

THE BOOMERS: OKLAHOMA PLAYWRIGHTS
OPENED THE TERRITORY

By PAUL T. NOLAN*

Oklahoma has always been proud of its pioneers, especially of its pioneer women. Bryant Baker's memorial statue, *The Pioneer Woman*, in Ponca City is probably the best known tribute to the pioneer in the United States. And the contributions of the pioneers have long been the subject of story and song. The politicians have been honored in C. W. Allen's *The Sequoyah Convention*; the oil men, in such works as W. L. Connelly's *The Oil Business As I Saw It*; the cattlemen, in E. E. Dale's *Cow Country* and the *Range Cattle Industry*; the Indians, in Angie Debo's *And Still the Waters Run*; the city-builders, in Debo's *Tulsa: From Creek Town to Oil Capitol*; the frontier newspaper-women, in Mrs. Tom Ferguson's *They Carried the Torch*; and the list could be continued to include almost all of those who made the Oklahoma "Run" one of the world's great adventures in pioneering.

But among the pioneers, there was one hardy band, led by a woman; and Oklahoma has not even left a shovel to show where they were buried—the playwrights.

Kenneth C. Kaufman and Spencer Norton, writing of the dramatists of Oklahoma for the two editions (1941 and 1956) of *Oklahoma: A Guide to the Sooner State*, both comment on the accomplishments of such post World War I Oklahoma playwrights as Lynn Riggs, author of *Green Grow the Lilacs*, *Cherokee Nights*, and *Russet Mantle*; and Mary McDougal Axelson, the author of *Life Begins*. They mention that Fleta Campbell Springer, in addition to her novels, also wrote "a play." But neither mentions a single play or playwright before World War I, and both Kaufman and Norton are among the most devoted chroniclers of the state's literary history.

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This neglect of this one aspect of Oklahoma's cultural history is not difficult to understand, and it is a neglect which most of the states in the Union share. Before World War I, it is generally agreed, American drama was in a "low state," a state caused in large part by the bad practices of the stage. Anyone who wrote for that stage, it is argued, had to commit offenses against dramatic art that made their plays, at best, second rate. And the "best" of the nineteenth-century American plays — dramas like Herne's *Margaret Fleming* — are judged to be inferior to their European contemporaries like Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* and Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard*.

Before World War I, moreover, Oklahoma produced only a few playwrights who had any success on this "bad" stage. And, the argument runs, although the stage was "bad," only those plays that were successful on it were any good at all. Oddly enough, with the "conditions on the American stage," Europeans like Ibsen and Chekhov could not have produced what they were writing, but if any of the stay-away-from-the-stage American playwrights were writing like them, their work was then ignored, and it is now forgotten.

Whether the playwrights of Oklahoma were too bad for the stage or too good, they were busy. From the opening of the Cherokee Strip in 1893 until the outbreak of the First World War, Oklahoma had at least thirty-nine playwrights who wrote at least forty-one of the dramas while residents. And they, at least, thought their works had enough merit to justify copyrighting them. These plays now constitute what is probably the largest body of "neglected" literature in Oklahoma's history.

PIONEER WOMAN, PLAYWRIGHT STYLE

The author of the first play copyrighted from Oklahoma was a woman who might well have served as a model for Baker's statue, Mary Isabella Hessin. She came to "Old Oklahoma" in 1869. Seven years later she celebrated this event in her play, *The Boomers: The Opening and the Settling of the Cherokee Strip*.

The play was copyrighted from Blackburn, and no known copy of it still exists. It was, apparently, her only dramatic composition. At least, it was the only play she ever had copyrighted.

Six more plays were written and copyrighted from Oklahoma before the turn of the century. Five of them, all written by two brothers, George and Warren Noble, were copyrighted in 1897 from Guthrie. Like *The Boomers*, all five are now among the "lost" drama of Oklahoma. Their titles are known, however, and suggest that the Nobles were interested in the drama for the sake of entertainment. Four of the plays are comedies:

Dad's Angel, *Baby Mine*, *Gay Mr. Tompkins*, and the *Yankee Genius*. Their fifth play was a melodrama, *The Train Wreckers*. All were three-and-four-act plays, suggesting that some of them, at least, must have been written before 1897.

Only one other play was copyrighted from Oklahoma in the Nineteenth Century. J. Frank Gudarian copyrighted *Paradise Regained* from Hennessey in 1898. It, too, is a "lost" play; and like Miss Hassin and the Noble brothers, Gudarian apparently wrote no other works for the theater beyond his Oklahoma composition.

INTO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

During the first fifteen years of the Twentieth Century, Oklahoma playwrights must have been as common as corner drugstores. Every town seems to have had at least one.

Oklahoma City had five. Two were women: Lena Blackburn, author of *The Sheath Gown Girls*, "a musical comedy in one act," 1908; and Edna Sulton Stark, the author of two plays: *Via the Heart*, "a play in 3 acts," 1912, and *Diamonds Seven, Hearts Eight*, "a play in 1 act," 1915. The other three playwrights were men: Felix Hunter, author of *By Chance*, a one-act play, 1911; Courtenay Morgan, the author of *One Christmas Eve*, a "dramatic sketch," copyrighted January 3, 1910, and *Innocent Widow*, a "play in 4 acts, dramatized from Delpit's novel, *Coralie's Son*," copyrighted January 27, 1910; and William L. Tucker, the author of *The Struggle*, "a Heart-Interest Drama in 4 acts," 1912.

Norman had three playwrights: Arthur O. May and Lew Sully, authors of *Limb of the Law*, 1914; and Mary E. Waddington, who copyrighted two plays from Norman in 1908—*At Douglass, King and The Return*—and one play from Purcell in 1911, *When Daughters Will*.

Five Oklahoma towns had two playwrights each. Stillwater had Marion Hughes, author of *Three Years in Arkansas*, 1906, and L. J. Jarlot, author of *Oklahoma*, 1903. Shawnee had Charles Patterson, author of *The Lost Heiress*, 1900, and *We Wo Yank*, author of *Chief Black Hawk's Revenge*, 1911. Ardmore had Herbert Butzow and Jack Burnett, authors of *The Gallery God*, 1911. Hobart had William and Henry Ellis, the authors of *Who Is He?*, 1907. Anadarko had two playwrights who listed their names simply as "Spahn & Corson," when they copyrighted their only play, *The Tale of the Comet*, 1909.

Over twenty other Oklahoma towns had at least one playwright each during these years. For four towns, the only playwright was a woman. Sulphur had Anna Burgess, author of

Money Against Money, 1909. A year earlier, in 1908, Miss Burgess had copyrighted her only other play, *War of Money*, from Chicago. Perry had Norma A. Lucy, author of *The Crook*, 1911. Muskogee had Isabel S. McLaughlin, author of *The Question*, 1911. The same year, Mrs. McLaughlin also copyrighted another play, *My Wife's Daughter* from Washington, D.C., apparently her only other dramatic work. Ada had Mrs. Cannie West, author of *A Man's Love; or Driven from Eden*, 1913.

All of the other "town's only" playwrights were, apparently, men. (Occasionally women used men's names in the hopes of getting a more favorable hearing for their plays.) Tulsa had Don Louis Anchors, author of *The Coochman*, 1909. Dewey had James Baughman, author of *The Little Mountaineer*, 1909. Tyrone had Stephen Champlin, author of *Adam Killjoy*, 1904. Pryor Creek had John J. Dege, author of *Soldier Prince*, 1908. Vinita had J. Eugene Hall, author of *The Moor of Venice*, "a revised edition" of Shakespeare's *Othello*, 1915. Pawnee had Gordon Lillie, author of *Statehood at Pawnee Bill's Ranch*, 1908. Mangum had W. C. Marble, author of *The Heartsearching*, 1913. Bomar had George Rhodes, author of *Cupid's Arrow*, 1910. North McAlester had Simeon Sites, author of *The Turkey Maiden*, 1914.

Durant's only playwright, W. A. Sterrett, should be of special interest to collectors of pioneer accounts. He wrote and copyrighted two plays in 1912, both about Oklahoma: *Opening of Oklahoma* and *Opening of the Cherokee Strip*.

Capitol Hill's only playwright, Ira N. Terrill, also turned to Oklahoma history for his only play, *A Purgatory Made of a Paradise*, 1907, "a tragedy in 3 acts, depicting early day scenes in Oklahoma."

Enterprise and Quinton had to share their "only playwright," Charles T. Wilkerson. In 1910 he wrote *Beautiful Friend* in Enterprise. In 1911 he moved to Quinton for his second and last play, *The Clutch of the Vampire*.

Geary, for a time in 1909, had for its "only playwright" one of the most prolific stage writers in the country, Junie McCree. McCree wrote and copyrighted one play there, *Hebrewing and Shewoeing*. For the ten years before and after his Geary residence, however, he copyrighted at least eighty-eight other plays, running from *After the Barber's Ball to Yit, Yat, and Yay*. All of the plays, other than *Hebrewing and Shewoeing*, were copyrighted from New York. Presumably McCree was a writer-actor traveling with one of the many road shows criss-crossing the state when he did his one Oklahoma dramatic composition.

Others of these playwrights did some writing for the stage, in addition to the plays copyrighted from Oklahoma. Champlin,

for example, after his play written in Tyrone in 1904, went to New York where he wrote and probably sold ten other plays, most of them one-act compositions intended for the vaudeville circuits. Only one of his plays, a three-act farce, *Who Did It?*, according to the *Best Plays* records, ever had a Broadway opening. It ran for eight performances at the Harris Theatre in New York, opening there June 9, 1919.

It is, however, in the forty-one plays written in Oklahoma that the best chance for recovering some "lost" *Green Grow the Lilacs* lies. Whether it was Terrill blaming "purgatory" on the opening of the Indian lands to white settlers or Mrs. West blaming it on "a man's love," it is in these plays, written on the scene at a time when the pioneer experience was still as fresh as bread from the oven, that the local playwrights were putting the Oklahoma adventure on record.

Some of these plays still exist in the writer's manuscript copies in the Library of Congress. Copies of most of them, however, if they now exist at all, are probably at the bottom of the trunk in the attic or in the vault with the family papers. Wherever they are, however, they are the real materials for a monument in the making for Oklahoma's forgotten pioneer, the playwright.