

ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF OKLAHOMA VERSE
1830-1930

By Leslie A. McMill

Oklahoma has a unique literary background for she was the recipient of two poetic streams in 1907 when Oklahoma Territory and Indian Territory were merged into one state.

WESTERN OKLAHOMA

Before the Oklahoma Territory side, as such, came into existence, we had some springs of poetic inspiration, most notably in the writings of Scott Cummins, known as "The Pilgrim Bard." He wrote by his campfire while engaged in gathering buffalo bones for the market—the year 1879. His poem entitled "Song of the Bone Pilgrim," was "written with a leaden bullet on the shoulder blade of a buffalo, while encamped on a bone-gathering expedition in the valley of the Eagle Chief Creek, in the present Woods County, Oklahoma, September 19, 1879", of which the following are two stanzas:¹

"I roam all day long o'er the prairie
And down in the canyon so deep,
And when darkness comes on
I must camp all alone
With the coyote to sing me to sleep.

"O think of the poor bone pilgrim,
Ye who are safely at home;
No one to pity me, no one to cheer me,
As o'er the lone prairie I roam.

"I pass by the home of the wealthy,
And I pass by the hut of the poor,
But none care for me,
When my cargo they see,
And no one will open the door.

"Oh think of the poor bone pilgrim,
Ye who are safely at home;
No one to pity me, no one to cheer me,
As o'er the lone prairie I roam."

Much later, but in the early territorial days of Oklahoma, there were others who wrote poetry. Most notably we cite Freeman²

¹ *The Daily Oklahoman*, Sunday, June 3, 1928.

Miller, who had his column "Oklahoma Sunshine" in the *Stillwater Advance* during the years of 1904-1905. His books of poetry ushered in what some one has called "Oklahoma's first contribution to formal literature."

His verse is smooth and reveals the flavor of the "halls of learning." Here are a few verses of his poem:

"The Stampede"

"We took our turns at the guard that night, just Sourdough
Charlie and I,
And as we mounted our ponies there were clouds in the western
sky,
And we knew that before the morning the storm by the north
wind stirred
Would harass the plains with its furies fierce, and madden the
helpless herd;
But we did not shrink the danger, we had ridden the plains for
years,
And the crash of the storm and the cattle's cry were music to
our ears."

EASTERN OKLAHOMA

As early as the 1830's, the culture of the Five Civilized Tribes (Cherokees, Chickasaws, Choctaws, Creeks and Seminoles) was transplanted to the Indian Territory when these people were brought to this region from the Southeastern States. In a feature article entitled "Early Oklahoma Poets Sang of Primitive Life in State," by the late Joseph H. Thoburn, we read:

"The earliest known metrical production pertaining to Oklahoma was a striking, graphic description of a Comanche buffalo hunt, the author of which had evidently been an eye-witness to scenes which he so deftly depicts in verse, and who concealed his identity under the nom de plume of "Phisono."

This poem was reprinted in the *University of Oklahoma Magazine* of March 1916.³ It has as title: "Indians Hunting the Buffalo." It carries at the end of the poem this data: "—Rosin Hill, Rog River, 1840." The *University Magazine* has a note to the effect that the poem was first published in the *Cherokee Advocate*, Nov. 13, 1845.⁴ Unfortunately, this number of the *Advocate* is not in the files at the Oklahoma Historical Building. As to the poem: First, the writer pictures the myriads of buffalo, peacefully feeding; then the uneasy feeling of danger that sweeps the herds, followed by clouds of dust on the distant horizon as hunters come sweeping on with their war-cries. He chooses the Comanches

² *The Daily Oklahoman*, Sunday, April 24, 1927.

³ *University of Oklahoma Magazine* (Indian Number), March 1916, pp. 18-20.

⁴ Marjell H. Wright, *A Guide to the Indian Tribes of Oklahoma*, University of Oklahoma Press (Norman, 1931), p. 12.

as hunters, since they were the most colorful of the Plains Indians and were notable horsemen here as early as 1815. Here are a few of the verses which will give us the style and color of the poem:

"A hundred hunters on their fire-eyed steeds
With barbed arrows and with bended bow,
Shrieking as each new victim falls and bleeds,
Are dealing death among the buffalo.
See the wild herds swift crossing as they fly,
The verge of land and sky.

"On! On! Now hither, thither, wildly speeding;
Their starting eyes in frenzy glaring round,
Bends the vast throng, some staggering and bleeding,
Goring the air and tearing the ground—
Crossed, turned, out-off and maddened by the foe—
Ill-fated buffalo.

"See the Comanches, with a fiend-like ease,
Their long, dark scalp-locks streaming in the breeze,
Red as the sunbeam with vermilion stain—
Now distant far, then instant flashing nigher,
Like flashing flames of fire.
And see the frenzied buffalo at bay
After his savage hunter madly rushing."

But there is an earlier poem than this. From the personal files of Muriel H. Wright, there is a poem, written several years earlier than that by "Phazma." It appeared in the issue of the *Arkansas Gazette* of August 29, 1832, and "is possibly one of the first, if not the first, metrical effusion ever composed in what is now Oklahoma":⁵

"Lines"

"On the death of Levi Pickens, a Choctaw Indian, who recently died in the Choctaw Nation, West of Arkansas."

"By an Indian Trader."

"His was the noble, honest heart,
Freed from all law and strong to act,
He, fearless, claimed and paid his due,
With feeling strong and friendship true.

"The Red Man, fearless, lives and dies—
He dreads no hell beyond the skies;
He shrinks from no appending rod—
He dreams of no revengeful God.

⁵Muriel H. Wright, personal notes and collections.

"He sees the spirits of the air,
His fathers' whoop has called him there,
Where forests wear eternal green,
Where war and death have never been.

"Some sixty sleeps have passed away
Since poles were planted where he lay,
His rifle, powder, pipe and food,
The Indian wants to cross the flood.

"When mourning friends again appear,
To pay the tribute of a tear,
They'll pluck the sign that marks the spot
Which, hallowed thus, is ne'er forgot."

—Roper"

But there were other interesting scenes of life in that early day. Youth and love were present as always. Evidence is this poem which appeared in *The Cherokee Advocate* of August 14, 1848, entitled "The Rose of Cherokee." It was signed: "Former Student of the Male Seminary." Two stanzas are here given:

"THE ROSE OF CHEROKEE"

"Though beauty deck the spring in flowers
Like Rainbows sleeping in the green,
Or soft, though moonlight's dewy showers
May star-like glitter o'er the scene:
Though passions young and warm may spring
With rapture through the thrilling heart—
Though earth and sea their treasures bring
Combined with all that's prized in Art—
Still wanton Nature's dark-eyed child
Is far more dear to me—
The sweetest flower that gems the wild
Is the Rose of Cherokee.

* * *

"She is a gay and artless sprite
Her eye is glad and happiness
Plays round her lips a rosy light,
Bright with the conscious power to bless,
Her heart's as pure, as wild, as free
As yonder streamlet leaping high—
Her soul's a gem of purity
And warm as loveliest star of night—
Yes, wanton Nature's dark-eyed child
The jewel is for me—
The sweetest flower that gems the wild,
The Rose of Cherokee.
—Former Student of the Male Seminary."

Naturally, one is curious to know the author of this poem. The Cherokee Male Seminary was formally opened in its new building in 1850. Yet the "Cherokee Male and Female Seminaries were both founded by act of the Cherokee National Council, Nov. 25, 1846" During the interim between the decree of founding and formal opening, Cherokee youths were in school. In *The Cherokee Advocate* of August 14, 1848, there is an address which had been delivered at the Anniversary of the Seminary. The address was made by Hon. John D. Mayes. The Seminary had probably been functioning two years at that time. We also read that when the Ridge family came from the East they brought their school teacher with them and neighborhood children attended her school along with the Ridge children.⁷ These historical notes are presented because the writer has a very strong feeling that the author of the "Rose of Cherokee" was none other than John Rollin Ridge. After the assassination (1839) of his father, the noted John Ridge, his mother took John Rollin to Arkansas where he continued his studies with Miss Sawyer for two years, then he was sent to Great Barrington, Massachusetts, later coming to continue his education with the Reverend Cephas Washbourne, missionary to the Cherokees.⁸ "In 1847 Ridge married Elizabeth Wilson in the Cherokee Nation,"⁹ and it is known that the young exiled Cherokee poet kept in touch with his people in the Cherokee Nation and at one time represented the Cherokee Nation on business at Washington.¹⁰ Two objections arise to my theory. First: The boy left Tablequah soon after his father's death in 1839. But it could be that the pupils of Miss Sawyer's school considered themselves as members of a Cherokee Seminary as the word meant "High School." The second objection lies in the fact that Editor Wm. P. Ross may not have been sympathetic to a poem by young Rollin Ridge, although the Ross family disclaimed any part in the death of the boy's father. Here is one stanza of a poem by John Rollin Ridge.¹¹

"A Cherokee Love Song"

"Oh come with me by moonlight, love
 And let us seek the river's shore:
 My light canoe awaits thee, love
 The sweetest burden e'er it bore!
 The soft, low winds are whispering there
 Of human beauty, human love,
 And with approving faces, too,
 The stars are shining from above."

⁶ George Everett Foster, *Sagoyah, the American Cadmus and Modern Moses*.

⁷ Carolyn Thomas Foreman, "Edward W. Bushyhead and John Rollin Ridge: Cherokee Editors in California," *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, March-December 1936, Vol. 14, p. 295 ff.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

¹¹ The whole poem appears in the *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. 4, 1926, p. 321.

In those early days of the Indians in the new country there was a bent toward the love song. This perhaps because in the midst of strenuous doings the spirit seeks release in the things of the spirit.

Besides the love songs cited above there are several, either originals or translations from the Cherokee language, which appeared from time to time in *The Cherokee Advocate*. One is a translation called "Cherokee Song." It appeared in *The Advocate*, March 1, 1876, W. P. Boudinot, Editor. It is unsigned but preceded with this introduction: "The following is as literal a translation of a Cherokee love song into English as can be made. We have shown it to our critic—the shoe-maker—who says that for a translation it will do well enough, not much being expected of translations:"

"CHEROKEE SONG"

"Sit we down beside this brook,
 You and I, Love and I;
 We will of the prospect look
 Far and nigh, far and nigh.
 Flowers are blooming, spring is here
 For my love, for my love;
 See from out you blue sky clear
 'Two stars above, two stars above.

"Now they shine a beauteous host,
 To our view, to our view.
 But the radiance is not lost
 Of those two, of those two.
 So from loving hearts shall spring
 Joys that last, joys that last.
 As each flying year takes wing
 'To join the past, to join the past."

Note the repetition, which is a characteristic of Indian poetry, although we find it to a degree in songs of all languages. Another poem appeared in *The Advocate* of Wednesday, August 22, 1877. It is preceded by a letter to the editor saying that the sender has heard the young girls singing it from time to time:

"MISTAKES"

"A Cherokee Love Song"

(Translated by White Flower Growing)

"Do you know what love is?
 'Tis a sigh and a kiss—
 Promised marriage and bliss.
 I can tell you what love is.

"Do you know what love is?
'Tis true love on one side,
And on the other false pride.

• • • • •

"Do you know what love is?
Love returned—in life's breath,
But mistaken—'tis death
Do you know now what love is?
—"Said to be composed by Tooma."

Now we turn from the esthetic to the serious struggle in the minds of the Indians in regard to their ultimate fate as an independent Nation. The following poems written by Too-quah-stee, and appearing in the *Vinita Chieftain* are true Phillipics, filled with barbed irony, satire and forceful argument. The first is entitled "The Dead Nation:"

"Alas, poor luckless nation, thou art dead
At last! and death ne'er came 'neath brighter bows
Of flattering hope; upon thine ancient head
Hath late-time treason dealt its treacherous blows.

• • • • •

"Then first it was, that on thy peaceful plains
The roar of onset and the saber's gleam
Began—but hold! humanity refrains
And genius cannot paint a dying scream.

• • • • •

"Dear Cherokee Nation, with the right to live,
Art dead and gone; thy life was meanly priced:
Thy room to civilization hadst to give,
And so did Socrates and Jesus Christ!"

The other poem from this writer is entitled "The White Man's Burden," and is based on a verse from Ezekiel "Son of Man, say to the Prince of Tyre." Each stanza begins with "Son of Man! Son of Man!" The whole poem is polemic of forceful arraignment of the white man's arrogance in assuming first place in the purposes of the Eternal. After reciting in a column and a half of verses, instances of the white man's errors, the writer closes with a reference to the effect that often a vessel used by the Almighty ceases to be longer useful, and is then cast away. These are the final lines:¹²

"The goblet from the lips of which I pour
My wrath, as often I have done before—
The glass itself, of no more value found,
Is hurled and smashed to pieces on the ground."

¹² *The Daily Chieftain*, Vinita, I. T. April 23, 1899; and *ibid.*, March 27, 1899.

Now, for a verse in happier mood. We all know the poetry of Alexander Posey, the matchless Creek poet of Eufaula. No one has written more beautiful lyrics than he, as a perusal of his book will show.¹² But Posey was also an editor. At Eufaula and Muskogee, he was in the newspaper business. The following shows him in lighter vein for the tongue in cheek, perhaps, his keen wit is given play to the question of a rhyme for "Arkansaw":

"INDIAN RHYMES"

"No rhyme for Arkansas!
 What's wrong with mother-in-law,
 Or Wichita
 Or Spavinaw
 Or Ma
 Or Pa!
 Bah!
 Hath not a crow a caw,
 And greedy sharks a maw?
 Is not a female Chickasaw
 A Squaw?
 Don't jacks hee-haw
 And Wildcats claw?
 Ever hear of Esaw?
 Never saw
 A Choctaw
 Smoke or claw?
 Ever see a Quapaw
 Eating a ripe paw-paw?
 No rhyme for Arkansas!
 Pshaw!"

But Posey caught the spirit of his times and had the ability to portray character in few words, until one could almost see the individuals of his pen pictures. In his poem: "The Passing of Hot Oon," in which he portrays one of the sages of the Creek Nation, who has brought the news of the death of one of their friends to the little group of philosophers, Posey relates their reaction to the bearer of news:

"All had to die at las'
 I live long time, but now my days are few;
 'Fore long, poke weeds and grass
 Be growin' all aroun' my grave house, too,"
 Wolf Warrior listen close
 An' Kono Harjo pay alone 'tention, too.
 Tookpafka Cimma, he simos'
 let his pipe go out a time or two."

¹² Mrs. Minnie Posey, "Alexander Posey: The Creek Indian Poet," (Crane & Co., Printers, Topeka, Kans., 1910.)

For a description of wrapt attention this cannot be surpassed. The last two verses contain a volume of meaning. *The Indian Journal* of January 24, 1908, has this to say of the quartette of Indian philosophers: "Hot Gun, Wolf Warrior, Kono Harjo and Fus Fixico were a quartette of Creek philosophers who used to spend much time together, and criticisms became as proverbs among their fellow Indians."

After the tragic drowning of Alex Posey in the North Canadian River, one of his admirers wrote this poem, "Alex Posey's Creed." T. S. Holden, *Fort Gibson Post* was the author, and the poem was published in the *Eufaula Republican* of July 24, 1890.

"ALEX POSEY'S CREED"

- "What's good and pure in any creed
I take and make it mine.
Whatever serves a human need,
I hold to be divine.
I ask no proof that bread is bread
And none that meat is meat.
Whate'er agrees with heart and head
That food I mean to eat.
- "Man sanctifies the holiest robe;
Truth sanctifies the book.
The purest temples on this globe
Are mountains, grove, and brook.
That spot on earth, whate'er it be,
To me is holy ground—
Where man is striving to be free—
Freedom or death is found.
The crown upon an empty head
I hold as cap of fool.
The sceptre from which wisdom's fled
Has lost the right to rule.
* * * * *
- "I find true men whe'er I look,
Of every creed and nation—
'Mid sons of toil in darkest nook
As in the loftiest station.
* * * * *
- "The truth that elevates the mind
And purifies the heart—
That teaches love of all mankind
And blunts affliction's dart.
* * * * *
- "Only this life is not our final doom—
Higher spheres for the good and brave,
Good acts and deeds forever bloom
In realms beyond the grave."

Again, let us turn to an Indian poet, Hentoh, the Wyandot—U. N. O. Walker, who came to Oklahoma from Kansas with an emigration of his tribe sometime in the early '70's. He wrote a great deal in dialect. His book of poetry was entitled "Kon-doo-shah-we-ah, (Nubbins)."¹⁴ He wrote many good poems among which are "The Calumet," "Injun' Summa' ", "The Warrior's Plume," "A Mojave Lullaby," and an "Indian Love Song." His poem "Injun Summa' ", although in dialect, is a jewel for lovely conception and picturesque description of nature in Indian Summer time. Here is part of the poem:

- "You seen it, that smoky, hazy, my frien'
 It's hangin' all 'roun' on edges of sky?
 It's spirits o' home-sick warriors come;
 Jus' near as could get to his ol' home.
- "I think he's like it, Happy Huntin' Groun',
 It's mus'ts be a nice, eva'thin' ove' tha';
 But, mebbe, fo' little bit, jus' kin' a look roum'
 When year it's get ol', an' sky it's fair.
- "He's kin' a like to a wanda' back ol' huntin' groun'
 But don't want to stay, No, cause it's all gone
 Beaver, Bear, Buffalo, all; it's can't be foun';
 Any how, makes a good dream fo' him, 'bout eva' one.
- "So he's come back an' make it his lodge fire,
 All 'roun' ova' tha' on edges of sky;
 An' it's nice wu'm sun, an' yon don't get tire
 'Cause it's Ol' Injun Summa' time, at's why."

Although in dialect here is a beautiful nature poem woven into nostalgic longing for the old home country. Indian warrior-spirits are camped around the horizon in the evening time taking a look at their former home. Read it again for an appreciation of the poetic beauty. Hentoh's poetry is well worth reading and surely ranks with Oklahoma's finest.

No survey of earlier Oklahoma poetry would be complete without quoting some of George Riley Hall's smooth-flowing, lyrical verses. He was a close friend of Alex Posey's and while Posey was editing the *Enfants Indian Journal*, he published in one edition two of Hall's beautiful poems. One was entitled "Not for Me", in which the poet writes of beautiful flowers and vibrant music, of "luring eyes and silken hair," but at the end of each stanza comes the sad refrain: "These things are not for me." But as if to recoup his spirit with something rarer, this poem is followed by one entitled "For me." Let us quote:¹⁵

¹⁴ U. N. O. Walker, *Hentoh, Kon-doo-shah-we-ah*, (Oklahoma City, 1924.)

¹⁵ *Enfants Indian Journal*, Aug. 15, 1902.

"For Me"

"I strayed by the shore where the echoes are sleeping
 Among the blue hills that encircle and hide
 The broad-breasted river, where, laughing and leaving,
 The streamlet makes haste to unite with the tide.
 Of sylvan Oklahoma, whose stretches of sand
 Make girdles of beauty about this fair land.

"The blue of the sky and the green branches waving,
 The sweet invitation of nature to rest
 Seemed to satisfy all of the soul's eager craving
 To live in a land by eternal spring blest;
 Each mountain, the river, each flower, each tree,
 Had a love song to sing, and all, ALL was for me.

• • • • •

"The far-away clouds drifted slowly, while seeming
 To blend with the billows of green on the hills!
 Within the cool shades I sat quietly dreaming,
 And sipping the nectar the morning distills;
 Like mem'ries of love o'er that emerald sea,
 The wind-harps of heaven vibrated for me."

George Riley Hall is remembered as the author of "Land of My Dreaming," which Posey said was a masterpiece. His poem, "Accomplishment" recites the progress made in Oklahoma in twenty-five years, and his "Grave of the Bandit Queen," fairly breathes early Oklahoma life and doings. He came to Oklahoma a year before the 89'ers, taught in Indian schools, and founded the *Hairgalla Free Lance*. He retired in 1908 and died April 13, 1944.

This article in *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* has only touched the surface of early poetry—lyrics, Phillippics, humorous verse, religious, historical and adventurous poems in this western country.¹⁶ In fact, early writers¹⁷ here ran the full gamut of poetic expression and set the scene for later Oklahoma poets to measure up to, if indeed they are able to do so.

¹⁶See Notes and Documents this number of *The Chronicles* for an old poem by John Walter Sams entitled "The Ghost of Wapanucka."—Ed.

¹⁷Mr. Leslie A. Merrill, of Oklahoma City, has served as President of the Oklahoma State Poetry Society for several years. He is the author of published works, including the book of poetry, *Tales of the Night Wind*, with poems based on Indian life and history in Oklahoma.—Ed.