

JANE HEARD CLINTON

By Angie Debo*

It was in the spring of 1897 that young Dr. Fred S. Clinton brought his bride to the roistering Indian Territory cow town of Tulsa. The place probably had a population of five hundred; it consisted mainly of corrals and loading pens, and a straggling line of frame buildings along a "Main Street" cutting at right angles across the Frisco tracks. It stood precariously on land belonging to the Creek Indians, and nobody could purchase a town lot or obtain more than an occupancy title to his place of business. It was a strange setting for a cultured Georgia girl.¹

Jane Carroll Heard was directly descended from Stephen Heard, president of the Revolutionary Council of Safety of the colony of Georgia, brigadier-general in the patriot army, and Revolutionary war governor of his state; and from Elizabeth Darden, his wife, who was a niece of Martha Washington. She was related also to Charles Carroll of Carrollton, signer of the Declaration of Independence.

Her father, James Lawrence Heard, had been an infantry colonel in the Confederate army, had served in the Georgia legislature, and had been chosen as the first mayor of the town of Elberton. Her mother, Melissa Harper Heard, had been one of the first graduates of the Wesleyan Female College at Macon, Georgia. The family home on the edge of Elberton was a place of gracious living and overflowing hospitality, always filled with relatives and friends, leaders of the community and the state. Outstanding among the guests was Alexander H. Stephens, former Vice-President of the Confederacy, whose amusing eccentricities and brilliant table conversation still live in family tradition.

In this happy setting Jane Heard was born, April 16, 1875. She grew up among her brothers and sisters and a host of Heard and Harper cousins running in and out of each others' houses. She graduated with highest honors from the Elberton Collegiate Institute, and became a pianist of original feeling and power. She was popular

*Dr. Angie Debo, of Marshall, Oklahoma, the well known author of a number of published volumes on Oklahoma historical subjects, is a former contributor to *Chronicles*. One of her recent books is *Tulsa: From Creek Town to Oil Capital* (Norman: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1943).—Ed.

¹I am indebted to Mrs. Margaret Heard Dohme of Elberton, Georgia and Mrs. Louise Morse Whitham of Tulsa for much of the information used in this article. I have even appropriated some of their sentences.

with the Elberton young people, now elderly men and women, who still remember her as a high-spirited, radiant girl with a gift for friendship. She also made visits to Washington and St. Louis, where she became a social favorite. In 1897 her picture was published in *Munsey's Magazine*, where she was characterized as a Southern woman of personal charm and outstanding musical ability.

Jane's family, and especially her mother, had hoped she would marry one of the local beaux whose shiny buggies were always standing in front of the house on Sunday afternoons; but one day she attended a commencement at Young Harris College, and met a tall, courtly stranger from the Indian Territory who was pursuing his pre-medical studies in "the States." This meeting culminated in a brilliant wedding, with the spacious plantation house crowded with guests, a small niece and nephew holding white satin ribbons and brothers and sisters and cousins as attendants, the mocking birds singing outside, and the bride sweeping down the wide stairway in her misty veil. A far cry, all this, from the life that lay ahead in the Indian Territory cow town.

Although Dr. Clinton was blue-eyed and blond, he was technically a Creek Indian, the son of Charles Clinton, a white man, and Louise Atkins, a part-white, part-Indian girl, a teacher in the tribal schools. Charles Clinton had died in 1888, but the family still owned the Half Circle S Ranch on Duck Creek, south of the Arkansas, and lived in a large ornate house on a hilltop in the present Tulsa suburb of Red Fork.

The doctor maintained his office in Tulsa, but desirable living quarters were not to be had there. He brought his bride to the Red Fork home, where Mother Clinton initiated her into Western ranch housekeeping. Other members of the family were Lee Clinton and his young wife, Susan Merrill Clinton, also a Georgia girl; Vera Clinton, now Mrs. J. H. McBirney²; and Paul Clinton. These lively young people had a merry time of it, entering into the outdoor activities of the farm and ranch, and the three girls developed a bond of sisterhood that has endured throughout the years.

Before the end of the first year of their married life the Fred Clintons were able to rent a house in Tulsa. It was located well out in the country, at the present Ninth and Main streets. It was a big bare box with only an outer wall; inside it was lined with red building paper, and the scantling showed like the bones of a skeleton. The young couple got permission of the owner to lath and plaster and paper the rooms at their own expense, and later they built a small barn for the doctor's two horses on the same terms. Here they lived for six years.

² See Fred S. Clinton, "James Hugh McBirney," *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, XXII (1944), 254.

Jane Clinton was completely undismayed by these hardships. She is remembered as a tall, regal young woman, who always kept a well dressed look, although she often made her own clothes and did her own housework. When colored help was available she had loyal workers in the garden and kitchen, for she understood negro people and they worked with her gladly. She suffered much from sickness and had to endure the loss of her two children, but her home radiated hospitality, and she met all comers with charm and dignity and irrepressible humor.

The Clintons became active members of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South.³ This little congregation had been organized in the Presbyterian Mission building in 1893 with seven members, and had progressed through a brush arbor meeting place to a one-room shack with a door in one end and the pulpit in the other, and three windows on a side. When the congregation outgrew these quarters, Dr. Clinton served on the three successive building committees, which planned the neat brick structure occupied from 1901 to 1907, the large pillared building used from 1907 to 1928, and the present towered edifice now dominating Boston Avenue with its modern expression of the religious spirit. At the same time Mrs. Clinton was active in securing the first pipe organ, and served as the organist.

As the church grew, her activities multiplied. For a number of years she taught a large Sunday school class of young women, which became known as the Clintonian Class; and her influence has followed the members into maturity and homes and careers of their own. In 1907 the women organized a Foreign Missionary Society in her home, and she served every year as its president until 1915, when it was merged with the Home Mission and Parsonage Society to form the organization now known as the Woman's Society of Christian Service. It was during her presidency that the society undertook the support of a native worker in Korea—the Jane Heard Clinton Bible Woman. This project was maintained by the local organization until the General Board of Missions took it over about 1925.

Meanwhile Tulsa had not remained an Indian Territory cow town. First came Federal courts and increasing law enforcement. Then came organized city government, and the platting and sale of town lots to individual owners. At the same time the Creek government was liquidated in preparation for Oklahoma statehood, and the great ranches surrounding Tulsa were broken up and divided into quarter-section allotments. Last, and most dramatic of all, Dr. Clinton and his partner brought in the discovery well at Red Fork that made Tulsa an oil town. The population jumped from 1,390

³ For a history of this church see Fred S. Clinton, "From Brush Arbor to Boston Avenue," *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, XXI (1943), 260.

at the first census in 1900 to 7,298 at a special statehood census in 1907; 18,182 in 1910; 72,075 in 1920; and 141,258 in 1930.⁴

The newcomers who came to swell the city's population were young men from many states lured by the chances of the oil industry. Mrs. Clinton's dinners and evening parties often included desirable strangers who were lodged at the hotels, and her friendly charm did much to induce them to settle as permanent residents and city builders. Many of them brought brides, and these young women went actively to work under Mrs. Clinton's leadership to make the frontier town a happier place to live. Much has been written of the romance of Tulsa's material development and of the pioneers who raised its towers into the sky, but "she was a pioneer in building the *soul* of the city."⁵

A full list of her charter memberships and offices in cultural and civic organizations would fill many paragraphs. She was a charter member and president of the Tuesday Book Club, organized in 1905; a charter member and president of the Ruskin Art Club, organized in 1908; a charter member of the Tulsa Art Association; a charter member of the Tulsa Civic Music Association; a board member of the Tulsa Symphony Orchestra Association; a charter member of the Tulsa Garden Club; a charter member and for many years a director of the Children's Day Nursery; a charter member and president of the Tulsa Federation of Music Clubs; chairman of the Committee on the Advancement of American Music for the Oklahoma State Society, Daughters of the American Revolution; and so on through a much longer list. But probably her greatest interest outside her home and her church was the Hyechka Club.

The Hyechka Club was organized with ten charter members—all musicians—in 1904. The name—the Creek generic word for "music"—was adopted at the suggestion of a Creek member. The purpose of the club was to develop music appreciation in the homes, the schools, and the churches of the rapidly growing settlement. Mrs. Clinton was chosen as its first president, and was re-elected every year thereafter until 1921, when she was made president for life.

It was through the efforts of this organization that the ambitious young town made music a regular part of its public school curriculum. In 1907 the club sponsored Tulsa's first Spring Music Festival, with local and outside artists. The next year—the first spring after statehood—Madame Schumann-Heink, then at the height of her career, brought her rich contralto and her varied musical themes to this wild setting of oil, and strife, and violent growth. In 1911 the club presented the New York Symphony Orchestra with Walter Damrosch as conductor. In 1914 it per-

⁴ Angie Debo, *Tulsa: From Creek Town to Oil Capital* (Norman, 1943), 76-110 and *passim*.

⁵ A statement made in the funeral address by the Rev. H. Bascom Watts.

suaded the young city to construct a \$125,000 Convention Hall and install a \$11,500 organ. And thus through the formative years the cultural development of Tulsa kept pace with the speed and fury of its growth.⁶

Although Mrs. Clinton's major public interest was in music, she found time to collaborate with her husband in his healing ministry. When the doctor with several associates started Tulsa's first chartered hospital and training school for nurses⁷ in 1906, she became a non-professional friend to the superintendent and students. Without formality her home was theirs, and her friendship helped many of them through the lonesome days of training. She initiated the custom of an annual Christmas tree at the hospital, where nurses, doctors, and patients joined with ministers and musicians of the town in a religious service with group singing. She also became a member of the Auxiliary to the Tulsa County Medical Society, and held office in the Auxiliary to the State Medical Association. She received a bronze medal from the United States government for Red Cross work in the First World War.

When the first Parent-Teachers' Association was organized in Tulsa in 1908, she became a charter member, and at one time served as president. She was one of the founders of the public (Carnegie) library. The Tulsa Y. W. C. A. was organized in her home, and she was chairman of the social committee when the present building was opened. When Girl Scout troops were formed she helped with their music and their programs.

By this time the Clintons were living in their commodious house at the corner of Fifth and Cheyenne, notable for its surrounding flower gardens. Here in this elegant setting Mrs. Clinton dispensed the same gracious hospitality and maintained the same leadership in the city's expanding affairs that she had shown in the days of crude beginnings. When the International Petroleum Exposition was organized in 1923 she served as chairman of the social committee for the first two of these great oil shows. When the Philbrook Art Center was opened, she was a charter member and an active supporter of the organization. Under her leadership the Hyechka Club multiplied its activities—encouraging young musicians, bringing music to shut-ins, carrying on social service work among the underprivileged—and the list of its guest artists sounds like a roll call of American musicians. Its influence was recognized not only in the state, but through the entire Southwest, so that when Louisiana, Arkansas, Missouri, and Oklahoma formed a district of the National Federation of Music Clubs it took the name of "Hyechka District."

⁶ Fred S. Clinton, "The Hyechka Club," *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, XXI (1943), 351.

⁷ For a history of Tulsa hospitals see "First Hospitals in Tulsa," *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, XXII (1944), 42.

As Mrs. Clinton looked back over the transformation of the cow town through successive oil booms to a great modern city and as she watched the unfolding of the institutions she had created, she became interested in preserving its story. She became a member of the Oklahoma Historical Society, and she encouraged her husband to record the history of its development. She and Dr. Clinton willingly served as advisers when a group of Central High School students formed the Tulsa Historical Society and began collecting materials on local history. She received the young research workers graciously, answered their questions with tact and directness, and told them pioneer stories with humor and a deep understanding of human nature.

The culmination of her long life of civic service came in the banquet celebrating the fortieth anniversary of the Hyechka Club, October 20, 1944. As the program unfolded in speeches and musical selections by business and political and musical leaders of the city and the state, it was a striking demonstration of how far Tulsa—and Oklahoma—had come since young Jane Clinton brought her gracious gifts to a raw frontier. She presided with her usual dignity and charm, her queenly grace accentuated by a rose velvet dress, and her mature face reflecting the years of creative living. At the close of the evening an announcement was made of the establishment of the Jane Heard Clinton Student Loan Fund, which will assist young musicians through the years, and will symbolize the influence of her radiant service.

Barely another year had rolled around when her busy hands laid down their multitudinous activities. She died November 8, 1945 at the age of seventy years. One who knew her well thus summed up the religious faith which was at the core of her life: "She met all the varied crises, changes of fortune or health, with an unwavering trust in God. She had no fear of life or death, or of the future. She often remarked to her friends that she was prepared for the Great Adventure."

Other tributes of appreciation poured in from the great and the humble. But all these tributes—like the present sketch of her life and labors—were inadequate. For while she was great as an individual, she was greatest of all as a wife. She and her husband complemented each other so perfectly that any estimate of one without the other is a mere fragment. When she left her sheltered Georgia home to join the young Indian Territory doctor in shaping the swirling tides of frontier society, she gave herself with naturalness and simplicity to her new environment. And where except in Oklahoma of the past half century could two joined lives yield such dividends of creative achievement?