

ALICE ROSS HOWARD

By Carolyn Thomas Foreman

Mrs. Alice Ross Howard lived in the oldest house in the oldest town in Oklahoma. She was a member of the most noted family in the Cherokee Nation. Alice Ross was born in Grand Saline, December 27, 1858; she was the daughter of Doctor Robert Daniel Ross, and her mother was beautiful Caroline Frances Smith of Covington, Louisiana.

Robert Daniel Ross, a son of Lewis Ross, and nephew of Chief John Ross, was born in the Eastern Cherokee Nation. His mother was Frances Holt of Bedford County, Virginia. There is a description of the handsome home of his parents in a letter written by Colonel Benjamin Gold of Cornwall, Connecticut, while visiting his son-in-law and daughter, Mr. and Mrs. Elias Boudinot, in Georgia, in the autumn of 1829. Colonel and Mrs. Gold drove in their carriage from Connecticut, and their first stop after entering the Cherokee Nation on October 27, was at the home of Lewis Ross. They remained two nights, and Gold describes the place as "an elegant white house near the bank of the river . . ." He speaks of the furnishings as being equal to those of houses in Connecticut; he was pleased with the four Ross children, and describes them as bright and attractive. Mr. Ross owned two or three large stores and had numerous slaves to serve his family and guests. Colonel Gold remarks that no one would suspect him or his children of being Indians.¹

Robert Ross was graduated from Princeton University and afterward attended Medical lectures in Philadelphia. While there he met Caroline Frances Smith who had been sent north to be educated. She was the daughter of Lemuel Smith, an actor, and Frances Matilda Winship Smith of Cincinnati, Ohio. After her father's death, her mother married Mr. John Todd, and Caroline adopted his name. Young Ross and Miss Smith were married in Hartwell's Washington Hotel in Philadelphia, September 7, 1848. This was the same hotel in which Chief John Ross and Miss Mary B. Stapler of Wilmington, Delaware, were married on September 2, 1844.

Doctor Ross, having finished his medical course, took his bride to the home of his father at Grand Saline (Salina), Indian Territory, until their own house could be completed. There their five children were born, Lewis, Edward Pope, Belle, Alice and Frances Matilda (the late Mrs. Herbert Kneeland).

¹ *The American Indian* (Tulsa) July, 1929. "Thrilling Romance of Elias Boudinot and Harriett Gold", by Carolyn Thomas Foreman.

The most vivid recollections of Alice's childhood were of the disturbances caused by drunken Indians who were rendered howling maniacs by the whisky they obtained from white men. A panther once crossed the road in front of their carriage, but the children felt more fear of the intoxicated men than of the wild animal. At various times during their childhood the Ross children were taken south by their parents to visit their maternal grandmother. The journey was made by carriage to St. Louis, and thence south by boat. They were always accompanied by their Negro nurse, and a man servant drove a wagon containing their baggage.

In 1862 Chief Ross finally decided to join the side of the Union², and for the protection of himself and his adherents Colonel William F. Cloud³ of the Second Kansas Cavalry, was ordered to escort them to safety. They started from Park Hill on the afternoon of July 27, and the party was joined by Mr. Lewis Ross⁴ and his family at the Grand Saline where he had various business enterprises, including the salt works. Doctor Ross, his wife and children were among the refugees; the departure, by carriage, was in the dead of night, and the children were impressed with the command that there must be no noise. They arrived at Fort Scott on August 7, and Chief Ross, his family and relatives left a week later for Pennsylvania.⁴

On their arrival at Fort Scott, Alice was struck with the appearance of the flag displayed. She had seen only the Confederate flag in the Indian Territory since the beginning of the war, and she remarked that they had 'little stripes in the flag' when she saw the Stars and Stripes floating above the fort. From there the party traveled by train to the East, and Doctor Ross and his family settled on Staten Island, later moving to Lawrenceville, New Jersey.

Doctor Ross was taken seriously ill, and realizing he could not recover, he directed his wife to remove him and their children to

² Britton, Wiley. *The Union Indian Brigade in the Civil War*, (Kansas City, 1922. "When the army returned to Cabin Creek, a regiment of cavalry under Colonel Cloud arrived from Kansas and was sent over to Tahlequah and Parkhill, to bring out Chief Ross and the archives of the Cherokee Nation. He was considered by the Federal officers in a position to know his feelings and sentiments, to be in favor of the Union cause, and it was not held expedient to leave him at his capital on the evacuation of the country.

"His family, friends and entourage occupied about a dozen carriages as they accompanied the army on the march north, part of our troops escorting him from Baxter Springs to Fort Scott, where he made arrangements to go to Philadelphia." p. 74.

³ "Cloud, William F., col. 2 and 15 Kans cav and 10 Kans inf." *Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army*, by Francis B. Heitman, vol. 2 (Washington) 1903.

⁴ *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1863*, p. 161. "The fugitives from the lower part of the nation, now at Park Hill, are being sustained by Mr. Lewis Ross, at his own cost."

Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, where they could be among the Moravians who had been the loyal friends of the Cherokee since the beginning of the century. Doctor Ross had seen the Moravian burial ground at Bethlehem, and he wished to sleep in that peaceful, well-kept spot. After the death of her husband, on September 26, 1863, Mrs. Ross and her five children went to Philadelphia, where they could be under the protection of Chief Ross. They remained there until the close of the war, living in Washington Square.

When the times became settled Mrs. Ross's mother, Mrs. Todd, went north to visit the little family, and she took them south when she returned home. They were delayed at Columbus, Mississippi, because of an epidemic of smallpox, and it was some time before they could proceed to Mobile where the Todds were living. After a visit in this city, which impressed Alice because of the wealth of beautiful flowers, Mrs. Ross and her family embarked aboard a steamer for New Orleans, in 1866; it was a rough passage, and two members of the party still recall the discomfort, and how glad they were to reach New Orleans where they boarded the *Lizzie Gill* for the trip up the Mississippi and thence up the Arkansas. There was another change of boats, probably at Little Rock, and this time the steamer, which was quite small, landed the band of wanderers at Fort Gibson, where they had returned in order to claim their rights of citizenship in the Cherokee Nation.

John Ross's fine home near Park Hill had been burned by the Knights of the Golden Circle⁵; Lewis Ross's house at the Grand Saline, a brick structure of thirteen rooms⁶, had been looted and some of the furniture was traced as far as Fort Leavenworth when the family returned from exile. "Houses have been plundered and completely gutted by white soldiers, and the wantonness laid to the Indians. We will mention a case in point: The beautiful residence of Mr. Lewis Ross, a Union man of the Cherokee Nation. We have the evidence, and know the names and regiments of white soldiers to which they belong, and yet Indians have been cursed for the vandalism."⁷

Alice Ross with her sisters, Belle and Frances Matilda, attended a private school, and later were sent to the Cherokee Female Seminary at Tahlequah. After the death of Lewis Ross, his daughter-in-law moved to Fort Gibson in 1870 with her three daughters, where they occupied a house in what is known as "Old Town" near where the original stockade of the Fort stood. Close by flows Grand River, and the boat landing mentioned in all accounts of Fort Gibson is north of the Ross home.

⁵ O'Beirne, H. F. and E. S. *The Indian Territory*, (Saint Louis, 1892), Knights of the Golden Circle, organized by Stand Watie, p. 76.

⁶ ". . . National treasurer, Lewis Ross, of Grand Saline, a prince of Indian merchants," *Life and Times of Hon. William P. Ross*, p. 7.

⁷ *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1862*, p. 162.

Hundreds of young officers, upon being graduated from West Point, were assigned to duty with regiments stationed at Fort Gibson, and the society of the charming young Cherokee girls proved a great source of pleasure to them. These girls made their social debut at a much earlier age than is usual now, owing to the pleadings of the young men who were indefatigable in arranging dances, boating parties, horseback rides and picnics. Young ladies sometimes rode horseback from Fort Smith, carrying their ball gowns in saddle bags, to attend dances at Fort Gibson.

One affair was a garden party at the home of the commanding officer where the young people danced on the lawn which was lighted by lanterns. The citizens of the town returned the courtesies of the army officers by giving dances in the post hall, where waltzes, polkas, schottisches and quadrilles were danced to the strains of a stringed band. The bachelor officers were very fond of getting up picnics. They had all of the refreshments prepared in their own mess, and after loading their guests in a post ambulance drawn by four white mules and driven by a soldier, they would drive to Bayou Menard, where the feast would be spread by orderlies and the evening spent in games and singing.

Doctor Robert B. Howard, a native of Georgia, who had taken his medical course in the Nashville Medical College, after service in the Confederate Army with Arkansas troops, settled at Fort Gibson, where he first married Miss Cora Ross, a daughter of William P. Ross; one daughter was born to them before the death of Mrs. Ross. On January 31, 1882, Doctor Howard married Alice Ross, a cousin of his first wife. The wedding ceremony took place in the Ross home in Fort Gibson and was performed by the Reverend S. A. Stoddard of the Presbyterian Church of Muskogee. Doctor and Mrs. Howard had one daughter, Miss Bess Byrne Howard. Doctor Howard died in 1885, and was buried in the Fort Gibson cemetery, as was Mrs. Howard's mother, Mrs. Ross, who died in 1896.

Mrs. Howard and her daughter moved to Muskogee in June, 1913, where Miss Howard was employed in the office of the Superintendent of the Five Civilized Tribes. Mrs. Howard joined the Presbyterian Church in Fort Gibson when she was about twenty-four years old. She and her sister, Miss Belle Ross, loved dancing, but gave it up when their minister advised that they would have more influence as Christians if they did not indulge in that sort of recreation. She transferred her membership to the Muskogee church when she removed from her old home. In the latter church she had charge of a class of seventy young women for ten or twelve years, and so beloved was she that the class still bears the name of Alice Ross Howard.

During World War I, Mrs. Howard made an enviable record for her devotion to Red Cross work. She had a personal interest in the war owing to the presence in the army in France of her nep-

hew, the son of Mrs. Herbert Kneeland, but her love of humanity and her patriotism would have inspired her work in any case. Her constant attendance in the surgical dressing rooms at the Red Cross in Muskogee was an example and inspiration to younger and stronger women. During the terrible influenza epidemic, when people waited in line for pneumonia jackets for patients in private homes and at the Oklahoma School for the Blind, Mrs. Howard would not leave the Red Cross rooms as long as there was any work to be done.

In the autumn of 1928 Mrs. Howard and her daughter returned to Fort Gibson to make their home with Miss Belle Ross. Here, under the roof which has sheltered three generations of her family, she passed the evening of her life. The house stands in a large yard with a blue grass lawn, shaded by enormous hard maple trees which were planted by Mrs. Howard and her brother in their youth. The long porch and huge stone chimney are draped with the festoons of wild grapevines, and borders of Madonna lilies and other flowers decorate the lawn. The front door of the house was pierced by bullets during the Civil War, and a neighbor who remained in her home during the conflict tells of seeing a wounded man stagger into the Ross home and fall dead on the floor. This house contains one of the oldest pianos in Oklahoma, a Hallet and Davis of Boston. It is said to have been brought overland by ox-cart from Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, for Miss Emma Louise Lowrey Williams, on her graduation from the Cherokee Female Seminary in the class of February, 1856. It was a gift from her grandmother, Mrs. Wolf.³ The piano was acquired by Mrs. Howard when a young member of the family to which it first belonged sold his property.

Mrs. Howard, after an illness of several years, died July 3, 1933. She was survived by her daughter, Miss Bess Howard; an elder sister, Miss Belle Ross of Fort Gibson, and a stepdaughter, Mrs. H. Monroe Goodwin of Michigan. Funeral services were held in the home with the Rev. J. K. Thompson of Fort Worth, and the Rev. Walter G. Letham of the First Presbyterian Church of Muskogee officiating. Burial was in the Fort Gibson Cemetery.

³ In his *History of the Cherokee Indians* (Oklahoma City: The Warden Company, 1921), Dr. Emmet Starr told this incident as follows (page 678, note 233): "Emma Lowrey Williams received as a graduation gift from her grandmother Wolf, a thousand dollar mahogany piano. Miss Williams, who was accounted a very brilliant girl, was dressed at her graduation in a gown which she had spun, wove and made."

In the genealogical section of his history, Doctor Starr listed the genealogy of Emma Lowrey Williams and gave the interesting origin of the family name "Wolf." Youngwolf Conrad was the third child and son of Hamilton Conrad and his full-blood Cherokee wife, Onai, of the Bird Clan. The son did not retain his full patronymic, he and his descendants being known by the family name of "Wolf." The fourth child and daughter of Youngwolf Conrad or Wolf and his wife, Jennie Taylor Wolf, was named Annie Wolf. She married first William Williams, and they were the parents of two daughters, Maria Jane Williams and Emma Lowrey Williams. It was the youngest of these two granddaughters, Emma Lowrey Williams, to whom Mrs. Jennie Wolf gave the piano.—Ed.