

CLEMENT VANN ROGERS
1839-1911

BY PAULA McSPADDEN LOVE*

One of the leading citizens of the Verdigris Valley was Clement Vann Rogers, better known to his friends as "C. V." He was a successful rancher, farmer, stockman, politician and benefactor.

In 1882 while serving his third term in the Cherokee Senate, he was named on the Board of Directors at Worcester Academy (Congregational) in Vinita. Education was of vital importance to the Rogers' family and with the opening of this mission school, it proved a happy solution for three of the Rogers children; Robert 16, Maud 14 and May of 10 years were enrolled in the first term. The oldest daughter, Sallie, graduated from the Cherokee Seminary in 1880.

Vinita was a thriving community which was then a part of Cooweescoowee District and the center of the stock industry.¹ In addition to the cultural and educational atmosphere, there were two railroads which were a great asset to business and travel. Since Clem was associated with cattlemen J. O. Hall and W. E. Halsell and other Cherokee leaders there, Vinita became a base for his numerous operations at this time.

Clem Rogers came from a stalwart and well-fixed family but from earliest childhood he showed an independent spirit and the urge to do things for himself. His parents, Robert Rogers and Sallie Vann came from Georgia before the main removal of the Cherokees in 1838. Clem's only sister, Margaret was very young when they came or was born soon after. Robert Rogers built a five-room log house near the Arkansas line, with a pleasant view of the Ozark Mountains, on the outskirts of the present town of Westville. It was here on January 11, 1839, that Clement Vann Rogers was born in the Going Snake District of the Cherokee Nation.

*Paula McSpadden Love has written this biography of her grandfather, Clem Vann Rogers, as a contribution to the history of Worcester Academy (Vinita), a historical project undertaken by the Lt. Col. Walter Chiles Chapter, Daughters of the American Colonists in Oklahoma. Mrs. Love has served many years as the curator of the Will Rogers Memorial, a beautiful building and museum at Claremore, Oklahoma.

¹ Cooweescoowee District comprised the northwestern part of the Cherokee Nation. There were some big ranches out on the Caney and Verdigris Rivers.

Before the lad was two years old his father died leaving his only son to carry on the name of Rogers and with the admonition to his mother: "See that Clem always rides his own horse."² His mother later married William Musgrove, a successful farmer and wagon-maker. They had two sons, Francis Marion and William Due.

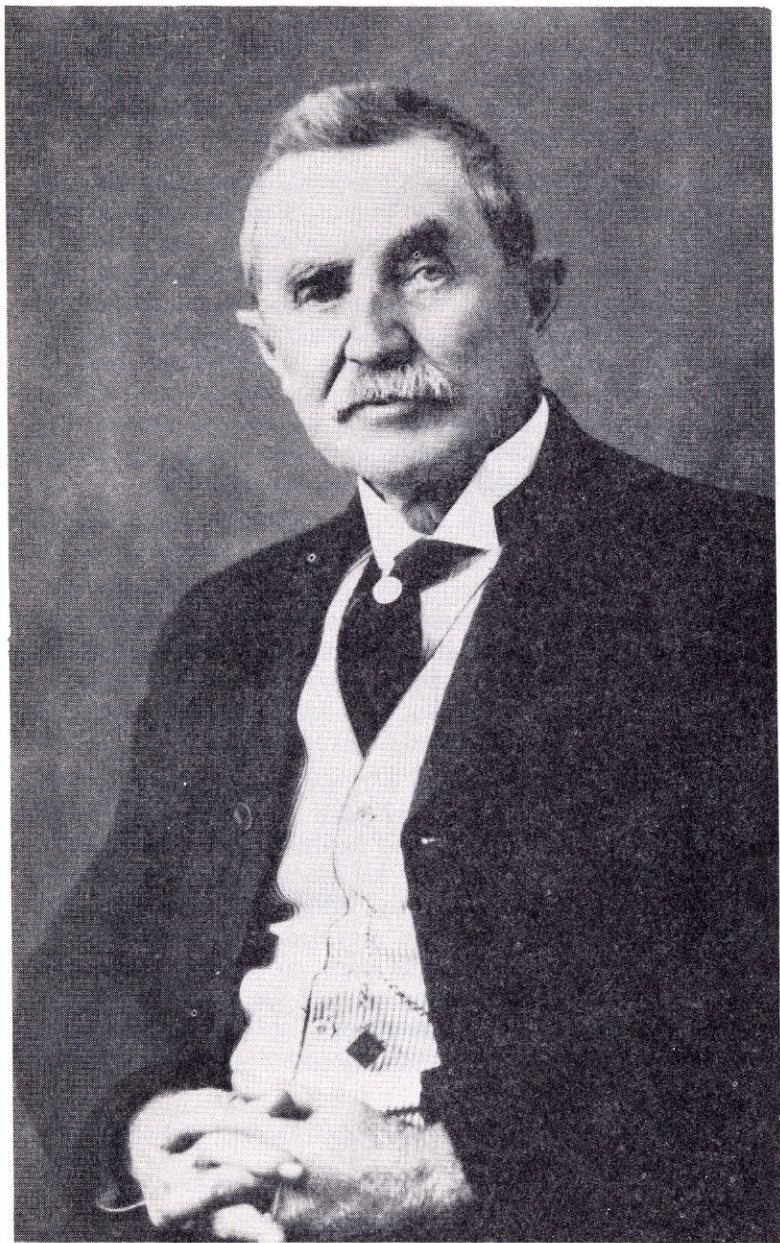
Clem and Margaret both attended the Baptist Mission about a mile from their home and later were students at the Male and Female Seminaries at Park Hill. Margaret was a very serious student and graduated with the second class at the Seminary in 1856. Elizabeth Alabama Schrimsher was also a member of this class.

Clem had little love for school and soon gave it up to work as a cowboy for Joel M. Bryan, near present Choteau. It was here he became hardened to the rough life on the range. With this experience, he was able to make his own way, and in 1856 came to the newly formed Cooweescoowee District where he settled on a branch of the Caney River. His ability as a trader was working out in good profits; he had crops, cattle, horses, and two negro slaves. By 1858, he was well established and returned to Ft. Gibson to claim his bride, the youngest daughter of Elizabeth Gunter and Martin Matthew Schrimsher, Mary America. She was endowed with the rare gift of love, laughter and home-making, so, it was evident that the four children of the eight born to the Rogers became noteworthy citizens. Their only son who grew to maturity was known throughout the world as *Will Rogers*.

Mary and Clem had dreams of a nice, comfortable home for their family but the War Between the States reached the Cherokee Nation. The people had been bitterly divided over the Removal question and now were generally aligned in their sympathies in the same way: those for Removal in the South, those against Removal with the North. This cleavage was a heartbreaking factor among the Cherokees. Clem joined the Cherokee Mounted Troops under the daring and colorful Confederate leader, Stand Watie, while Mary went with her people as refugees to Bonham, Texas for the duration of the War.

Clem admired Stand Waite, his fearless courage and his intrepid raids on the enemy. Clem became associated with the brilliant Cherokee leader, William Penn Adair, who undoubtedly

² This story used so often by writers came from Clem's sister, Margaret, known to all the relatives as "Aunt Peggy."



CLEMENT VANN ROGERS

had an influence on his life and was partially responsible for his keen interest in politics in the years to follow. During this time the Cherokee Confederates held their own council, usually in secret meetings, and Clem served as a member of the Senate during the years 1862-1863.³

Like many others in the Cherokee Nation, Captain Clem Rogers returned from the war to find his place in ruins and nothing left to continue his farming and ranching. The devastation in the Cherokee Nation was as great as in any of the southern states.⁴ Clem settled his family near Ft. Gibson and began working for Oliver Wack Lipe hauling freight from Kansas City to Sedalia and from there to Ft. Gibson.⁵ The work was hard and perilous over the rough almost unknown trails, driving a six-mule freight wagon, but Clem was fearless and no task was too difficult for him. He was also ambitious and realized that only through hard work could he establish himself once again.

It was more than four years before Clem had saved enough money to invest in cattle in the Choctaw Nation and return with them to the Cooweescoowee District. This time he did not go to his former place but continued more than six miles north where he chose a more imposing location for his future home. A new start in a new country gave him a feeling of again being on his own and he set out immediately to build the kind of a place that he and Mary had planned before the War.

Clem was a man of vision and saw the possibilities of the virgin land. There was only a log cabin on the site but he put a man to work at once cutting and hewing logs for the improvements. It was an ideal location for a home which was reached by a winding road that led to the valley. The house seemed to rise from a hill at the back and provided a perfect setting with blackjack, elm and native cedar trees to enhance the beauty. From the front was a sweeping view of the wooded slope near the ever-changing and often dangerous Verdigris River and endless acres of bluestem grass which grew so abundantly in the rich valley.

About 1870 he brought his family to the new home which had

³ Emmet Starr, *History of the Cherokee Indians*, p. 301.

⁴ Noel Kaho, *The Will Rogers Country*, p. 21.

⁵ "Uncle Lipe" as the Rogers children called him, was a wealthy merchant from the East and the husband of Catherine Gunter, the maternal aunt of Mary Rogers.

undergone a great change though it was not complete in all its future splendor until 1875. His family consisted of Sallie Clementine, Robert Martin and Baby Maud who took her first step in the new home. There were many ranch hands, cowboys and household helpers who had a part in building "The Rogers Place."

In a few years several well-known families had come out to the Verdigris Valley that held such promise for stock raising. Across the river and in sight of the Blue Mounds, Charles M. McClellan and his sister's family, the Stephen Taylor Foremans, had built beautiful homes. Dr. A. J. Lane came a little later with his family and established a well-stocked place for his boys. Frank Musgrove, Clem's half-brother, was another who engaged in farming and ranching on a large scale. Near Oowala, Dewitt Clinton Lipe, Clem's business partner and kinsman, put in a store and was the first postmaster in the area where mail was received two times a week. These people were inter-related by blood and deep friendship played a major role in the Rogers family from that day on to the members of the present generation.

"Clem Rogers was in the city this week in attendance at the stock meeting," reported the Vinita paper. "The Livestock Association of the Cherokee Nation held its meetings to make arrangements for the annual spring roundup. In 1891 Clem was President of the Association."⁶ George C. Clark of Vinita was the Chairman of this meeting and the proceedings were recorded by him. "C. V. Rogers, member of the Senate, and W. C. Rogers,"⁸ member of the Council, have been in Vinita for a few days. They will be on hand at the next council, ready to express their views and vote squarely upon all questions of public interest that may come before them," observed the Chieftain in speaking of the politicians.⁹

Clem's political activities began in 1877 when he ran successfully for Judge of Cooweescoowee District and although he was not educated in law he was aware of the basic rules. He was fair and just, and held the confidence of the people. He was Sen-

⁶ *Indian Chieftain*, Feb. 9, 1883.

⁷ *Indian Chieftain*, Apr. 30, 1891.

⁸ W. C. Rogers was no kin to C. V. Rogers. "He served as Chief 1903-1906 and continued in office until 1917"—Muriel H. Wright, *A Guide to the Indian Tribes of Oklahoma*, p. 73.

⁹ *Indian Chieftain*, Oct. 19, 1883.

ator from his district five terms for the following years: 1879, 1881, 1883, 1899, and 1903.¹⁰

Clem served his people faithfully in politics and understood them perhaps better than any other public servant. While he did not speak the Cherokee language he understood it, as his mother was quite fluent in the Cherokee tongue and used it a great deal. Clem was outspoken and unlike the politician of today stated where he stood on any issue. This is clearly demonstrated by the letter he wrote to Chief Bushyhead who was his brother-in-law which says in part:¹¹

. . . We are powerless to enforce our laws. Are we to submit to such great rongs (sic) by white men not citizens . . . Dennis Bushyhead there is not a single law in this country enforced. Men are hauling cattle in this country in open violation of law, and the sheriff and solicitor both know it, white men are putting up hay all along the lines in the Nation, and a few days ago the sheriff went up and collected a tax on the hay. Where is the law authorizing such act. Timber, plank, and logs are conveyed across the line all the while to which the sheriff and solicitor well know. How in the world can we hold up as a nation when our officers don't respect the law, as the oath they have taken . . . we are *fast fast* drifting into the hands of white men . . . give my respects to your wife, my wife is sick.

From your personal friend, but not political,

C. V. Rogers

The Indian Chieftain of Vinita, July 27, 1893, gave the following news of Clem's appointment: "Hon. C. V. Rogers of the Commission appointed to appraise improvements, came up from Tahlequah. Tuesday evening."

Clem Rogers was appointed by Chief C. J. Harris to serve with Joshua Hutchins of Georgia and P. H. Pernot of Indiana (appointed by President Grover Cleveland) to appraise the improvements made by the people who had encroached on Indian land, erected dwellings, planted crops, cut the trees, and used the hay for their own purposes. Clem had introduced a bill in the Cherokee Senate to keep these "intruders" out of the Territory but it did not pass. Then the U. S. Government passed legislation to pay these people for their improvements before the land could be reclaimed by the Indians, the rightful owners. Traveling all over the country with the attorney for the Cherokees, William P. Thompson, of Vinita, Clem set about this distasteful task. They rode horseback, sometimes drove by buggy or took the

¹⁰ Emmett Starr: *History of the Cherokee Indian*, pp. 272-273.

¹¹ C. V. Rogers to Chief Bushyhead; Aug. 11, 1883, Frank Phillips Collection, University of Oklahoma. Dennis Wolfe Bushyhead married Elizabeth Alabama Schrimsher Adair, Mary Rogers' older sister.

train to interview and appraise the property of almost 3,000 heads of families when they could find them. The work was not completed for two years. Even today the "Intruder Question" still arises in northeastern Oklahoma as revealed by a letter from Dallas, Texas, to Earl Boyd Pierce, Counsel for the Cherokees, who replied in his diplomatic manner: "History tells us that no problem vexed the Cherokees more than this. In fact, the overwhelming number of people who came into this country by invitation or otherwise, brought about the speedy dissolution of the tribal government and the advent of statehood."¹²

W. W. Hastings of Tahlequah, one of the Nation's most brilliant lawyers, was in Washington, D. C. at this time and Clem wrote to him regarding the plight of the Cherokee people:

Feb. 16, 1893

Sir and Friend:

Your letter received several days ago and am under many obligations to you for keeping me posted on matters pertaining to our affairs in Washington.

I am a little surprised at the action of the convention of citizens of Tahlequah District in sending additional legislation to Washington. Every other district have the same right as Tahlequah. All unnecessary and uncalled for by the people.

Boudinot¹³ had some *pet scheme* in work up at the city. Old Judge Walker made a *dam fool* construction of the late Permit Law.

Under his construction President of the Senate Buffington,¹⁴ Senator Call Starr and "himself Walker" can't get a permit. I am surprised at our Chief¹⁵ selecting a *white man* who has interest in our *lands* and *money* to construe our law. His whole construction is on the side of the white man against the Nation. Tell *Gid* I am surprised at him joining the Watts Association and am for the Cherokees *first, last* and the way through against those dam fraudulent claimants.

Write often, your friend,

C. V. Rogers

N. B. If it is not too much trouble to you I wish you would send me a lot of garden seed from the Department of Agriculture, and oblige.

C. V. Rogers¹⁶

¹² June 7, 1970: *Muskogee Phoenix & Times Democrat* (article by Phil Harris).

¹³ Elias C. Boudinot, a Cherokee lawyer assisted by F. C. Sears, attorney for Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railroad advertised that they had found millions of acres in Western Indian Territory (later organized as Oklahoma Territory) that were public property of the U. S. and therefore subject to settlement by homesteaders. These were known as "Unassigned Lands." E. E. Dale, *Oklahoma—The Story of a State*, pp. 223-224.

¹⁴ Thomas Mitchell Buffington (Vinita) served as Principal Chief of the Cherokees 1899-1903.

¹⁵ C. J. Harris, Principal Chief at the time this letter was written 1891-1895.

With all his political involvement Clem Rogers was one of the most successful farmers and stockmen in the Verdigris Valley. He was the first to introduce wheat on a large scale and in 1895 raised 13,000 bushels of wheat on his property. He owned the first push binder in this part of the country and also built the first barbed wire fence.¹⁷ He saw the wisdom of rotating his crops for year-round feeding and in addition grew a variety of fruit trees which supplied more delicacies for his own family and friends.

In 1890 he was President of the Vinita Fair Board and served for several years on the Board of Directors. In 1894 he was an honorary member of the Board of Trustees of "Willie Hallsell College" in Vinita where his son "Willie" went to school, along with several other young people from the Verdigris area. It was this same year that some of the businessmen of Vinita decided with the growing population in Claremore it was time to charter a bank in the new town and Clem Rogers became Vice President of the First National Bank of Claremore, a position he held until his death in 1911. The officers were the following: James O. Hall, Vinita, President; Charles F. Godbey, Claremore, Cashier; Len Comer, Claremore, Assistant Cashier. The Board of Directors were: W. E. Hallsell; C. V. Rogers; Dr. Oliver Bagbey; E. L. Hall; W.C. Patten from Vinita and John Dirickson, W.A. Graham, and James M. Taylor from Claremore.¹⁸

The Indian Chieftain (Vinita) was very pro-Rogers, and on July 25, 1895, gave this piece of news:

Clem Rogers is authority for the statement that all citizenship attorneys in this Nation, including Hoolie Bell, are National men and are trying to defeat Sam Mayes and elect Bob Ross. And it may be added that if there is a man in the Cherokee Nation qualified to speak advisedly on this subject it is C. V. Rogers. As a member of the appraisement commission that has just concluded appraising intruder places in the Nation, he had ample opportunity to know. It was the duty of this commission to question each intruder as to how they came to be in the country, and nearly invariably the cause was traced to some citizenship lawyer whose name was given freely by the claimant. In this matter Clem Rogers holds a full hand and is not afraid of being called.

The greatest problem facing the Cherokees was giving up their land held in common and dividing it in 160 acre tracts to each member of the tribe. There was great pressure from the

¹⁶ C. V. Rogers File. Box 7 (The Will Rogers Memorial).

¹⁷ Ellsworth Collings: *C. V. The Old Home Ranch*, pp. 96-97.

¹⁸ *Claremore Progress*, December 22, 1894.

“Boomers” to settle in the Territory and the Government eager to see the end of the tribal lands distributed set to work at once to bring this about. The Dawes Commission was created by the Government to deal with the Indians on this issue.

The Indian Chieftain (August 27, 1896) gave wholehearted approval to the selection: “Chief Mayes has certainly exercised good judgment in his selection of a Commission to confer with the Dawes Commission. Ex-Gov. Bushyhead, Clem Rogers and Robert B. Ross are representative men. The attorneys to represent the Nation before the Dawes Commission are W. W. Hastings, Frank Boudinot, and Hutchings & English.”

These men had the responsibility of making up the tribal rolls of the Cherokees which was to prepare for the allotment of land and eventually statehood. There was much dissension over this matter as the full-blood Cherokees and many others were not willing to relinquish their tribal government and would not accept any of the agreements from the U. S. Government by the Dawes Commission.

Clem Rogers was a far-seeing man and realized with the sale of the Cherokee Strip in 1893 and later the passage of the Curtis Act in 1898, the dissolution of the Cherokees as an independent government was inevitable. Also with the coming of the railroads which meant the end of the vast lands so many of the cattlemen controlled, he knew it was futile to continue as they had in the past. In fact the railroad cut his huge range in two. Despite the facts which were evident to all, he set about working for the land to be allotted. He perhaps had more influence in bringing this about than any one individual. This very difficult task was not completed until 1906 when the Cherokee rolls were finally closed.

It was a few years later that Clem transferred his loyalties to Claremore becoming one of its greatest boosters. He married Mary Bibbes in January 1893, who had been his housekeeper and they moved to Claremore in August 1898 to make their home at 6th and Muskogee streets. “C. V. Rogers will today have the new gas Ecytelenne placed in his residence. A Ft. Smith firm will do the work,” the *Claremore Progress* reported August 27, 1899. Clem was one to keep up with progress in every way.

Mr. Rogers owned a great deal of property in Claremore including a livery stable where he always kept a high stepping buggy horse to drive around Claremore and visit “the old home place” which he had rented. He kept a watchful eye on it hoping

that "Willie"—the pride of his life—would return to take over the management of it.

With the death of his second wife, he moved to furnished rooms over the bank and devoted more time to his daughters Sallie McSpadden and Maud Lane in Chelsea where he spent each week-end with them. He was adored by all his grandchildren and the many relatives and friends in Claremore who looked to "Uncle Clem" to get them out of a bad business deal or give financial assistance. Generosity was an inborn trait in the Rogers family.

All of his life he was interested in education and identified with the schools in the area. In 1899, he was elected President of the Claremore School Board. His fondness for children led him to give some property on 5th and Weenonah Streets for a children's playground with the provision that it would remain always for that purpose. Today the Claremore High School Gymnasium sprawls on most of the lot pushing the numerous school cars into the streets thus completely blocking traffic from all sides.

Perhaps his crowning achievement, or the one that he prized the most, was serving with the 55-man delegation from Indian Territory in the Constitutional Convention that met with the Oklahoma Territory delegation in Guthrie in 1906, to write the laws for the new state of Oklahoma. That part of his beloved Cooweescoowee District where he lived was re-named "Rogers County" in his honor. So great was the rejoicing in Claremore over this event that when Dr. Denney met him on the street to congratulate him, he slapped him on the back with such gusto that two ribs were broken and Clem was forced to go to Chelsea to the "girls" to recuperate from this injury.¹⁹ He recovered soon after and the last of February took daughters Sallie McSpadden, Maud Lane and her husband "Cap" to Washington, D. C. to visit "Willie" who was playing in vaudeville there.²⁰

Clem Vann Rogers had an interesting and eventful life. In his last years he was to enjoy the benefits of his early struggle in building a vast empire of business interests that was practically self-sustaining. He had come to the Verdigris Valley in 1856 at the age of seventeen and through hard work and intelligence had

¹⁹ *Vinita Leader* Microfilm, January 3, 1907.

²⁰ Rogers' Correspondence. Postal card to Betty Blake, Rogers, Arkansas. February 28, 1907—Will Rogers Memorial files.

brought the wilderness under his well-planned cultivation to productivity. He spent 55 of his 72 years in the county that bears his name. Forty-four years of his life, he devoted to politics (1863-1907) winning every office he ran for except that of Treasurer of the Cherokee Nation and this election was lost by only one vote. He helped enact some of the most important laws in the Cherokee Nation and took part in the gradual and crucial transformation from territorial government to statehood. He withstood the ravages of war and rose again to rebuild his fortune. He accepted sorrow with characteristic courage in the loss of his oldest son, his beloved Mary America and three infants, and set about to be a part and contribute something to the communities in which he lived.

Writers of today searching in the background of noted Will Rogers and the elements of greatness in him, often overlook the fact that he was the son of a famous father—Clem Vann Rogers—who was one of the most dynamic leaders of his time.