

## WOODY GUTHRIE: THE OKLAHOMA YEARS, 1912-1929

By Harry Menig\*

During World War II, the people of Okemah, Oklahoma, received a letter written on the Atlantic Ocean. The message came from an experienced merchant seaman, a man who knew the perils of German U-boat torpedoes. He was homesick; his name was Woody Guthrie. Alone at sea, a one-time Dust Bowl refugee, a folksinger, cartoonist and journalist, he reminisced: "There is a look and a smell about your smoking timbers that even is good away out here." Guthrie also had a message for his hometown folks, a message he implied would be good peacetime conduct. "Men of all kinds and all colors," he observed, "fight here side by side." If the war, any war, can teach a lesson, it would be the lesson Guthrie observed at sea: that petty differences must be laid aside in time of extreme national emergency.

More than ten years had passed since Guthrie left his birthplace, yet in his letter he recalled the good as well as the bad times. His mind must have been filled with mixed memories: his mother's songs; his father's wealth and status; the town alive with cotton wagons, crowds, music and animals; the black harmonica players; the Indian stickball games and corn dances; the seven room house burning; the tornado; his sister's death; his mother's illness; his father's failure; the lynching and shooting of blacks; the drunkenness and free-wheeling boom-town days; and the town's death.

Guthrie's letter was more than a story with a moral; it was a simple observation with a plea for a very complicated hope for better conditions for all people. He never forgot his origins, never gave up the desire that all people might begin to live in harmony. His experiences in Okemah from 1912 to 1929 do not only recreate a social history but they also indicate that what he learned as a young boy influenced him for the rest of his life. His work and the memories people have of him is in itself an exciting account of a unique period in Oklahoma history and culture.

Guthrie's talents had their beginnings in both his home and the small pioneer town of Okemah. As a balladeer, cartoonist and journalist, he

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<sup>1</sup> Woody Guthrie, "Letter to the People of Okemah" in the "Today" column of *Okemah Ledger* (Okemah), unidentified newspaper clipping, Mrs. Dorothy Dill's "Scrapbook," Okemah, Oklahoma.

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found an amazing amount of resource material for his autobiography and for his history of American life. From his mother, Nora Belle Tanner Guthrie, the daughter of one of Oklahoma's first log-cabin school teachers, he learned music and a deep respect for family love and unity. Charles Edward Guthrie, Woody's father, gave to him a sense of humor, a politician's mind and a journalist's eye. Okemah was, in a sense, Woody Guthrie's foster parent. From its people he learned music, charity, hatred, violence, but most of all, a sense of "getting along"—a need for self-survival through cooperation. In later life, he combined his musician's ear with his reporter's eye to point out, and sometimes to protest, the unfair conditions which forced many people to live unsatisfactory, unnatural lives. He himself was once left homeless and parentless because of the fates of health and weather. He never forgot the love his parents once gave to him, and he later transferred this love to all mankind; common men with a common goal became his children and he became their father spokesman.

Guthrie's own parents provided their children, Roy, Clara and Woody with a warm and loving home. The land investments of Guthrie's father allowed the family to live without fear of want; luxuries were at their demand; they needed only to sign the Guthrie name. Money, in early Oklahoma, however, was not easily earned, and Guthrie's mother had to pay a high price for the niceties of small-town pioneer life. The price was worry, for his father was in the uncertain land-trading business.<sup>2</sup>

At first Woody Guthrie's mother was able to compensate for her husband's uncertain occupation, for they had a new home and a growing family in a growing town. The house, built about 1912, the year of Woody's birth, according to him, had seven rooms and cost between seven and eight thousand dollars. "I remember a bright yellow outside—a blurred haze of a dark inside," he recalled. The ample money his father was able to share with his family obviously made his mother happy. "Mama could sign a check for any amount, buy every little thing that her eye liked the looks of," Guthrie wrote.<sup>3</sup> He understood that his father's money set him apart from the typical Oklahoman. "I wasn't in the class of people John Steinbeck calls the Okies," he said. "My dad was worth forty-thousand dollars."<sup>4</sup> While his father could give his family anything they "liked the looks of," his mother was not the ambitious type. In fact, she was quite the opposite, wanting only a stable and comfortable life, something she had

<sup>2</sup> Woody Guthrie, "Interview of Alan Lomax," on *Woody Guthrie: Library of Congress Recordings* (Washington, D. C., March 22, 1940), Side Number 1; Woody Guthrie, *Bound for Glory* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1943), p. 39.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 38, 39.

<sup>4</sup> Guthrie, *Woody Guthrie: Library of Congress Recordings*, Side Number 1.

known as a young girl. Guthrie claimed his grandmother, Mrs. Lee Tanner, once described his mother to him and declared: "She went to my little school house where I taught over on the Deep Fork River and she read her books and got her lessons, and she helped me mark and grade the papers. She liked pretty music and she sang songs and played her own chords on the piano."<sup>5</sup> Guthrie's love for his mother was described by Mrs. V. K. Chowning of Okemah as "deep devotion."<sup>6</sup> Obviously she taught him more than a love for nice things; the ballads he learned from her were mixed with love for his family. Her influence, he said, took hold at a very early age. On the porch of their seven-room home, he claimed he composed his first song:

Listen to the music,  
Music, music;  
Listen to the music,  
Music band.

Fortunately, Guthrie's mother had more to offer him and his older brother Roy and older sister Clara than music. Her strength of character and fortitude came to the children in the same words of Ma Joad in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. Guthrie's mother told him: "We love your papa, and if anything tries to hurt him and make him bad and mean, we'll fight it, won't we? . . . We're not the scared people Woody." Unfortunately, what she thought her family could unite against and fight was impossible odds. Guthrie, in his youth, showed his devotion by offering a simple solution for family peace. He wrote: "If ever single livin' one of 'em would all git together an' git rid of them mean, bad politics, they'd all feel lots better, an' wouldn't fight each other so much, and that'd make my mama feel better."<sup>7</sup>

The new Guthrie home with all the luxuries could not hide the fact that Guthrie's father was part of a rough era, when land ownership changed rapidly. The hostility of Guthrie's mother toward this rough way of life is remembered by many Okemah people. "She was often spiteful," recalled Mrs. Chowning. "One day, when she was mad at Charlie, she took all the furniture out of their house and piled it up on the front yard." As Guthrie's father grew in popularity, the townspeople grew in curiosity of the family. The personality of Guthrie's mother became public property,

<sup>5</sup> Guthrie, *Bound for Glory*, p. 72.

<sup>6</sup> Interview, Mrs. V. K. Chowning, Okemah, Oklahoma, June 27, 1973.

<sup>7</sup> Guthrie, *Bound for Glory*, pp. 38-39, 77.

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and as her worrying turned to depression, and the depression to a total nervous breakdown, town gossip grew stronger.<sup>8</sup>

To have a father who was popular was to young Guthrie a rare gift. In spite of the devotion he held for his mother, he could not help cherishing his father's tales of the day's land dealings. At night, Guthrie claimed, after his father "would ride in on the horse," he would sit on his father's knee and listen to "who he was fighting and why, and all about it." If Guthrie was devoted to his mother, it was obvious that he idolized his father. "Papa was a man of brimstone and hot fire in his mind and in his fists," he recalled, "and was known all over that section of the state as the champion of all the fist fighters."<sup>9</sup> His admiration of his father was obviously more folklore than fact, and evidently a boy's wish for a hero-father. Regardless of the myth, Guthrie's mother could not help but be upset over her husband's own "tall tales," for she knew he had other abilities which did not necessitate fist fighting. Guthrie never had to choose between his parents' ideals, for fate decided the issue. Nevertheless, he, like his mother, presented an equally half-true image of his father.

Guthrie's father was more than a fist fighter; he was a prominent Oklahoma Democrat, and thus commanded much respect and public scrutiny. A closer view of Guthrie's father reveals Woody's heritage as well as his background, first gained from affluence and status and later from deprivation and anonymity.

Guthrie's father loved his family, worked for them, gave them what they needed and fought hard for them. "He was a cowboy," recalled Mrs. Chowning, "who came in here from Texas."<sup>10</sup> The cowboy and fist fighting image, however, is only a partial truth. Guthrie's father was more than a folk hero, for he was what is commonly referred to as a self-made man. In Okemah, in the early days of Oklahoma statehood, times were comparatively primitive, and the Old West still prevailed. Nevertheless, the *Okemah Ledger*, the town's weekly newspaper, was stocked with investment and insurance advertisements. The people of Okemah were urged to invest and

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<sup>8</sup> Interview. Mrs. Chowning. The belief at the time was that Guthrie's mother could not stand the pressure of her husband's political career. The ups and downs involved in land trading and running for public office were assumed to be the cause of her deep depression, resulting in her total mental breakdown. What was assumed to have been madness is now known to have been Huntington's Chorea, a hereditary nerve degenerating disease. At the time, however, her lapses into a coma-like state were thought to be signs of mental illness, when in fact they were symptoms of Huntington's Chorea. The facts now known concerning her health, however, appear not to diminish the reactions people still have concerning the Guthrie family.

<sup>9</sup> Guthrie, *Woody Guthrie: Library of Congress Recordings*, Side Number 1.

<sup>10</sup> Interview. Mrs. Chowning.



Okemah, Oklahoma, as Woody Guthrie knew it in the early 1900s

protect their possessions; "Did You Ever Stop and Think" ran one advertisement for fire insurance. The advertisement appeared beside an article written by Guthrie's father titled "A Baby Defined," in which he wrote that he was "a happy as a lobster" over the birth of Woody.<sup>11</sup>

The first years of the life of Guthrie's father in Okemah were promising. He was elected to the office of Court Clerk, serving as the first clerk in Okfuskee County shortly after statehood.<sup>12</sup> From 1907 to 1912 he was laying the foundation for a well-established homelife for his family. By 1912, the year of Woody's birth, he was becoming better known and at the same time more community minded. Early in the year, he was concerned with the unclaimed land ownership question. Being a national election year, emotions normally ran high when various speakers came to Okemah to propose a variety of solutions to the major questions in Oklahoma: who would get the unclaimed land and how would it be sold? One Socialist party speaker, named Thurman, particularly aggravated Guthrie's father,

<sup>11</sup> *Okemah Ledger*, July 18, 1912, p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> Guthrie, *Woody Guthrie: Library of Congress Recordings*, Side Number 1.

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for he seemed to provoke something very close to his life—individual rights, private ownership and enterprise. Woody's father, who owned much of the land and many buildings in Okemah, was understandably concerned when Thurman, suggested that the Federal government intervene to take possession in solving the ownership question, and the speech provoked a two column full-page response from Guthrie's father.

The article, titled "Evasive, Shifting and Inconsistent: A Careful Diagnosis of the Socialist and Anti-Christian Speech Made in this City on Christmas Day by Agitator Thurman," revealed an abiding belief in individual rather than state rights to ownership. Guthrie's father attacked the logic of Thurman's argument by pointing out his inconsistent suggestions: that the Federal government should take possession, and the failure of state government to offer viable solutions. To Guthrie's father, Thurman's argument was "Wishy-washy, slippery, and dangerous." He distrusted government intervention on a large-scale basis. "I have always been taught," he wrote, "that socialism meant majority rule. This would look like it meant Bossism." He concluded his counter argument to Thurman's plea for "purer" government through socialism with a Henry David Thoreau type statement which he directed to his neighbors: "No body of men can establish pure government unless that body of men are pure in themselves."

The political persuasion of Guthrie's father was tied to his concept of private enterprise; however, this article, plus several others, indicate his belief in a grass-roots government. As a family man in a small pioneer town, he found it necessary to protect his own rights as a land owner. Woody Guthrie would later adopt this type of thinking through his support of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration and then in his support of the Congress of Industrial Organizations. Guthrie's belief that individual rights could be maintained by group solidarity was inherent in his father's writings. Guthrie's father concluded his argument with a touch of stylistic satire and a serious approach to the facts. He spurned Thurman with "Ta, ta, Doc Rev Socialist Windjammer" and then pointed out in a serious tone that the Socialist party had not provided the working man with as many benefits as the two million member American Federation of Labor.<sup>13</sup>

The political thinking of Guthrie's father gave to Woody the belief that solutions to governmental problems could be solved through established and accepted channels. The Democratic party to Guthrie's father was best

<sup>13</sup> Interview, Colonel Martin, Okemah, Oklahoma, June 28, 1973; *Okemah Ledger*, January 4, 1912, p. 1; Guthrie, *The Nearly Complete Collection of Woody Guthrie Folk Songs!* (New York: Ludlow Music, 1963), *passim*.

sued to handle issues, as it was a well established and actively working organization. However, the common people were a part of this party, and Guthrie's father, and Woody himself, never lost sight of an individual's power within a large system. Most evident in the writings of Woody's father is his constant reference to the people of Okemah. As a family man with active political aspirations and significant financial operations, he was quick to identify himself with the middle class people of Okemah. In July, 1912, the *Okemah Ledger* was alive with the Guthries. In the same issue announcing the birth of Woody, his father was listed with D. W. Scully of Padan, Oklahoma, and Tom Hall of Okfuskee, Oklahoma, as candidates for the office of County Assessor. The birth announcement added to the political career of Woody's father, for it portrayed him as a respectable family man and a commoner: "Mr. and Mrs. C. E. Guthrie are the proud parents of an eight pound democrat boy that arrived at the new home Sunday afternoon. In another column of this issue will be found an article by Charlie on the baby question that we think is mighty clever."

By combining the political career of Guthrie's father with news of his homelife, the Guthrie family became more public than ever. In addition, the common man image of Guthrie's father was further strengthened in his own essay titled "A Baby Defined:"<sup>14</sup>

It is a well established rule of nature that current events, to a certain extent, constitute the basis of current topics. The rule being strictly applied in my case, it has been my great pleasure to devote both time and thought to a systematic search for the best definition of a baby.

After devouring . . . many volumes of the latest and most up to date works which deal with the theories of Creation, Evolution, and the origin of the Family; brushing away the cob webs to gain entrance to the antiquated libraries of our ancestors, I have finally succeeded in finding a definition. I have selected . . . one given in England in the hope of receiving a prize which had been offered by a London newspaper.

'A baby—a tiny feather from the wing of love dropped into the sacred lap of motherhood; an inhabitant of Lapland; a padlock on the chains of life; a curious bud of uncertain blossom; . . . the morning caller, the noon-day crawler; midnight bawler; . . . the latest edition of humanity of which every couple think they possess the finest copy. . . .'

I concur in the definition as given, and trust it will meet with the approbation of our splendid populace which is composed of real home-builders. To say the least, I am as happy as a lobster.

No matter how colloquial, no matter how witty Guthrie's father attempted to be, his readers could not help realize that he was a well-read

<sup>14</sup> *Okemah Ledger*, July 18, 1912, pp. 5, 2.

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and talented man whose interests took him beyond the hardships of frontier life; yet he could apply his learning to a celebrated but simple occasion—the birth of his son Woody. To compliment the good citizens of Okemah as a town of “real home-builders” was a politician’s effort to win his public. When Guthrie’s father was appointed as “Temporary Secretary” to the “Permanent Wilson-Marshall Club” of Okfuskee County, it was evident that he had won some support. Thus, Guthrie can be seen as a product of his father’s career more than in name only.<sup>15</sup>

Guthrie’s father attempted to give his family what they needed, but his political aspirations were often the cause of family disunity. Like many ardent politicians, he was unable to leave his work at the office. As public figures, the Guthries enjoyed only a short-lived reign of public approval. The rumors, probably half spread out of jealousy, concerning Guthrie’s mother grew as his father grew in popularity. The small town of Okemah, like many small towns, was high on gossip. Guthrie, with a touch of satire, described Okemah as “Just another one of those little towns. I guess, about a thousand or so people, where everybody knows everybody else; . . . Everybody had something to say about something or somebody and you usually knew almost word for word what it was going to be about before you heard them say it.” When tragedy hit the Guthrie family, a family already in the news, rumors could not be curtailed. One day, the new seven-room home mysteriously burned to the ground, leaving no evidence of the cause of the catastrophe. The result, however, was recorded by Guthrie who claimed one of his friends told him, “Kids say your mama got mad an’ set her brand new house on fire, an’ burnt ever’ thin’ plumb up.” While his mother’s discontent with her husband’s fist fighting life helped spread these rumors, the real catastrophe came in the ironic fact that Guthrie’s father had no fire insurance. In a sense, his only investment was the family; while the new house burned, destroying all the “nice things” the Guthries tried to live on as a united family.<sup>16</sup>

Guthrie’s father attempted to regain the family’s trust and self-respect when he bought another house for about \$1,000. Constructed to last forever, it was a two story structure: the first floor was made of stone and built into the side of a hill, while the second story was made of wood with an overhanging front porch. The view from the porch was for the young Guthrie a lookout; from there he watched the trains go by and the wagons come into town from the nearby farms. “He used to sit out on that front

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, August 15, 1912, p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> Guthrie, *Bound for Glory*, pp. 37, 40; Guthrie, *Woody Guthrie: Library of Congress Recordings*, Side Number 1.





Guthrie's new home in Okemah, from which he watched the trains and wagons pulling into the town

porch a lot," recalled Mrs. Chowning. "It was the only place he could find some peace and quiet from his hectic homelife," she continued. "Okemah" Guthrie wrote, means "Town on a hill" in Creek. For him, the new home offered a view of Okemah in action, and to some extent, became a symbol of his homelife and hometown.<sup>17</sup>

Luckily for Guthrie, he was at an age when the family house burning catastrophe could not take its total effect. The older Guthries, however, realized the importance of the disaster. While the children, Roy and Clara, lost most of their toys, Guthrie's mother lost the one thing she could offer her family—strength and security. All complained of the darkness, the dampness and the general drabness of the new home; it did not compare

<sup>17</sup> Interview, Mrs. Chowning; Guthrie, *Bound for Glory*, pp. 44, 45–56.

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to the seven-room home that had burned. Guthrie's mother, unfortunately, never had a chance to fully recover after losing her home. Guthrie described what was to become a common scene. In the new house she was washing the dishes when Clara shouted at her: "Mama, look! You're draining the dishes without a drain pan! The water's dripping like a great big . . . river . . . down. . . . And then Clara looked over the hot water reservoir on the wood stove and nobody in the house saw what she saw. Her eyes flared open when she seen that her mama wasn't listening, just washing the dishes clean in the scalding water."<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, Guthrie's father continued his efforts to regain position and prosperity in Okemah. Guthrie also found other things to do when the family was having a hard time.

Guthrie's spirit was undamaged. Instead, he began to observe and take part in the activities of Okemah. A typical scene that Woody might have seen from the porch was the cotton wagons coming to town: "The white strings of new cotton bales and a whole lot of men and women and kids riding into town on wagons piled double-sideboard full of cotton," Guthrie remembered, "driving under the funny shed at the gin, driving back home again on loads of cotton seed." This farming town, he claimed, had a population before the big oil boom of approximately 1,500. On a typical Saturday at this time "all the farming people'd come in," Guthrie stated, "they'd have a trades-day, buy a new buggy, box of tobacco, or a new pair of button down shoes." While the parents were buying and selling, the children would enjoy the monkeys down at Moomaw's Drug Store. There, where the owner kept his monkeys in a cage in the window, the children gathered to wait for the big escape. The monkeys, being curious, would get out of their cages and climb on top of the brown stone building, where they watched business activity.<sup>19</sup>

On Saturday night, Guthrie would participate in the various traveling carnivals and minstrel shows that came to town. The Dubinsky Tent Show was one such opportunity for this young man to witness magical tricks, singing comedians and Robert Ripley type freak shows. If the town had a particularly exciting evening, the local drunks provided some sleeping citizens with impromptu versions of "In the Good Old Summer Time" or "Sweet Adeline."

On Sunday, for those who had the strength, many found it fun to visit the Fort Smith and Western Railroad platform to watch the in-

<sup>18</sup> Guthrie, *Bound for Glory*, p. 46.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41; Guthrie, *Woody Guthrie: Library of Congress Recordings*, Side Number 1: Interview, Mr. and Mrs. Martin.

coming and outgoing trains. The Fort Smith and Western line had opened its service to Okemah in 1903 and the novelty of train watching was still fresh during this time; people were interested in seeing who and what came into Okemah. The Broadway Hotel and Dexter House also sent their hacks to carry back the new people and fresh supplies. Okemah was in the pre-oil boom stage.<sup>20</sup>

As Okemah prepared for the oil boom, the Guthries attempted in vain to recover their normal homelife. Their new house was not fitted to their personalities; it was cold as stone; they were warm with life. For one time, and only one time, a disaster seemed to work for and not against the Guthrie family. A tornado struck Okemah around 1917, taking with it a large part of their home. Guthrie described the results. As the house "stood there without a roof. It looked like a fort that had lost a hard battle. Rock walls partly caved in by flying wreckage and by the push of the twister. Our back screen door jerked off of its hinges and wrapped around the trunk of my walnut tree."<sup>21</sup> The Guthries celebrated this disaster. Though Woody's father had lost more money, he was able to find a better house on the more fashionable north Ninth Street section of Okemah. Guthrie's mother believed she could regain some of her warmth and strength in this new home, and the family was able to reunite for a short time and begin to share in the oil boom times.

During the following five years, between 1918 and 1922, Okemah experienced an oil boom never to be equalled. These years for the Guthries were a mixture of success and failure. Guthrie's father was, by 1922, at the summit of his political career. The *Okemah Ledger* announced that he was a Democratic candidate for the Oklahoma Corporation Commission, claiming that he had "active working organizations in twenty-six counties of the state." The announcement, also stating that his new headquarters was located in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, was accompanied by a photograph of Guthrie's father in a well-tailored business suit. He appeared stylish, healthy and youthful. A month later, the *Okemah Ledger* reported that he "feels sure of winning the state nomination."<sup>22</sup> Though his political aspirations were strong and he appeared youthful and expressed confidence, his homelife had worsened both personally and financially. Instead of being "happy as a lobster" over the birth of his son, Guthrie's father was silent over the death of his daughter Clara, then aged fourteen.

<sup>20</sup> Interview, Mrs. Dorothy Dill, Okemah, Oklahoma, June 27, 28, 1973; "Roy Martin Recalls Okemah," in Mrs. Dill's "Scrapbook."

<sup>21</sup> Guthrie, *Bound for Glory*, p. 89.

<sup>22</sup> *Okemah Ledger*, June 29, 1922, p. 1 and July 13, 1922, p. 1.

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Guthrie's mother barely had time to recover from the house burning and tornado disasters when Clara was killed as the result of burns received after a kerosene stove exploded. Her depression over this tragedy was self-consuming, a condition from which she never fully recovered. Guthrie described her condition: "She got careless with her appearance. She let herself run down. She walked around over the town; looking and thinking and crying. The doctor called it insanity and let it go at that. She lost control of the muscles of her face."<sup>23</sup> Though Guthrie's father was unable to regain the nice things—the house, the part-time maid, the car—he never stopped trying. His mother, unfortunately, was never able to combat her illness. Her breakdown this time certainly aided the gossip seekers. Believing that these depressions were inherited, many Okemah residents thought Clara had committed suicide. "She did it to spite her mother," one Okemah resident recalled the gossip. Such talk would damage any politician's career, and though Guthrie's father was positive politically, he never again held a public office in Okemah, and he lost the race for the Oklahoma Corporation Commission.<sup>24</sup>

While the Guthries were suffering, Woody adopted his father's positive thinking. As a young boy in a booming town, he easily absorbed the ever present excitement in Okemah. The serious and depressing family problems undoubtedly caused him to seek some relief and pleasure in activities in the town. Guthrie showed a great deal of influence from his father when he described a rock war. According to Woody, the "new" oil boom children had no "say so" in how "the gang" was run. Like his father, Woody took the "new" kids' side. Guthrie described this gang as a mini-society with elected officials from president to sheriff to outlaws. "We had to have someone to throw in the jail," an empty piano box, he explained. Beyond the humor, however, was Guthrie's implicit concept that government could work for everyone if it were run by honest men who contributed on equal terms. His father's ideals of individual ownership and his belief in the good of the American Federation of Labor were not far removed from young Guthrie's early thought.

Okemah itself offered Guthrie more than rock wars. After 1918 the town began to change from an agricultural entrepot to a banking and investment center. The question on everyone's mind was no longer the land itself, but what was under it, as oil had been discovered in large quantities. Guthrie found excitement in the town rather than in his home. He stated that his family did not share in the oil boom profits; with a laugh, Guthrie

<sup>23</sup> Guthrie, *Bound for Glory*, pp. 133, 136.

<sup>24</sup> Interview, Mrs. Chowning.

said, "No, we got the grease, we didn't get no oil."<sup>25</sup> Guthrie and the town were excited when newspaper headlines told of the promising influx: "The Oil Derricks Come Marching on in Okfuskee County; Okemah Well Making 500 Barrels—Pipeline Being Laid; [and] Magnolia Pipeline Soon to be Extended to Okemah."<sup>26</sup> His description of the beginning boom indicates the zest of the people:

Trains whistled into our town a hundred coaches long. Men drove their heavy wagons by the score down to pull up alongside of the cars, and skidded the big engines. . . . They unloaded the railroad cars, and loaded and tugged a blue jillion different kinds of funny looking gadgets out into the fields. And then it seemed like all on one day, the solid-tired trucks come into the country, making such a roar that it made your back teeth rattle.

As Guthrie found himself more a part of this rapid transformation, he described it as a sordid carnival atmosphere. He gave a dim view of the types of oil production people to first come to Okemah:<sup>27</sup>

The first people to hit town was the big builders, cement men, carpenters, teamskinners, wild tribes of horse traders and gypsy wagons loaded full, and wheels breaking down; crooked gamblers, pimps, whores, dope fiends, and peddlers, stray musicians and street singers, preachers cussing about love and begging for tips on the street corner. Indians in dirty loud clothes chanting along the sidewalks with their kids crawling and playing in the filth and grime underfoot.

According to Guthrie, the population of Okemah increased about five times during this period, going from the original 1,000 to nearly 5,000. Some Okemah residents recalled what this increase did to the settlement. "You would see tents around town," said Mrs. Chowning, "where some men would sleep in the day and others would sleep at night." From this change, Guthrie gained both positive and negative reinforcement. His parents were also influenced, and their money often was mismanaged. "The children," recalled one observer of the Guthries, "always had expensive toys, but necessities were scarce." When Guthrie became more dependent on Okemah for his education and livelihood, he discovered that the town was equally, if not more guilty of mismanagement than his mother and father. The oil discovered beneath Okemah's soil was not the only thing to be revealed. The saying that excessive wealth breeds greed

<sup>25</sup> Guthrie, *Bound for Glory*, p. 116; Guthrie, *Woody Guthrie: Library of Congress Recordings*, Sile Number 1.

<sup>26</sup> *Okemah Ledger*, July 17, 1919, p. 1, February 23, 1922, p. 1 and March 2, 1922, p. 1.

<sup>27</sup> Guthrie, *Bound for Glory*, pp. 94, 96.

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and greed breeds violence was proved in Okemah's oil boom. The long-held racial hatred of the community soon exploded with a force equal any oil gusher.<sup>28</sup>

Violence soon became an intricate part of the oil boom. After a hard day's rigging and drilling, oilfield workers and those feeding off the fat and easy money came to town for a night's entertainment. Gambling, drinking and prostitution were undoubtedly prime pastimes. Guthrie described an election night in oil-boom Okemah:<sup>29</sup>

A board was all lit up, and the different names of the men that was running for office was painted on it. One column would be, say, "Frank Smith for Sheriff," and the next "John Wilkes." One column would say "Fistfights" and another column would read "Gangfights." A man would come out every hour during the night and write "Precinct Number Two, for Sheriff Frank Smith, three votes, John Wilkes four, Fistfights four, Gangfights none."

Throughout the oil boom, the *Okemah Ledger* in numerous brief accounts reported the activities of the town's less respectable citizens. Lawlessness became a common topic, as reported in its headlines: "Three Men Hoop Up Okfuskee Storekeeper; Sheriff Finds Buried Still and Whiskey; Plea Guilty to Whiskey Offense; [and] Gamblers and Choc Seller Arrested."

The culmination of the fist fighting days of Guthrie's father had come. Though this new violence in Okemah may have been exciting to young Guthrie, it was of a different calibre than the earlier tales of political fistcuffs. The new violence was definitely non-political. The times were such that making money became an end in itself, and the best confidence man often became the richest. During this time, while an early teen-ager Guthrie donned his father's business suit and attempted to make his own way in the bustling town. As a businessman, however, Guthrie was not successful as his father. He described his short career as a root beer salesman in a concession stand. Guthrie was instructed by his boss, however, to sell on request the little bottles under the counter. Curious to taste the "rot gut," he sampled one of the bottles. "When I woke up," Guthrie claimed, "I was out of a job." His next venture was in the newspaper business, this time as a street-corner newspaperboy. Guthrie soon discovered that oil-boom workers either could not or would not read the news. He realized, though, that if anything were made to look like something

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<sup>28</sup> Guthrie, *Woody Guthrie: Library of Congress Recordings*, Side Number 1; Interview with Mrs. Downing.

<sup>29</sup> Guthrie, *Bound for Glory*, pp. 96-97.

<sup>30</sup> *Okemah Ledger*, February 23, 1922, p. 1.

especially something exciting, it would sell. Guthrie's procedure was both profitable and humorous. He would sell all his papers to the local drunks who would roam Okemah's Main Street, shouting out humorous headlines young Guthrie had composed himself. Unfortunately local officials were not totally pleased with this fun business venture. Guthrie described the results: "I spent sixty cents for twenty more papers at the drugstore. 'Listen,' the paper man was telling me, 'th' sheriff is gettin' mighty sore at you. Every night there's three or four drunks walkin' up and down th' streets with about twenty papers yelling out some goofy headlines!'" Guthrie replied: "Business is business."<sup>31</sup> Fortunately, Guthrie never became a cold-hearted business man; if the oil boom taught him anything, it was that within any system that operates with acts of violence and the confidence game, some must win and some must lose. The losers, the blacks and Indians of the town, became Guthrie's prime interest in later Okemah years and in the years that followed after he left his birthplace.

The racial scene of Okemah had its foundation before Guthrie's birth. What he witnessed was a result of years of growing discontent between the races. The *Okemah Ledger* once boasted of the town's near total whiteness. In 1911, the year before Guthrie's birth, the school census was reported as 555 white students and 1 black student. The fact was celebrated by calling Okemah "a banner white town." At the end of the school year, however, the boasting had changed to fear after two blacks, Laura and L. D. Nelson, were lynched six miles north of town on a bridge over the North Canadian River. They were hanged for shooting George Loney, a local rancher, who reportedly caught them in the act of cattle rustling. The fear in the minds of Okemah whites was a result of rumors of black retribution by "sacking and burning" the town.<sup>32</sup> By Guthrie's time, during and after the oil boom, the general feeling toward blacks in Okemah was distrust and fear. Guthrie undoubtedly heard many versions of the lynch-night scene, and he likewise felt the discomfort between the races in the town.<sup>33</sup>

The oil boom was indirectly responsible for some racial tension, for the population of Okemah had increased not only in number but also in racial distribution. Guthrie claimed the town was made up of "one-quarter

<sup>31</sup> Guthrie, *Bound for Glory*, pp. 93-101; Guthrie, *Woody Guthrie: Library of Congress Recordings*, Side Number 1.

<sup>32</sup> *Okemah Ledger*, March 7, 1912, p. 1; "Imaginations Run Wild in Okemah," *Okemah Ledger*, May 25, 1911.

<sup>33</sup> Interview, Mrs. Dill, Okemah, Oklahoma, June 27, 28, 1973; Mr. Glenn Dill, also present at the interview, disagreed with his wife concerning the lynching. Their reactions made the event seem as if it had happened yesterday.

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Negro, one-quarter Indian, and one-half white." When asked how they got along, he replied, "No, not what I'd call equal terms. There's been a lot of shooting scrapes and fights. They have some crazy way of looking at the colored situation."<sup>34</sup> The "crazy way" of the white population often involved violence or the threat of violence as the only solution. For the black and Indian in Okemah, hostility was a way of life. Because they were generally not allowed to share directly in the oil boom, they often resorted to taking their share. Again *Okemah Ledger* headlines told the story: "Two Negroes in Jail on Horse Stealing Charge; [and] Indian Caught Stealing Weapons from Sheriff's Office."<sup>35</sup> Fearful of a minority uprising, white retribution was often serious. In a simple case of chicken stealing, "one Negro," Shirley Watson, was tried for the crime. She was sentenced to one year of imprisonment at a trial held approximately one year after the thievery. On the date of the crime, January 22, 1921, her accomplice, Felix Moaning, also a black, had been shot and killed, "caught in the act."<sup>36</sup>

The culmination of Okemah's racial tension came on July 5, 1922, when a group of white-sheeted men paraded in open cars down the main street of the town. A newspaper reporter claimed that the parade plus the \$50.00 charitable donation made in the name of the Ku Klux Klan a week before proved its existence in Okfuskee County.<sup>37</sup> The parade was undoubtedly the Klan's warning to the local blacks.

The town had changed from the quiet farming community of Woody's early years. The Guthries themselves had experienced an equally radical transformation. While the oil boom gave Guthrie's father promise of a new and more powerful political office as Oklahoma Corporation Commissioner, the increase in violence and hatred heightened his wife's worry. The Guthries, according to Woody, in order to start fresh and give his mother a change of environment, moved to Oklahoma City in 1923. Guthrie's account of their stay of nearly a year is not specific, but it reveals that his father was unable to find satisfactory employment. Guthrie also made no comment concerning politics; his father's political career had evidently lost its initial promise. Nevertheless, the Guthries returned to Okemah in 1924, hoping to start a business in the new motorcycle industry. Woody's uncle, Leonard Tanner, had convinced his father of going into business with him as a motorcycle dealer in Okemah. When Tanner was

<sup>34</sup> Guthrie, *Woody Guthrie: Library of Congress Recordings*, Side Number 4.

<sup>35</sup> *Okemah Ledger*, February 23, 1922, p. 1 and July 17, 1919, p. 1.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, January 12, 1922, p. 1.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, July 5, 1922, p. 1.



suddenly killed, the Guthries once again lost an opportunity to regain their livelihood and status. The town could offer little for the family, for the oil boom was declining. Guthrie described the results:<sup>38</sup>

I bumped along. Drug along. Maybe that old man was right. I looked in at the lobby of the Broadway Hotel. Nobody. I looked through the plate glass of Bill Bailey's pool hall. Just a long row of brass spittoons there by their self in the dark. I looked in at the Yellow Dog bootleg joint. Shelves shot all to pieces. I looked in the window of a grocery store at a clerk with glasses on playing a fast game of solitaire. Weeds and grass in the door of this garage? Always was a big bunch of men hanging around there. Nobody running to and out of the Monkey Oil Drug Store. They even took the monkey and the cage from out in front. Benches, benches. All whittled and cut to pieces. Men must not have much to do but just hump around and whittle on benches. Nobody even sweeps up the shavings.

Guthrie's description revealed the havoc of overuse. The "grab-it-all" philosophy had almost turned Okemah into a ghost town, and it would take time for it to recover some of its economic vitality. The Guthries, however, never had a chance to recoup financially. Woody's mother soon worsened and the doctor's advice was followed. She was sent to the Central State Hospital in Norman, Oklahoma, leaving Guthrie's father as the sole head of the household. He alone could not provide the security the Guthrie children needed. Ironically, Guthrie's father was the victim of another mysterious fire which nearly took his life shortly after his wife's commitment. Woody supplied the gossip this time: "I always will think he done it on purpose. He lost all his money; he lost his hog ranch; he used to raise the best pure bred hogs in that whole country. He felt like he was doing something good. Working hard." Though Guthrie's father did not die from his burns, he went to Pampa, Texas, to recover at his sister's farm. The children were adopted by the town, although Woody never chose any particular family as a permanent address.<sup>39</sup> He was completely on his own for the first time. In the next several years in Okemah, he would learn a great deal.

Because it had become an Okemah custom to talk about the Guthries, the children then became the center of attention. Woody, who found himself on his own, lived in the old "gang" house and became a junk collector. "We had an old wagon," recalled his partner, Colonel Martin, "which we built ourselves. We didn't do it too well for we had two big wheels in front

<sup>38</sup> Guthrie, *Bound for Glory*, pp. 138-147.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157; Guthrie, *Woody Guthrie: Library of Congress Recordings*, Side Number 1; interview with Mr. Martin.

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and two little wheels in back so all the weight went on the old Jenny. We'd haul our junk and sell it out at Mark's Junk Yard here in town."<sup>40</sup> People began to pity the sight of Guthrie in quest of money. "Woody was a mess," recalled Mrs. Chowning, who first took an interest in him when he began to live on his own. "He used to come to my back door," she said, "and sing a song. We'd have coffee or tea together." For a short time Guthrie was the concern of the more respectable families of Okemah. Mrs. Chowning could have influenced the youth's decision to join the Boy's Glee Club in high school, for she was as early as 1922 one of the directors for the Glee Club theater productions.<sup>41</sup>

In school Guthrie was an unusual student. "He used to go to school early because no one was at home," recalled Mrs. Dorothy Dill of Okemah. "He'd draw funny pictures on the blackboard," she went on, "and all the other students would try to get there early to see what Woody drew." On one occasion he drew a picture of two stick figures running past a fire hydrant with a city in the background. On the lower left hand corner, Guthrie wrote his name in large capital letters. Once proud that his mother could sign her name for social purposes, it was as if Woody now signed his name for attention, a reminder that the Guthrie name still had promise of being respected again.

Guthrie's formal education, though not complete, offered him many opportunities to perform in public. "He was a little showman, a natural performer," one friend recalled. "The teacher never had to tell Woody what to do," Mrs. Dill said, "he'd just get up and begin to sing and dance." Others recalled Guthrie's in-town performances. Whenever money was needed for school functions, the students would borrow the Dossey's wagon and Guthrie would sing and dance on it while others passed the hat. Martin remembered Woody's "ebony bones" which he ordered by mail: "They were about eight inches long and he would rub them together to get music and he would do a jig dance." Even those who remembered him in less than favorable terms admitted his unusual talents. "When we bigger boys went out for football and basketball," J. O. Smith said, "Woody would carry the water. He was a little wirey haired fellow always under foot, always making some kind of music in the back of the classroom."<sup>42</sup>

Though Guthrie performed more than he studied, and spent more time on the street than in the classroom, he found some time for high school

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Interview, Mrs. Chowning; *Okemah Ledger*, April 20, 1922, p. 1.

<sup>42</sup> Interview, Mrs. Dill; Guthrie's drawing, Mrs. Dill's "Scrapbook;" Interviews, Colonel Martin and J. O. Smith, Okemah, Oklahoma, June 27, 28, 1973.

academics and activities. The structure and discipline required in high school was likely too much for the parentless boy. In English, Guthrie did barely "C" work for a three year average, while in algebra his grade was closer to the "B" level. Guthrie made up this low grade in English by participation on the staff of *Panther*, the high school newspaper, and as a member of the Publications Club, which was the yearbook committee. These activities were undoubtedly more suited to him than a structured classroom. Nevertheless, typing, like algebra, was easy for Guthrie, and an "A" was his reward. Geography, too, posed no problems for him, for another "A" was added to his record. In ancient and modern history, he did near "B" level work as a total average. Guthrie's only failure came in psychology.<sup>43</sup> As in English, his own personality and past experiences were probably in conflict with preconceived theories. Guthrie had learned that fate, not psychology, was the determining factor in life. It was wiser for him to base theories on the facts of life rather than to create dreams.

School could not give Guthrie enough, for he had lost his family and Okemah's oil boom excitement also had died. However, his memories of lost wealth, status and love were rejuvenated through his close contacts with the two minorities of Okemah, the blacks and Indians. Guthrie found in them a deep respect for their openly expressed cultures. "Woody never missed an Indian stickball game or the annual Corn Dance," said Mrs. Chowning. "Those stickball games," she continued, "were worse than bull fights. They'd just get out there and practically kill one another." Guthrie, who relished in excitement, found a new cause for violence and celebration. He must have been close to the Indians, for according to Mrs. Chowning, "you had to be invited to attend their annual Corn Dance."<sup>44</sup>

The blacks of Okemah, however, became Guthrie's prime interest. From them he not only learned music but also discovered the blues, a way of expressing want, need and loneliness. He confessed his love for the Negroes:<sup>45</sup>

Ever since I was a kid . . . I've always found time to stop and talk to those colored people because I found them to be full of jokes [and] . . . wisdom. . . I learned how to play the French harp off a boy shining shoes down there. I was about fifteen or sixteen years old. He was playing the railroad blues. Every day he'd play one; it was the same title over and over; he'd improvise. I never hardly pass an Indian or Negro—I learned to like them.

<sup>43</sup> Guthrie, "Pupil's Record of High School Credits," Superintendent's Office, Public Schools, Okemah, Oklahoma.

<sup>44</sup> Interview, Mrs. Chowning.

<sup>45</sup> Guthrie, *Woody Guthrie: Library of Congress Recordings*, Side Number 1.



Such Dust Bowl scenes in Oklahoma inspired many of Guthrie's songs

Guthrie "learned to like them" because they too could express in music the feeling he had already developed about life—that poverty, deprivation, injustice and loneliness were often unavoidable. People were victims of these fates.

By 1940, shortly before Guthrie wrote his message of hope to the people of his hometown, he recalled what Okemah had taught him. By 1929, the year his high school transcript was mailed to Pampa, Texas, Guthrie already had seen what the American public was to witness in the Great Depression. The Dust Bowl had worsened Oklahoma's plight, and Guthrie found the rhythm of sadness in Negro music to be a perfect expression of these hard economic times. He described the feeling of this music: "The blues is plain ole being lonesome." He remembered his Oklahoma years. "People where I come from are lonesome for a job, lonesome for spending

money, lonesome for drinking whiskey." The conditions of the blues, Guthrie pointed out were "Being out of work, being lonesome, being in jail." To him the blues was "a complaint, a lament, something wrong when you look around."<sup>46</sup> The lonesome sound of the black harmonica player's "railroad blues" which Guthrie heard as a young boy in Okemah later became his song for all people. The trains which the people of Okemah enthusiastically observed were now leaving, taking with them a good part of the town's spirit.

Guthrie's experiences in Okemah would have been sufficient cause for him to become a cynic: the numerous fires, his mother's illness and his early struggles for self-survival. Surprisingly, however, he maintained a spirit of hope. This spirit was taken directly from his Oklahoma years. His mother's message to her children to "fight for our Papa" became for Guthrie a cause to fight for all people who suffer from hard times. His hope was ever present, and Okemah was always on his mind.

Guthrie's parents attempted to provide him with a comfortable homelife and a middle class way of life. This influence later found expression in Guthrie's many songs and for about children. His "Riding in My Car," for instance, presents a typical scene of a child asking his father to go for a car ride. Guthrie delighted young audiences in this ballad with his car motor and honking horn sounds. In most of his children songs, a warm and loving homelife was presented. After the car ride, in this hypothetical home, the father might sing a lullaby such as "Grassey Grass Grass" in which, without guitar accompaniment, Guthrie tapped out the rhythm in repeated phrases such as:<sup>47</sup>

Grassey grass grass,  
Tree tree tree,  
Leafie leaf leaf,  
One two three.

Secure in bed in a loving home the children would sleep. Guthrie's early years were quite similar.

A man must by necessity earn a living. On a more serious level, Guthrie showed the influence of his father's journalistic and political mind. His father had always presented himself, and others had always thought of him, as a common man with broad backgrounds and interests. Though an ardent politician, he always considered his family, and had "down to earth

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Guthrie, "Grassey Grass Grass," album, *The Greatest Songs of Woody Guthrie*, Vanguard VSD-35, Side Number 2.

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values." Fate unfortunately denied Guthrie's father the ultimate success he strove for all his life. The common man, dispossessed of his home, became Woody Guthrie's theme.

Oklahoma's Dust Bowl offered Guthrie a tremendous source for trying this idea. After he left Okemah in 1929, he spent several years in Texas living once again with his father. In the early 1930s Guthrie hit the road for California, which he initially considered as the "land of milk and honey." By 1940, however, he had learned that California was not the promised land. His advice to would-be Okies—those who had migrated from Oklahoma to California—was to stay at home and work for better conditions within their native state. He warned Oklahomans of the half-truths spread by popular singer Jimmie Rodgers who in "California Blues" claimed that in California people could "sleep out every night" and drink water that tastes "like cherry wine." Guthrie registered his advice to the would-be Okies in his own ballad "Do Re Me":<sup>48</sup>

Well if you want to buy a home or farm,  
That can't do nobody harm,  
Or take your vacation by the mountains or the sea,  
Don't swap your old cow for a car,  
You'd better stay right where you are;  
Well you'd better take this little tip from me,  
Cause I look through the want-ads every day,  
And the headlines on the papers always say oh . . .  
If you ain't go the Do Re Mi, boys, (repeat)  
Well you better go back to beautiful Texas, Oklahoma,  
Georgia, Kansas, Tennessee.

For a victim of the Dust Bowl, to stay in Oklahoma was often impossible. Guthrie offered the homeless sharecropper two alternatives to leaving. Both choices were based on his father's teachings: to stay and fight with your fists, or to stay and work through the system. The two most popular ballads by Guthrie, "Pretty Boy Floyd" and "Tom Joad," reflect these alternatives for the common man. In the ballads, Pretty Boy Floyd was an outlaw while Tom Joad joined the unions for a common cause. Both ballads reflect the extremes of Guthrie's personality and Oklahoma experience.

In "Pretty Boy Floyd," the common man, Charles "Pretty Boy" Floyd, encountered the evil deputy sheriff who, using "vulgar words of lan-

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<sup>48</sup> Guthrie, "Do Re Mi," *The Nearly Complete Collection of Woody Guthrie Folk Songs*, p. 66.

guage," indirectly insults Floyd's wife. The conflict, Guthrie explained, was over a new ruling in town: "They had made a new ruling since Pretty Boy had been to town about the week before about tying your horses—automobiles was getting pretty big about that time." Floyd was a true gentleman and, to protect his lady's honor, grabbed a log chain. "And in the fight that followed he laid that deputy down." Although the deputy had drawn his gun, Floyd was forced to escape to "the trees and timbers on that North Canadian River's shore." From that point on, Guthrie claimed, Floyd became an outlaw because the story of the deputy's death began to grow. Guthrie describes a typical rumor concerning Charles Floyd: "He was worse than quintuplets, with three guns in each hand an a whole bunch more in his pocket."

Woody made "Pretty Boy" Floyd into a twentieth century Robin Hood. Floyd, though an outlaw, is open, direct and honest to himself. He will rob the banks which have robbed the good farmers. His method was a "Wild West" expression:

Now as through this world I ramble,  
I've seen lots of funny men,  
Some will rob you with a six gun,  
And some with a fountain pen.

Guthrie gave Floyd a peculiar quality. Floyd loved the homesteader much as Guthrie's father praised the "real home-builders." In the ballad, Floyd would "come to beg a meal" from a farmer, and "leave a thousand dollar bill" underneath the napkin as a thank you note. Guthrie claimed that "You'll never see an outlaw drive a family from their home."<sup>49</sup> Like Guthrie's father, Floyd was forced to live a life determined much by chance and circumstance. He was not afraid to fight for his rights and therefore had to pay the price. The ballad, "Pretty Boy Floyd," had an unusual appeal because, unlike a "Jesse James" type ballad, "Pretty Boy Floyd" does not end in a shoot-out with the law winning. Instead, Floyd would, it was implied, continue to live outside the system and at the same time contribute to the needy farmers. As the Guthries tried to live on, as Woody continued to hope, so does the message of "Pretty Boy Floyd."

The outlaw motif was considerably softened in "Tom Joad," a ballad based upon the movie version of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. The Joads, a family united around Ma Joad, were a family of dispossessed sharecroppers. Guthrie idealized the two heroes of this ballad,

<sup>49</sup> Guthrie, *Woody Guthrie: Library of Congress Recordings*, Side Number 3; Guthrie, *The Newly Complete Collection of Woody Guthrie Folk Songs*, p. 86.

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Preacher Casey and Tom Joad, by making their message impossible to reject. Guthrie transferred his own mother's teachings when Tom Joad, a probable self-portrait, speaks:

Wherever little children are hungry and cry!  
Wherever people ain't free;  
Wherever men are fightin' for their rights,  
That's where I'm a gonna be, Ma,  
That's where I'm a gonna be.

Though Tom Joad joined the organized unions, he did so for a human cause. He would, it was assumed, attempt to create a purer way of life by becoming more socially aware of people's needs. Guthrie, who once fought for the "new kids" because they had no "say so" in how "the gang" was run, now fought for the "new men" who again "had no say so" in how the nation and their lives were run.<sup>80</sup>

Guthrie's concern with the Dust Bowl refugees found expression through two other ballads, "I'm a Jolly Banker" and "Willy Rogers Highway." In both ballads, Woody reflected his father's belief in private rather than governmental ownership of land and homes. In both cases, Guthrie protested the conditions of the Oklahoman by casting blame on a "mysteriously" evil or totally ineffective Federal government. Both ballads were quite satiric in tone with a reminder of the "Ta, Ta, Doc Rev Socialist Windjammer" attitude of Guthrie's father.

In "I'm a Jolly Banker," the banker named "Tom Pranker" acts according to his name:

I safeguard the farmers, widows and orphans,  
I check up your shortage,  
And bring down your mortgage;  
I'll plaster your home with a furniture loan;  
If you show that you need it, I'll let you have credit,  
Just bring me back two, for the one I lent you;  
I'll come down and help you, I'll rake you I'll scalp you,  
I'm a Jolly Banker, Jolly Banker am I.

Guthrie, who once said "business is business," was only a boy operating in an oil boom where money was plentiful. As a young man trying to get along, he found little room for a "Tom Pranker," a man who had no feeling or compassion. Pranker's only desire is for self-gain and greed. As a banker, Pranker stood as a symbol of the Federal government. Unlike an outlaw,

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90; Guthrie, *Bound for Glory*, p. 116.



the government could literally rob anyone with a fountain pen. Guthrie satirized the government, and at the same time proclaimed the natural innocence of the "widows, orphans and children."

In similar fashion, Guthrie satirized the Oklahoma hero, Will Rogers, in "Willy Rogers Highway." The tone of this ballad was definitely personal. Guthrie had a share of what was now dust and hunger. He opens his ballad with a direct challenge to Will Rogers:

My Sixty-Six highway, this Will Rogers road,  
It's lined with jalopies just as far as I can see;  
Can you think up a joke, Will, for all o' these folks  
From New York town down to Los Angeles.

Guthrie continued this challenge in the remaining refrains. These lines reveal a more specific protest:<sup>31</sup>

Can you make up a joke that'll win them a job?  
Can you grin up a tale that'll feed my folks stranded?  
Did ye tickle Hoover enuf ta build us all houses?  
You hafta go back, Will, and tickle 'em again.

The relief of humor which Rogers gave to the movie audiences of the 1930s seemed insufficient to Guthrie. Although Guthrie had a well-developed sense of humor, he could not find reason to laugh at such Rogers' films as *David Harum*, in which Rogers played a hard dealing but golden hearted banker. In the movie, Rogers was no "Tom Pranker." Instead, he gave the widow her mortgage, paid in full as a Christmas Day present.<sup>32</sup> For Guthrie, the hometown banker as portrayed in this film did not exist. In times of need, Guthrie wanted workable solutions, not charity.

Guthrie found a solution to the needs of economically depressed Americans in the growing labor unions. The defense Guthrie's father gave to the American Federation of Labor in 1912 became in Guthrie a personal campaign. In 1940, he returned to Oklahoma to work for the Oklahoma City local union of the Congress of Industrial Organizations. The oilfield workers were on strike for better conditions and Guthrie performed at several of their union rallies. Working for Bob and Ina Wood, he composed his most noted union ballad, "Union Maid." In it Guthrie presents a picture of a working woman, a woman who is not afraid:

<sup>31</sup> Guthrie, "Jolly Banker" on *Woody Guthrie: Library of Congress Recordings*, Side Number 3; Guthrie, "Willy Rogers Highway," *The Nearly Complete Collection of Woody Guthrie Folk Songs*, p. 126; Guthrie, *Bound for Glory*, p. 101.

<sup>32</sup> *David Harum*, Will Rogers Memorial, Claremore, Oklahoma.

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There once was a union maid, She never was afraid,  
Of goons and ginks and company finks,  
And the deputy sheriffs that made the raid.

The union maid, however, was also strong because she has a family united for a common cause:<sup>83</sup>

Get you a man who's a Union man,  
And join the Ladies Auxiliary,  
Married life ain't hard,  
When you got a union card.

Guthrie saw promise in a union of people working for better conditions. During their Okemah years, the Guthries had never found the rewards of a united effort, for fire, wind and death removed their opportunities.

For Guthrie, the family unit was the basis for strength in fighting injustice. Guthrie, like his father, warned people against the dangers of political bossism, and both Guthries called for united action on the part of Americans to fight side by side for a common cause.

Guthrie left Oklahoma in 1929, but his stay in Pampa, Texas, was short lived, and in the mid-1930s he made the trek westward to California with thousands of Dust Bowl refugees. Like the others, whom Steinbeck called "Anonymous People," Guthrie took his Oklahoma heritage; however, unlike the others, he was a talented singer, writer and personality. Guthrie's Oklahoma years served him in two principal ways. He learned many native American ballads from his mother which gave to him a deep respect for American cultural history as recorded through song, and most important, he realized that poverty was only a matter of circumstance. His own deprivations plus the misery he saw around him enabled Guthrie to empathize with his fellow man. From his father, however, Guthrie found inspiration and hope. Also like his father, Guthrie believed in the rights of the common man. Stated simply, Guthrie's contribution to American thought was based on three basic ideals. The right of the common man to seek and maintain ownership of private property was foremost in Guthrie's thought. Ideally expressed, this right would find culmination in a small self-sufficient farm. In addition Guthrie believed in the sanctity of a strong family unit. He maintained that a strong family was a basic means of achieving social reform. The family unit would provide a sense of love and security, protecting the common man from the often inhumane corporate

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<sup>83</sup> Pete Seeger, "Woody Guthrie, Songwriter," *Ramparts*, November 30, 1968, p. 30; Guthrie, "Union Maid," *The Nearly Complete Collection of Woody Guthrie Folk Songs*, p. 94.

structures. Guthrie's third principle was directly inherited from his Oklahoma experience. With the end of the Okemah oil boom and the beginning of the catastrophic Dust Bowl and Great Depression, Guthrie witnessed the downfall of the common man. His belief in the right of every man to earn a living without fear or degradation served him as a guiding principle from the 1930s until his death in 1967.

The later works of Guthrie, when analyzed in terms of his three major beliefs, reveal that he never forsook his Oklahoma cultural heritage. The observant historian can find in the life and works of Guthrie a unique approach to American history in turmoil. Guthrie's interpretations of the Dust Bowl, the Great Depression, the development of the labor unions, World War II and the McCarthy Era are to a great extent from an Oklahoma point of view. As America changed from an agricultural to an industrial society, Guthrie attempted to remind Americans that the agrarian love for a home, a family and a job were still worth preserving. Through the ballad tradition, Guthrie fought a battle against the creation of a society devoid of human compassion. As a veteran of diverse economic periods in Oklahoma history from the Okemah oil boom to the Dust Bowl, Guthrie was able to give his messages of hope to all Americans.