew upon her past experiences with her husband Bill as well as some of her own personal research. For example she was asked to write a brief description of the famous female outlaw Belle Starr. Later, Tilghman helped to write a musical about the famous outlaw.<sup>74</sup> Her knowledge of the Oklahoma landscape and people was of use during her various assignments for the guidebook.

Many of the assignments that Tilghman was given related to outlaws such as the Dalton gang who Bill, in his time as a United States marshal, had helped capture. Interestingly she was specifically told to avoid using Wild West material.<sup>75</sup> She had also written about the Dalton gang in her book *Outlaw Days* before her time with the FWP.<sup>76</sup> Tilghman also was assigned many American Indian topics, such as pre-statehood education among Indians and the difficulties faced between Creek and Seminole tribes regarding black Seminoles before the Civil War.<sup>77</sup>

The FWP called upon her experience in the literary world. She had one assignment to write a review of George Washington Ogden's book *Sooner State*, which described the land run that opened the Cherokee Outlet in 1893.<sup>78</sup> The majority of Tilghman's topics were geared toward her areas of expertise in history. The FWP was a major step in achieving her goals in the historical and literary fields. Through the guidebook she was able to use her extensive knowledge of Oklahoma history in the creation of a project that allowed the public to share her love of the state's history.

Additionally, the FWP not only showcased her literary and historical talents but also displayed her tendency to become emotional with certain topics, such as communism. The United States in the late 1920s and early 1930s experienced the first of two major scares concerning communism. Oklahoma had socialist roots that extended back to the beginning of the twentieth century. During the Great Depression, Communist leaders ran for office and attempted to control organizations, such as the Worker's Alliance, which sought to unionize laborers. Fred Maxham, an important Communist leader, had a brief association with the FWP in Oklahoma.<sup>79</sup> Project director Cunningham was known to have leftist views and he soon attracted other writers with similar stances, such as Louis L'Amour.<sup>80</sup> The political and economic atmosphere that pervaded the Depression era created a feeling of community among many writers of the time. The idea of identifying with the masses through their writing was not gender specific.<sup>81</sup> Writers of both sexes started to adopt views that leaned towards the left.<sup>82</sup>

The FWP was no exception; many writers with leftist views were attracted to the project because artists viewed the fine arts programs as an opportunity to connect to the masses through their art. The FWP was not the only organization in the WPA to attract more radical workers; other fine arts endeavors such as the Federal Arts Project were affected as well.<sup>83</sup> Tilghman was opposed to the group of writers who shared the leftist philosophies. She was anticommunist and had a

## THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

fierce antagonism toward Cunningham, who she accused of being the progenitor of the communist infiltration in the Federal Writers Project.<sup>84</sup>

From the beginning of her time at the FWP Tilghman had a controversial relationship with Cunningham, who had a successful writing career before working with the FWP. He taught Marxist theory at Commonwealth College in Mena, Arkansas, a school well known to have communist sympathies.<sup>85</sup> In 1935 he published the book *The Green Corn Rebellion* based on the plight of the impoverished farmers who had participated in the event.<sup>86</sup> Cunningham had also published several poems; one had appeared in the poetry society's annual anthology.<sup>87</sup> He was selected to be the director of the FWP because he had more literary merit than the other candidates; however, he was not the first choice. The influencing senators associated with the project originally wanted attorney A. L. Emory to be the director.<sup>88</sup> During his time with the FWP Cunningham started a multitude of literary projects, but none of the works were published during his time as director. In 1937 rumors circulated that Cunningham was working on a novel based on the plight of the tenant farmers in eastern Oklahoma. However, the novel was never published.<sup>89</sup>

Two years after joining the Federal Writers Project Tilghman suspected that Cunningham was the head of a group of radicals who had



*US Marshals Chris Madsen and Bill Tilghman, 1916 (5608, Frederick S. Barde Collection, OHS Research Division).*

infiltrated the project. She asserted that Cunningham's goal was to create a connection between his newly founded workers' union within the FWP and the National Worker's Alliance. In a seven-page statement she wrote in 1938, after Cunningham had left the position of director for a post in New York, Tilghman accused the director of several serious attempts to create an affiliation between the FWP and the Communist Party. She stated that Cunningham had tried to forge a link with organizations that were supposed to have communist affiliations such as the Southwestern Writers Congress and the League of American Writers. She also accused the former director of trying to organize the workers of the FWP into a radical union. Tilghman asserted that Cunningham's goal was to create a connection between his newly founded union and the National Workers Alliance. She stated that the union failed because of a lack of interest on the part of the majority of the workers.<sup>90</sup> The union had started to disintegrate after a radical constitution was introduced.<sup>91</sup>

Tilghman, out of fear that the core group of communists were taking over the FWP and trying to affiliate with the Communist Party, wrote to United States Representative Martian Dies, the head of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC).<sup>92</sup> The purpose of the HUAC was to travel around the country exposing and prosecuting known and suspected communists. Often when the committee was in town they were not very popular, but Tilghman and several other employees of the FWP wrote and invited the committee to make Oklahoma City their next stop.<sup>93</sup> In her letter to Dies she explained that she suspected that a group of staunch communists had formed, led by Cunningham, who antagonized the other employees of the Oklahoma FWP.<sup>94</sup> Tilghman admitted that Cunningham had attempted to introduce leftist material to the employees of the program during a seminar that was meant to improve the research and writing skills of the workers. She stated that under the rule of the radicals other members of the leftist group were favored.<sup>95</sup> Tilghman never called Cunningham a communist, but her letter to Dies and in her statement she strongly inferred that he had communist sympathies.<sup>96</sup>

Tilghman stated several reasons why the committee needed to investigate the communist infiltration of the FWP. She explained that if an employee was favored by the radical group then they were granted a better paying position. She specifically used the word "politicalized" when describing the atmosphere of the project. She supported the claim by stating that Cunningham's secretary Alta Churchill received higher wages than the reporters for the project. Tilghman asserted that Cunningham hired Churchill because of her leftist political views and

## THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

further accused the director of actually creating a position for her. He promoted Churchill to the position of head reporter, which according to Tilghman did not exist, after she returned from a trip to Commonwealth College.<sup>97</sup> She explained that the position was supposed to be a research director, and that Cunningham promoted Churchill out of favoritism. Tilghman also reported that Cunningham's secretary took a vacation to New York that happened to coincide with the Communist National Convention that was held there in 1927.<sup>98</sup> One of Tilghman's foremost concerns was how Cunningham and the other members of his inner circle were spending the money they had earned from working at the FWP. She said, "their other activities have been outside the project and they are within their rights in carrying them on. Nevertheless, the money paid them by the U.S. is being used to support them in their communistic work."<sup>99</sup> She suggested that the money they earned was being sent to Spain to support loyal communist groups and to fund communistic endeavors. In the statement Tilghman also referred to Cunningham's involvement with the Southwestern Writers Conference, which was rumored to promote radical ideals.<sup>100</sup>

Tilghman was adamant about keeping the FWP a clean, American undertaking. She was so ardent about her goals, promoting literary works and educating the public about Oklahoma history, that she invited the Dies committee to investigate the FWP, which was an action that few other states had chosen. Her main concerns were that the employees of the program were not being treated fairly because they chose to stay loyal to the American government. Tilghman's involvement with the Dies committee and her lengthy statement detailing every action made by Cunningham of which she disapproved is an example of her tendency to be overdramatic during certain situations. She went to extraordinary lengths to battle the communist influence that she believed to be a source of shame for the FWP.

Several other statements written by other members of the FWP are evidence that Tilghman was not alone in her accusations of communist activity. An anonymous statement addressed to Representative Dies titled "shall we pay taxes to hire communists" suggested that government employees should take loyalty oaths.<sup>101</sup> A second anonymous statement also addressed to Dies stated that the WPA regulations against political activity made any action against Cunningham and his inner circle difficult.<sup>102</sup> At the end of her seven-page statement Tilghman explained that she wrote to the committee not out of jealousy, but out of the genuine concern for the other workers of the FWP. She explained that because of the favoritism the morale of the entire project had been "shattered" and that the noncommunist workers of the

organization worried about losing their jobs. Tilghman explained that the group of communists had inferred that, if the rate of work slowed, the nonradical employees were in jeopardy of being fired.<sup>103</sup>

Once Cunningham left for New York in 1937 Tilghman believed that she was to be promoted to director. James M. Thompson was recommended instead. At least one employee at the FWP asserted that the communist group had used their influence to get Thompson appointed. Being passed over for the promotion irritated her because, in her opinion, she was more qualified for the position, yet she decided to remain with the project. She stayed with the organization until 1939 when the FWP was closed. She was not rehired in 1940 when the project was restarted. Instead, Angie Debo was appointed as director.<sup>104</sup>

After Tilghman's removal from her post in 1939, she wrote to Ron Stephens, the state administrator of the WPA. She asserted that she had been wrongfully removed and asked to be reinstated, which she was.<sup>105</sup> In a letter from James M. Thompson to Henry Alsberg, the national director of the FWP, Thompson explained that Tilghman was highly recommended by Senator Elmer Thomas and Senator Josh Lee.<sup>106</sup> He provided Tilghman the first full-time position that became available, a job working on the place-names origin project.<sup>107</sup> The assignment required traveling around Oklahoma as well as in the neighboring states. She reluctantly agreed but only with the stipulation that she be returned to working on Oklahoma topics as soon as possible. Additionally, she put a time restriction of three months in her agreement.<sup>108</sup>

During her time on the place-names project Tilghman wrote about the origin of the names Sallisaw, Ocheleta, Pawhuska, and Wichita.<sup>109</sup> Tilghman found no conclusive origin of the name Wichita, but a theory suggested that the word came from a Caddoan language. The theory stated that Wichita was comprised of the words *weets*, meaning men, and *eta*, meaning north. In her article "Origin of the name Wichita" Tilghman offered her own theory, positing that the origin of the name was derived from a Creek or Muskogee word, *we-chata*, meaning red water.<sup>110</sup> She was able to draw upon her previous knowledge of American Indian languages during this project.

Throughout her long and illustrious career, Tilghman wrote numerous books for both adults and children based on her own life experiences. She was able to pursue a successful career despite her lack of formal training and her flair for the dramatic. Her marriage to Bill Tilghman influenced many of her early works by exposing her to the wild outlaw culture of territorial Oklahoma. Throughout her life the one constant was poetry. The Oklahoma Poetry Society allowed Tilghman



## THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

to share her love of poetry with the entire state as well as to encourage new literary works. The organization still exists today.<sup>111</sup> The Federal Writers Project fit in with Tilghman's goals of promoting Oklahoma's writers and of educating the public about Oklahoma history, as the essential purpose of the project was to compile the story of Oklahoma and preserve the stories that she enjoyed. One aspect of the FWP that was essential to her goals was the creation of the national guidebook because of the outside attention the state guidebook received. The struggles that she encountered as a woman in a male dominated field linked her with other women writers of the time. Although her time with the Federal Writers Project was controversial, Tilghman worked tirelessly to promote Oklahoma history even after she was removed from the project. She continued to write until her death on June 13, 1964. Her last article, "A Bed for God," was published in the spring 1965 edition of *Oklahoma Today*.<sup>112</sup> She is important to the study of Oklahoma history because she encompassed many of the qualities of her time. She was actively involved in community organizations and became a productive member of Oklahoma society as well as helping to combat the communist scare that was sweeping the nation. She overcame the obstacles of gender to make her mark on literary history.

### Endnotes

\* Mallory Newell is a digital projects archivist in the Research Division of the Oklahoma Historical Society. She works with the oral history collections and with a grant project to digitize all public domain newspapers in the OHS collection. The photograph on the title page is Zoe Tilghman, Zoe A. Tilghman Collection, 1972.002, Department of Special Collections and University Archives, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa, Tulsa, OK.

<sup>1</sup> "Mrs. Tilghman Busy Using Experience," *Daily Oklahoman* (Oklahoma City, OK), August 9, 1936, 27.

<sup>2</sup> Newsletter of the poetry society, folder 1, box 20, Zoe A. Tilghman Collection, McFarlin Library Special Collections and University Archives, University of Tulsa, Tulsa Oklahoma (hereafter cited as Zoe A. Tilghman Collection); Elaine Boylan and Mary Hays Marable, *Handbook of Oklahoma Writers* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1939), 85.

<sup>3</sup> Boylan and Marable, *Handbook*, 85.

<sup>4</sup> Boylan and Marable, *Handbook*, 85; Folder labeled Zoe Tilghman, Federal Writers Project Collection, Research Division, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma (hereafter cited as FWP Collection).

<sup>5</sup> Boylan and Marable, *Handbook*, 85.

<sup>6</sup> "Mrs. Tilghman Busy Using Experience," *Daily Oklahoman*.

<sup>7</sup> Boylan and Marable, *Handbook*, 85.

<sup>8</sup> Poetry Society Bulletin, folder 6, box 3, William Matthew Tilghman Collection, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma (hereafter cited as William Matthew Tilghman Collection).

<sup>9</sup> Diploma from Central State College, folder 7, box 8, Zoe A. Tilghman Collection.

<sup>10</sup> Boylan and Marable, *Handbook*, 85.

- <sup>11</sup> "U.S is Asked for Damages," *Daily Oklahoman*, March 14, 1935, 12.
- <sup>12</sup> Zoe A. Tilghman, *Outlaw Days: A True History of Early-Day Oklahoma Characters* (Oklahoma City: Harlow Publishing Company, 1926), 1-138.
- <sup>13</sup> Zoe A. Tilghman, *Marshal of the Last Frontier; Life and Services of William Matthew Tilghman, for 50 Years of the Greatest Peace Officers of the West* (Glendale, CA: A. H. Clark Co., 1964), 5.
- <sup>14</sup> "Mrs. Tilghman Sues Paper for \$100,000," *Daily Oklahoman*, July 16, 1939, 52.
- <sup>15</sup> Rupert N. Richardson, "Review," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 36 (March 1950): 729-30.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>17</sup> Tilghman, *Outlaw Days*, iii.
- <sup>18</sup> Gaston L. Litton, "Review," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 17 (March 1939): 107-108.
- <sup>19</sup> Questionnaire about Zoe Tilghman, folder 8, box 8, Zoe A. Tilghman Collection.
- <sup>20</sup> Boylan and Marable, *Handbook*, 86.
- <sup>21</sup> Poetry Society Bulletin, folder 6, box 3, William Matthew Tilghman Collection.
- <sup>22</sup> Teaching Materials, folder 5, box 8, Zoe A. Tilghman Collection.
- <sup>23</sup> Zoe Tilghman, *Oklahoma Stories* (Oklahoma City, Harlow Publishing Company, 1955), iv; Zoe Tilghman, *Stories of Oklahoma* (Oklahoma City: Harlow Publishing Company, 1955), iv.
- <sup>24</sup> Zoe A. Tilghman, "The Wives of Walking Sun," *Outlook*, November 1919, 301.
- <sup>25</sup> Musical score, folder 1, box 7, Zoe A. Tilghman Collection.
- <sup>26</sup> Mitchell Gertz to Zoe Tilghman, July 20, 1959, folder 8, box 1, Zoe A. Tilghman Collection.
- <sup>27</sup> Boylan and Marable, *Handbook*, 85-86; Henry T. Chambers to Zoe Tilghman, October 9, 1930, folder 4, box 1, Zoe A. Tilghman Collection.
- <sup>28</sup> Louis L' Amour to Zoe Tilghman, December 4, 1934, folder 13, box 1, Zoe A. Tilghman Collection.
- <sup>29</sup> Kaufman, "The Way I See It," *Daily Oklahoman*, March 1, 1936, 51.
- <sup>30</sup> Patricia Loughlin, *Hidden Treasures of the American West: Muriel H. Wright, Angie Debo, and Alice Marriott* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005), 163.
- <sup>31</sup> Jacqueline Goggin, "Challenging Sexual Discrimination in the Historical Profession: Women Historians and the American Historical Association, 1890-1940," *American Historical Review* 97 (June 1992): 69-802.
- <sup>32</sup> Jan Montefiore, *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s: The Dangerous Flood of History* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 1-2.
- <sup>33</sup> Zoe A. Tilghman, "Origin of the Name Wichita," *American Anthropologist* 43 (July-September 1941): 488; Zoe A. Tilghman, "Origin of the Buffalo Legend," *American Anthropologist* 43 (July-September 1941): 487.
- <sup>34</sup> *Quanah, The Eagle of the Comanches* was published in 1938 and *Prairie Winds* was published in 1930.
- <sup>35</sup> Boylan and Marable, *Handbook*, 86.
- <sup>36</sup> Maroula Joannou, *Women Writers of the 1930s: Gender, Politics and History* (Edinburgh, Scotland?: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 2.
- <sup>37</sup> Loughlin, *Hidden Treasures*, xvi.
- <sup>38</sup> Loughlin, *Hidden Treasures*, 169.
- <sup>39</sup> William B. Shillingberg, "Wyatt Earp and the 'Buntline Special' Myth," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 42 (Summer 1976): 113-54, [http://Kancoll.org/khq/1976/76\\_2\\_shillingberg.htm](http://Kancoll.org/khq/1976/76_2_shillingberg.htm), accessed 6 April 2009.
- <sup>40</sup> Loughlin, *Hidden Treasures*, xvi, 162-72.
- <sup>41</sup> Loughlin, *Hidden Treasures*, xv-xxi.
- <sup>42</sup> Goggin, "Challenging Sexual Discrimination in the Historical Profession," 769-802.
- <sup>43</sup> Boylan and Marable, *Handbook*, 85; Poetry Society Bulletin, folders 11,13, box 3,

## THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

William Matthew Tilghman Collection.

<sup>44</sup> Goggin, "Challenging Sexual Discrimination in the Historical Profession 769-802.

<sup>45</sup> Joannou, *Women Writers*, 4.

<sup>46</sup> Poetry Society bulletin, folder 6, box 3, William Matthew Tilghman Collection.

<sup>47</sup> Mary Ann Slater, "Politics and Art: The Controversial Birth of the Oklahoma Writers Project," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 68 (Spring 1990): 72-87.

<sup>48</sup> Kenneth C. Kaufman, "The Way I See It," *Daily Oklahoman*.

<sup>49</sup> Poetry Society bulletin, folder 6, box 3, William Matthew Tilghman Collection.

<sup>50</sup> "Contest is Opened by Poetry Society," *Daily Oklahoman*, October 3, 1935, 18.

<sup>51</sup> "Mrs. Tilghman Re-Elected President; Place on Board Given to Mrs. Stealy," *Daily Oklahoman*, February 24, 1935, 48.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Mrs. Tilghman Re-Elected President," *Daily Oklahoman*.

<sup>54</sup> Boylan and Marable, *Handbook*, 86.

<sup>55</sup> Narrative report of the Federal Writers Project, May 2, 1939, folder 12, box 5, FWP Collection.

<sup>56</sup> Larry O'Dell, "William Meredith Cunningham: An Oklahoma Proletarian Novelist," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 86 (Fall 2008): 323.

<sup>57</sup> "Guide to List 500 Pages of State Facts," *Daily Oklahoman*, May 24, 1936, 17.

<sup>58</sup> Slater, "Politics and Art," 77.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 72-77.

<sup>60</sup> "Guide to List 500 Pages of State Facts," *Daily Oklahoman*.

<sup>61</sup> Slater, "Politics and Art," 77.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 78; "Guide to List 500 Pages of State Facts," *Daily Oklahoman*.

<sup>63</sup> "Guide to List 500 Pages of State Facts," *Daily Oklahoman*.

<sup>64</sup> Slater, "Politics and Art," 78; "Guide to List 500 Pages of State Facts," *Daily Oklahoman*.

<sup>65</sup> "Guide to List 500 Pages of State Facts," *Daily Oklahoman*.

<sup>66</sup> "Mrs. Tilghman Busy Using Experience," *Daily Oklahoman*.

<sup>67</sup> O'Dell, "William Meredith Cunningham," 323.

<sup>68</sup> Ron Stephens to Henry Alsberg, May 11, 1939, folder 20, box 1, William Matthew Tilghman Collection.

<sup>69</sup> Zoe Tilghman to M. W. S. Sterling, July 21, 1938, folder 24, box 1, Zoe A. Tilghman Collection.

<sup>70</sup> Questionnaire about Zoe Tilghman, folder 7, box 8, Zoe A. Tilghman Collection.

<sup>71</sup> Unpublished manuscript, box 1, FWP Collection.

<sup>72</sup> "Mrs. Tilghman Busy Using Experience," *Daily Oklahoman*, August 9, 1936, 27.

<sup>73</sup> Tilghman, *Outlaw Days*.

<sup>74</sup> The assignment slips were not dated.

<sup>75</sup> Assignment slip, folder 13, box 1, FWP Collection.

<sup>76</sup> Assignment slip, folder 13, box 1, FWP Collection; Tilghman, *Marshal of the Last Frontier*.

<sup>77</sup> Assignment slips, folders 13, 14, box 1, FWP Collection.

<sup>78</sup> Assignment slips, folders 13, 14, box, 1, FWP Collection.

<sup>79</sup> Assignment slip, folder 13, box 1, FWP Collection.

<sup>80</sup> *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, s.v. "Communist Party," by Larry O'Dell, accessed February 24, 2009, <http://digital.library.okstate.edu/encyclopedia/entries/c/co40.html>.

<sup>81</sup> O'Dell, "William Meredith Cunningham," 316.

<sup>82</sup> Slater, "Politics and Art," 73.

<sup>83</sup> Slater, "The Controversial Birth of the Oklahoma Writers Project," 73.

<sup>84</sup> O'Dell "William Meredith Cunningham," 324.

## ZOE TILGHMAN

<sup>85</sup> Slater, "The Controversial Birth of the Oklahoma Writers Project," 73.

<sup>86</sup> O'Dell, "William Meredith Cunningham," 316.

<sup>87</sup> *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, s.v. "Communist Party."

<sup>88</sup> Kenneth Kaufman, "The Way I See It," *Daily Oklahoman*, March 1, 1936, 51.

<sup>89</sup> O'Dell, "William Meredith Cunningham," 316.

<sup>90</sup> *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, s.v. "Communist Party."

<sup>91</sup> Zoe Tilghman to Martin Dies, June 10, 1938, folder 5, box 1, William Matthew Tilghman Collection.

<sup>92</sup> Slater, "The Controversial Birth of the Oklahoma Writers Project," 83.

<sup>93</sup> Tilghman to Martin Dies, June 10, 1938.

<sup>94</sup> Several statements are included in the Tilghman Collection at the Western History Collections, two are known to be Zoe Tilghman's statements, the others are unsigned and may be from other employees of the FWP.

<sup>95</sup> Tilghman to Martin Dies, June 10, 1938.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Slater, "The Controversial Birth of the Oklahoma Writers Project," 83.

<sup>98</sup> Tilghman to Martin Dies, June 10, 1938.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Anonymous statement, folder 5, box 1, William Matthew Tilghman Collection.

<sup>103</sup> Anonymous statement, folder 5, box 1, William Matthew Tilghman Collection.

<sup>104</sup> Tilghman to Martin Dies, June 10, 1938.

<sup>105</sup> O'Dell, "William Meredith Cunningham," 316; Anonymous statement, folder 5, box 1, William Matthew Tilghman Collection.

<sup>106</sup> Ron Stephens to Henry Alsberg, May 11, 1939, folder 20, box 1, William Matthew Tilghman Collection.

<sup>107</sup> James M. Thompson to Henry Alsberg, May 11, 1939, folder 1, box 1, William Matthew Tilghman Collection.

<sup>108</sup> Stephens to Henry Alsberg, May 11, 1939.

<sup>109</sup> Thompson to Henry Alsberg, May 11, 1939.

<sup>110</sup> Assignment slips, folder 14, box 1, FWP Collection.

<sup>111</sup> Zoe Tilghman, "Origin of the Name Wichita," *American Anthropologist* 43 (July-September 1941): 488.

<sup>112</sup> Chris Jones, "Love of Words Finds Expression in Poetry Society," *Oklahoman*, 3 June 2007, accessed 5 April 2009, <http://www.newsok.com/article/3060930>.