

## THE HERITAGE OF THE OKLAHOMA CHILD

*By Charles Evans<sup>1</sup>*

Oliver Goldsmith, whom fame has named the perfect poet, says,

"Such is the patriot's boast where'er he roam,  
His first, best country, ever is at home."

Though we passed a short season ago through an era of almost twenty-five years when the "Star Spangled Banner" was almost derided and any tribute to the flag was met with strange silence, again destiny has brought the states and the nation to a life and death struggle where it is made clear that the indefinable and rather indefinite force called patriotism is the power of powers which sustains, preserves and perpetuates the state.

Though Scott, some two hundred years ago filled his songs to the brim with tribute to Scots,

"Who have with Wallace bled,  
Scots, whom Bruce bath often led  
Welcome to your gory bed,  
Or to glorious victory."

He sent forth that other sentiment taught to millions of the Anglo-Saxon race in the lines,

"Breathes there a man with soul so dead,  
Who never to himself hath said,  
This is my own, my native land."

Still it remains for an Englishman in this very hour to sound the clearest note of home love in the weakest, and darkest days of England's existence and with his passionate patriotism snatch his country from a fate worse than death.

Winston Churchill, speaking June 4, 1940, declared: "We shall defend our island whatever the cost may be. We shall fight on the beaches, the landing grounds, in the fields, in the streets and on the hills. We shall never surrender."

So at this time when love, home and country and devotion to ideals which make this America and Oklahoma what they are, are giving the finest and highest definition of patriotism known thus far to man, would it not be well for Oklahomans to dwell upon those gifts Providence has bequeathed us and which with righteous labor of our fathers, has made us in this fateful and glorious hour what we are.

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One of the sages of Israel when sending a rallying call to the distressed and defeated Jews, reminded them they should remember they might lose a battle but should not lose a war because the God of the universe had fashioned them in indestructible patterns. Remember said He, "The Rock from whence you were hewn, the hole of the pit from whence you were digged."

The people of this commonwealth have reason now to think upon the rock from whence they were hewn. Stretching east and west some three hundred miles and from north to south more than two hundred miles, Oklahoma lies at the very heart of the United States, a republic the richest and most powerful nation upon the earth. Oklahoma City, our capital, is but a few miles from the land center of America. The State, while twenty-second in population in the United States, excels all but thirteen in riches. So strategic and balanced is the position of this state in America that its products proclaim it neither an eastern nor a western state, nor a northern or southern territory. In wheat, a northern product, she ranks among the foremost five states. In cotton, king of the South's agricultural wealth, Oklahoma often has pressed close to Texas, the leader in that staple.

Some verse maker caught this unique situation of the Sooner State as he said,

"Oklahoma the child of the warm Southern Sun,  
And the mountains which temper the winds as they run  
To clasp in sweet amity charming queen wheat  
And jolly King Cotton in bonds so complete  
That the South cries, 'She's mine and about it doth throw  
Its garlands of roses with love all aglow;  
While the great rugged North with devotion that thrills  
Shouts 'Mine too' as proved by her snows and hills."

The sun and the soil, its immeasurable agricultural and mineral wealth together with its pivotal position in America and the north American continent have made this commonwealth a magnet drawing the best of the Anglo Saxon races into its confines. This has been given a flavor, a tang, a texture and glamor possessed by no other state because it brought contact and amalgamation with the greatest Indian bloods of North America. These First Americans, with their age-old traditions, with their arts and mysticisms as ancient and sacred as those of the Greeks and Romans, these races proud, poised, strong as men can be in their sense of honor justice and truth, met the swift, eager and conquering Americans and together formed a state, so unique that it is and shall always have a peculiar strength in the American union.

Age gives to people as to wine a mellowness which warms the emotions, stimulates the arts and sciences and excites high pride. Many of our citizens here underrate their State when they think of it as dating from 1889 or 1907. Let the Oklahoman in the presence

of one who boasts of Mayflower blood or of the strain of the First Families of Virginia, lift the chin a bit high and say, "My own state was discovered and entered by European explorers seventy-nine years before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock, and sixty-seven years before the English settled at Jamestown." Our lineage is one of the oldest and noblest in America.

With this seasoned, age-old and exalted force giving strength to the blood of Oklahoma's children, the unthinking too often overlook the glorious heritage brought to them by the infusion of the early Indian life. The Five Civilized Tribes and other First Americans, brought here more than one hundred years ago, mighty leaders, schools, a splendid home life, churches and the printing press and set up laws, customs and courts that have given color, force and dignity to our history not bequeathed by Indian life to any other state. Does the Virginian glory in the name of John Smith? Oklahomans can with even more pride point to that Indian pioneer-chief, diplomat and statesman, John Ross of the Cherokees. Does Kentucky boast of its Boones, its Hendersons, its Hardins? Oklahoma in its history just a little later, can offer their equals in education, service and leadership directly out of its Anglo-Indian life, in its Boudinots, its Ridges, its McCurtains. If our people have found just pride surging through their hearts since statehood as its great senators, congressmen, writers and artists, of Indian blood have shed lustre upon entire America, let them remember and know that this is no new thing to this race. It has enriched our history through its amalgamation with the Anglo Saxon blood for more than a century.

Someone asked Emerson what was the chief and important production of Massachusetts. The Sage of Concord, it is said, replied, "Men." Though the Oklahoma child can range his eyes across this state that is larger than all New England, and possesses material wealth so that it ranks among the few Billion Dollar States in annual—output, still like the old Bay State, it can offer its men and women as its substantial glory.

A few years ago as the writer of this article stood on a pier looking out over the beautiful blue bay of Miami, Florida, a voice at his side said, "This is a great sight." Turning I entered into conversation with a splendid man and found him to be a farmer from Maine. When I told him I was from Oklahoma, his eyes lighted, his voice grew kindlier, and he said, "Oklahoma, the home of Will Rogers. Say, did you know him?" Scarcely waiting for my answer, he went on, "Sir," and his voice grew low and full of feeling, "there's a man that just should not have died! We needed him so; why, the day my wife and I out on the farm, heard that Will Rogers was dead we just broke down and cried. We sort of felt like he was our very own."

The picture of that Maine farmer with his words about Will Rogers, "our very own," would, if hung in the school rooms of Oklahoma, do much to remind pupils and teachers, that dwell as they may upon the worth of their State, they cannot stress it too much. For when Will Rogers and Wiley Post winged their way that day in 1935 into the blue of world wide renown and glory, it served to remind the whole earth that in the genius of the Philosopher of Good Will and the Columbus of Aviation, Oklahoma had placed for all time, human progress under obligation.

So, magnify as we will its industrial progress, its tremendous strength in oil and agricultural resources, its towns and cities, two of which are richer and more beautiful in their fifty years than were Rome or Athens in their first four hundred years; with all this let the citizens of our State take an inventory of their spiritual and material blessings and know that their native heath is not only one of the fairést lands on this continent but that it rates with the oldest and most famous states in all that sustains strong and just patriotism.

An article like this is often challenged as lacking too much in fact or not sufficiently saturated with statistics. Mr. Gradgrind in Dicken's *Hard Times*, fed "facts, Sir, nothing but facts," to his pupils and only the genius of England's most popular novelist could describe the weakness and sorrow such teaching brought. Nothing but facts are in the statements here set forth, but they have received a color due them from any genuine Oklahoman who knows the history of his state.

If the teacher of this State's children, in home or school challenges this line of thought set forth here, if he doubt that in its very place under the sun, in the set of its rivers, valleys and mountains, in the riches of its earth, in its peculiar human progress growing out of a singular blending of great races; if he does not feel or see that the heritage of the Oklahoma child is no less than marvelous, let that teacher or citizen take up the challenge and follow it through. He or she will find the story grows more beautiful and prideful the deeper he digs and the further he goes.

And let no one cry, "A citizen may bud and blossom into genuine state and national appreciation without dwelling too often and too much upon the virtues or the glories of his native or adopted land. Let him do his daily duty, pursue the even tenor of his way and he will secure all the pride of patriotism life needs." Not long ago all America was shocked and in a sense enraged that a survey revealed the highschool graduate and even the collegiate of this land by thousands, knew nothing of the lives of such men as Washington, Jefferson, and Jackson and Lincoln. It became such a severe challenge to present American education and patriotism that it was brought to the floors of the American Congress as a subject for

weeks of profound and serious discussion. Whether the ability to rightfully evaluate a citizenship in any state or the whole of America is closely coupled with the appearance in days of national peril with "fifth columns," bunds and scores of other organized enemies of the American Constitution, it is well that the schools and colleges and all leaders and moulders of thought realize that the pride in and love for their home and country have never been stressed enough.

Would it be too much to say on this point that if American youth issues from our schools without that knowledge of their country that is needed to make them know and appreciate America and its respective states, it comes about perhaps because they met no teacher or influence that dwelt upon the glories of their native land with burning patriotic zeal.

What have the words of Shakespeare meant to English youth through the centuries as it put into their mouths the passage in which the dying John of Gaunt apostrophizes his country:

"This other Eden, demi-Paradise,  
This fortress built by Nature for herself,  
Against infection and the hand of war;  
This happy breed of men, this little world,  
This precious stone set in the silver sea,  
Which serves it in the office of a wall,  
Or as a moat defensive to a house,  
Against the envy of less happier lands;  
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England."

Here is Shakespeare's immortal devotion to the little island that held Stratford the place of his birth. So though in a milder, gentler way may not the Oklahoma child run the story of Oklahoma in the earliest days of heroic exploration through the period of territorial settlement, sacrifice and conquest on through statehood, a story of progress unparalleled as measured by years: learn of the McCovs, the LaHarpes, the Chouteaus, the Rosses, the Sequoyahs, the Posts and the Rogers, associating with these the splendid names in the period of statehood; they will find in such a history a heritage surpassed by no people.

If any excuse need be offered for this challenge to the leaders and moulders of thought in this young commonwealth for them to hold high this legacy of blood and treasure to the Oklahoma child let summons be made upon one of the most matchless minds of England, Joseph Chamberlain. Installed as Lord Rector of Glasgow University, Chamberlain, the supreme political force of England at that time chose for his subject, "Patriotism." In this address he said a thing every teacher, parent and pulpiteer should not forget:

"I propose to speak to you on a subject which although of *more importance to your country* than any classical or mathematical learning, yet forms no portion of any curriculum and remains *without a Chair and without a text book*. 'Learning,' says Lord Bacon, 'should be made subservient to action'; and your action will

largely depend and the conception which you form in youth of the duties and privileges involved in that *greatest of civic virtues and most important element of national character which you now call patriotism*. What is this patriotism, this almost universal instinct for which more men have given their lives than for any other cause, and which counts more martyrs than even religion itself—this potent sentiment which has produced so great and splendid deeds of heroic bravery and of unselfish devotion—which has inspired art, and stimulated literature, and furthered science, which has fostered liberty, and won independence, and advanced civilization—and which on the other hand has sometimes been misunderstood and perverted and made the excuse for brutal excesses and arbitrary tyranny.”

Though the word “Okie” has been thrown about by loose minds and “Grapes of Wrath” has been quoted so loud the voice of Truth could not be heard, frequently, let the Oklahoman look straight ahead and know the record of his homeland runs just one way: toward increasing power and greatness.

Entering the halls of fame at Washington he will find his heroes there; turning into the temples of art he will find some of the leading painters of the land, renowned artist from his state; in music all America has been listening in rapture to “Oklahoma,” the highest form of light opera produced in this country in the last fifty years; and even in the realm of the finest of all fine arts, poetry, we have Mencken, a renowned national critic saying, “Oklahoma is producing now more poetry of merit than any other section of the United States.”

So with the lines of one of our singers, beloved by the nation, Jennie Harris Oliver,<sup>2</sup> telling of the loyalty to her home, let us feel happy and secure in our heritage:

“Oh, do not seek this red land  
Unless it be for staying—  
    (The red, red earth the jealous gods  
    have alchemied for you!)—  
And do not drink its red dew  
With any thought of straying;  
The gods have dyed its tawny waters, too.

Oh, do not seek this red land  
Because its gold is flowing—  
    (The black, black gold the jealous gods  
    have for their own to spend!)—  
And do not turn a furrow  
If you think you must be going;  
Your feet will carry red earth to the end.  
Oh, do not seek this red land  
When red bud lamps are burning—  
    (The rose-red lamps in leafless springs the gods  
    go lighted by!)—  
And do not seek affection  
If you’ve any thought of turning;  
For red-earth love will hold you till you die.

<sup>2</sup>A biography of Jennie Harris Oliver by Bess Truitt was published in *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, XXII (Summer, 1944), No. 2, pp. 138-142.