

JENNIE HARRIS OLIVER

By Bess Truitt

A popular writer-poet of her day, Jennie Harris Oliver was loved and honored by Oklahomans. She was respected throughout the Nation, and across the seas her stories and poems were received and read.

Jennie Harris Oliver, the eldest child of the Reverend George W. and Mary Ann Walton Harris, was born on March 18, 1864, at Lowell, Michigan, and died on June 6, 1942, in an Oklahoma City hospital, following an illness of several months. A simple funeral service was held in the Baptist Church, Guthrie, Oklahoma, with special music by her friends during the years, Mr. and Mrs. Robert Merten. Interment was in the family burial plot in the Guthrie cemetery beside the graves of her husband and her mother. Her immediate survivors are her three brothers: A. A. Harris, Guthrie; F. O. Harris, Chickasha; and George A. Harris, Cache, Oklahoma.

Though the formal education of Mrs. Oliver was limited to the grammar schools of her native Michigan yet she was an avid reader and a student throughout her life. At the age of sixteen years, she began teaching in her home town. In 1891, the young teacher moved to Kansas, and the following year, to Oklahoma Territory, locating at Fallis, in Logan county. It was here while teaching that she met and married Lloyd L. Oliver, in 1900.

It was in the village of Fallis atop "The Long Red Hill" that Jennie Harris Oliver began to write. In her last book, *Pen Alchemy*, she related how her first story, sold to Bob Davis of *Munsey's Magazine* for ten dollars, was "pecked out" on a borrowed typewriter on ironed-out wrapping paper. One story in long hand sold (a half a cent a word was the limit in those days). Later markets were *All-Story* and *Pearsons*. Then *Hollands* purchased "Flowers of Judgment." All the time *Munsey's* was buying her stories, paying as high as thirty dollars apiece. It was months later that "The Music and The Dream" sold for one hundred and seventy-five dollars. It was this story which with the consent of the purchasing editor afterward became a part of the "Mokey Delano" series.

Then *Good Housekeeping* bought "Interrupted Ghost," and from that time, Mr. Bigelow used Jennie Harris Oliver's fiction and poems as long as he was editor of this magazine. The March (1931) issue of *Good Housekeeping* featured Mrs. Oliver, using her picture which, she said, "Is English like my mother, but did not show my hands which are pure Scotch."¹

¹ Acknowledgment is due Jennie Harris Oliver, *Pen Alchemy*, (Oklahoma City: The Dunn Pub. Co., 1938), for data used in the preparation of this sketch.

At last Oklahoma became conscious of the genius and talent of Jennie Harris Oliver. Various women's clubs throughout the state first recognized her. They came to see her and invited her to visit their clubs, giving teas and dinners in her honor. Jennie lived in "a blaze of glory." She enjoyed the attention and the music but was too timid to say a word. Eventually, the Irish within her came into its own and she began making public appearances, reading her own poems, at first either before women's clubs or college groups.

Working entirely from blue prints, she laid the scenes of her famous Joie Nash stories on the campus of Oklahoma A. and M. College, at Stillwater. Years afterward, she was entertained by Mabel Caldwell of the English Department in the College and personally conducted by adoring students along the streets that she had made famous.

About this time every envelope received contained a check for the slender writer on "The Long Red Hill." Her income from writing was well above the five figure bracket. A home with grounds and some of the comforts of life were hers for the first time.

The years passed swiftly. She wrote and wrote mostly from instinct. When an editor in New York commented that a certain story reminded him of a Chinese puzzle, she learned for the first time that there was such a thing as view-point in writing.

It was the year after Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer bought "Mokey" that her "Little Blind Mother" died. Some months later, in the summer of 1933, came the death of her husband, Lloyd. Finding the empty house intolerable, she went to live—or die—with her brother, George, near Fort Sill, Oklahoma, in what she termed "My Purple Valley." Here she found writing difficult, although "Joseph's Coat" was authored for *Household Magazine* and the rights sold in England.

Returning to her memories and "The Long Red Hill", she found it easier to write. Her poems now printed and bound as *Red Earth* were traveling far and wide. Lord Halifax, the Chancellor of Oxford University, England, wrote commenting favorably on the second edition.²

"Mokey" had found a place in the Universities of Baylor, Boulder, and Columbia as a psychological study. Jennie's fan-mail now had attained considerable proportions and visitors from everywhere were seeking her out. She basked in the sunshine of their love and admiration and, in turn, gave freely of her time in encouragement and help to all aspiring writers who called upon her.

The annual caravan to her home in June, sponsored by the Oklahoma State Writers organization, had by this time become an

² Lord Halifax, present English Ambassador to the United States.

institution and a much looked-for event in her lonely life. Here under the junipers by the lily pond-lion basin was spread the basket dinner followed by a program of music and poetry, always with Jennie concluding the occasion with some of her own poems. In later years, these pilgrimages supplemented by visits from writer friends made her life tolerable. Ill health and near blindness forced her to employ a companion-housekeeper.

In 1938, she wrote of the Easter Pageant in the Wichita Mountains near Lawton. This story, called "Before Sunrise," appeared in the April issue of *Good Housekeeping*. The author told about the sale of this story, in the following words:³

"It seemed to require all Oklahoma with the Associated Press to convince my Editor there was a 'Holy City' in the valley of the Wichita Mountains and a pageant where smoke-planes wrote 'Christ Arose' on the sky, that a twenty-year-old girl could travel there by bus unattended!

"Alphia Hart, executive cameraman for Walter M. Harrison of *The Times* and *Oklahoman*, arose before day to print and dispatch air-mail photographs. I, myself, sent the profile of Joe Fitzpatrick as 'Hart Mathuen' in the miracle scene before the cross with the front view of Nyra Abell as 'Sara McElhaney' in the dressing room of Pilate's Judgment Hall."

Mrs. Oliver had attended the Pageant in 1937 in company with Doctor Bailey of Oklahoma A. and M. College. At Easter time, 1938, she lay in her own room with a broken back. The Pageant did not forget her. The Reverend Mark Wallock and the Pageant Board sent her a sheaf of Easter lilies and Talisman roses, and her telegram of thanks was broadcast ahead of the President's message. "I am sure Mr. Roosevelt did not mind," she afterward wrote.

It was later in the season that Lawton's Chamber of Commerce planned a Jennie Harris Oliver Day, with a plane to convey her there, a parade, and a banquet in the evening. Though her back was in a plaster cast, she was happy: "The Irish of it. Even in trouble, I can be quite gay, for does not the blackest water somehow get under the bridge."

The years were taking their toll. Accented by grief, loneliness, and improper nourishment, the gentle author of *Fallis* was losing her health. Her bones crumbled at the least provocation. It was at a Writers' convention in Stillwater that Jennie crushed her ankle and found herself later in a hospital for the first time in her life. For this reason, she was unable to accept Jessie Wiley Voils' invitation to Radio City, New York, and the invitation to read before

³ *Pen Alchemy*, *op. cit.*

The National League of American Pen Women at their annual meeting in Washington, D. C.

With the permission of Mr. Bigelow, Editor of *Good Housekeeping*, and other editors, her stories had been published in book form by the Burton Publishing Company, Kansas City, Missouri, appearing under the titles of "It Is Morning" and "Mokey." And the third edition of *Red Earth* was also published.

She was now writing infrequently. Because many people wanted to know more about her and her life, she wrote *Pen Alchemy* which was published by The Dunn Publishing Company, of Oklahoma City.

In 1939, Mrs. Oliver was named as an honored member of the "Hall of Fame" by the Oklahoma Memorial Association. In the same year, at the suggestion of Kenneth Kaufman writing in his column on the "Book Page" of the Sunday edition, *The Daily Oklahoman*, she was named Poet Laureate of the State, by Acting Governor James E. Berry. The Poetry Society honored her at a special meeting in the Skirvin Hotel soon afterward, and she was greatly in demand as a reader of her own poetry throughout the state.

It was while she was a patient in The Hubbard Hospital of Oklahoma City that she wrote her last stories in collaboration with her protege, Joe Fitzpatrick. These were published in a book entitled *The Singing Hand*.

Partially recovered, she returned to her home in Fallis. An occasional poem and a foreword for a friend's book were now all that she could manage. Ill and disheartened, she craved love and attention but refused to leave her isolated home. It was only when desperately ailing that she consented to be moved to a hospital for treatment. Arrangements were made for placing her in an Oklahoma City hospital, where her friends were in constant attendance, ministering to her needs. The end came after two weeks.

Gentle, kind, and trusting, Jennie Harris Oliver may be counted among the truly great. In her writings she depicted life's struggles and triumphs. Her characters though poor and lowly were never coarse nor common. Much of her prose was pure poetry.⁴

The following may not be classed as her greatest poem but it glimpses the philosophy by which she lived:

⁴ Several master's theses have been written about her published works and recently the publication of an "all-poetry" magazine called *Red Earth* has been launched as a tribute to her memory.

OMISSION

I'm sorry, Lord, that I forgot to pray!
The wind across my bed was oh so sweet
The April bloom; and on my window-seat
The full moon paved a white untroubled way
Where I might see, with sleep-contented eyes
The day I loved with all its humble deeds—
The tramp I fed; my gift of flower-seeds;
The dress I craved and gave as a surprise!

The April wind blew sweet across my bed
And brought the morning. Now a mocking bird
Sings in the maple branches at my head
And all my sky with hope is brightly stirred.
So, here beside me is another day—
I'm sorry, Lord, that I forgot to pray!