

COMMENTS FROM THE NEW YORKERS ON THE IRVING TOUR IN OKLAHOMA, 1955

By *Maureen McKernan**

The Fort Gibson restoration was a pause in the Washington Irving Tour that was greatly enjoyed by the New York visitors as was the stop at Salina and the opportunity to meet descendants of the pioneer traders who established this frontier base.

But even more impressed were they by the Bear's Glen because here the face of the earth was relatively unchanged, and it was possible to relive for an hour the events of a hundred years ago, even picking up a little touch of poison ivy. In the older states the face of the land has so changed that one cannot associate the present with the past but in Oklahoma one can and to those from old states where generation after generation has left its own deposits upon the face of nature, it is a rare privilege and an excitement to stand upon unchanged land, view an original and unchanged landscape.

None of the New York visitors will forget the cold punch and cakes served by the women and members of the Washington Irving Club at the IXL School near Perkins. Here and again at Yale they were deeply impressed by the kindness, the realness of the people where hospitality was so much of the heart, not just a word.

To everyone, most of them seeing Oklahoma for the first time, it was an unforgettable experience to find the urban presence of modern Oklahoma City and Tulsa so close to the primeval, the original and the characteristic of the country itself. Nowhere, they say, can one see the characteristics of American people, what is essentially American, as is revealed in Oklahoma by Oklahomans to the visitors who are fortunate enough to tour the state with its representative and informed people. Members of the New York delegation made the following comments concerning the Irving Tour:

ELLIOTT B. HUNT, of Ossining, President of the Westchester County Historical Society: "I was deeply impressed, as were all the New York party, at the foresightedness of Oklahomans in recording their history, preserving historic landmarks, doing research now while sources are still available, the facts of the growth of the community easily ascertained.

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"Most significant, from a cultural viewpoint, is that history to Oklahomans, the visitors found, is a living story of today and yesterday, of fresh interest to children and to youth as well as to the antiquarian and the genealogist. With such a beginning one can assume that future generations of Oklahomans will be a far better educated people about their own state and culture than are the people of so many states where a living interest in history was not aroused until decades had obliterated much of the facts of the growth of the culture and society of the area.

This was not only Mr. Hunt's appraisal but that also of all the New York visitors from the historically rich Hudson River Valley.

MRS. ALICE RUNYON, associate director of the Sunnyside Restorations which includes the home of Washington Irving at Tarrytown: "In Oklahoma, Washington Irving stands as the explorer and the statesman who is too often obscured in Eastern minds by his fame as a story teller of half fanciful tales such as those that he wrote about our own Hudson River country." Mrs. Runyon, viewing from the perspective of the historian, saw significance that could inspire other states or areas in the way Oklahoma has made its very earliest history a story of immediate interest to young generations by its speedy program of preserving its historic heritage in such tangible form as restorations and historic markers, following a pattern of known facts and not tradition. As a woman who had given much of her life to research and preservation of the history of Washington Irving and his part in the making of America, she was deeply moved at what the pioneernig and young state of Oklahoma has done for the history of that portion of American development in which Irving played his part.

MRS. RALPH DAROS, of Yorktown Heights, N. Y.: "I'll never forget that morning at the Irving Castle Rocks, when old cowboys made it seem like a day in a time long past and then suddenly there was a radio mike, right out on the prairie from nowhere to bring you back to the present. What impressed me most? What do I remember? That welcome on our arrival at the station in Oklahoma City. The Indians in feather headdresses! The welcome, as though we were old friends, at the Governor's mansion—such a beautiful home. The police escort! I never rode with one before. But perhaps I'll remember longer our visit to Anadarko on Sunday, after the tour was over. The beautiful rock formations of that part of the country; the green of the plains against the red soil; the beauty of the rolling prairies. I've never seen anything more beautiful. I'll never forget it. There was the surprise of the Gilcrease Museum and the grandeur of the Will Rogers Memorial. They were impressive, wonderful, not to be forgotten."

MISS GRETA CORNELL, Ossining, N. Y.: "I'll never forget the inspiration, the beauty, which came to us as a surprise because we

were unprepared, of the Indian students at Bacone College as they gave the 23rd Psalm in Indian sign language. Their singing was equally inspiring. I was so glad to see that the Indians are keeping up their tribal dancing, not letting the dances be forgotten. They must be encouraged not to forget the spiritual significance of their dances.

"I was most impressed by the quality, the wise selection, the great art at the Gilcrease Museum. In particular, I was interested in the Jarvis portrait of 'Black Hawk and His Son,' and the Audubon bird etching by Havell who lived in my home town of Ossining. The landscapes are outstanding. One needs to spend hours in more than one visit to do that Museum justice. I was very much impressed by the collection."

LOGAN BILLINGSLEY, of Katonah, a former Anadarko resident: "The Bacone College Campus at Muskogee is as beautiful as any I've ever seen in the east. You know, from such programs as they gave for us with the wonderful rendering of the Lord's Prayer in Indian that the little college is still the great moral and cultural influence upon Oklahoma that it always has been. Nothing must happen, just for the lack of money, to let Bacone ever decline. It's an American College to thrill the heart of any American, be he Oklahoman, New Yorker or anyone. The East must know more about Bacone."

SIDNEY LEVINE, former Commissioner of Licenses of the State of New York: "This tour of Oklahoma, from great cities like Tulsa, whose skyline challenges that of Manhattan when you see it from the distant hilltops, to the open plains that have never changed, made me think a lot of my own father (and to be proud of him). He was Abraham Levine, a pioneer merchant who followed the railroad construction crews of the Santa Fe in 1881 until he reached Temple, Texas and decided to stay right there. I grew up in New York but this historic tour of Oklahoma made me appreciate and be deeply grateful that my father was a pioneer.

"The Indian dances at Pawnee were most popular with me because they seemed less changed by modern influences. Not that all of the Indian dances on the tour weren't good. The highlights for me were the speech of General Patrick J. Hurley at the banquet in Oklahoma City; the wit and humor of Judge Edgar S. Vaught; the wonderful golden wedding anniversary celebration at the home of Mr. and Mrs. O. A. Cargill near Edmond which I attended. And it was a treat, a real treat, to have a chance to talk to a Governor, Ex-Governor Murray, about that piece of his in the *Saturday Evening Post* that had Oklahoma talking so much. That's an experience you don't stumble onto every day, listening to an author who was also a Governor, discuss his trouble-making piece in last week's magazine."

MRS. CHARLES WARD, Somers, N. Y.: "How nice they all were! It made you feel undeserving, how everywhere people acted as though we had paid them a special honor for coming to Oklahoma while we at the same time were just breathless at the kindness, the friendliness, the lavish hospitality to us, strangers from so far away. We were hardly in a town until people knew we were there and made us feel as if we had found a whole crowd of friends welcoming us. The patience of the crowds when we were late arriving! The trouble everyone took to entertain us! Their graciousness—whether it was a Governor or a judge or some shy little Indian boy!"

EVELYN HODECKER HUNT (Mrs. Elliott B.) of Ossining: "The friendliness, their hospitality, the way the people of Oklahoma did not stand on ceremony at all. Even the children just came up and spoke to us, told us about their families, their hopes to go to college—as though we were old friends or someone they had been just waiting to meet. The young people seemed to be so much more interested in schooling, in getting an education than most I know back east. The barbecue picnic on the prairie at the Irving Castle Rocks south of Stillwater was the most striking event, one we'll not forget but on the formal side I think we were all most impressed by the Will Rogers Memorial. To us New Englanders the Oklahoma spirit taught a lesson. It is to show you how kind people can be to strangers and that you can and should do the same for someone else who may be a stranger in your own home town."

It was as a Frenchman that Paul Masse viewed Oklahoma, and the French name "Chouteau" meant the pioneer story of America which has always fascinated him, particularly that part of the pioneer adventure that was paced out by the French.

"Now," said Mr. Masse (and his wife agreed), "I have seen the heart of America as I had not yet seen it. Now I can really begin to know America. You don't find all that I have wanted in our eastern cities. What I wanted to know about America I began to see and understand in Oklahoma. It's the America I have wanted to find."

FRANCIS BILLINGSLEY, Chairman, Committee on Westchester County Historical Society Irving Tour: "We New Yorkers were a group of history lovers, most of whom were on their first trip to the southwestern part of the United States and a real adventure.

"As for myself, I was keenly interested in seeing the eastern section of Oklahoma, as my previous trips to the state had been to the southwestern part. The native charm and beauty of the "New Country" to which, in 1901, the Billingsly family had gone from the Cherokee Strip were well known to me: the colorful Indian people and the beautiful view from the top of Tonkawa Hill in Indian City.

"Having heard tales of the Indian Territory from a native daughter, Maureen McKernan, I had contemplated the Irving Tour with the

same expectancy as my fellow travelers. Miss McKernan, Woman's Editor of the Westchester County Publishers, had spent her girlhood near Castle where her family had been cattle ranchers before statehood. The Oklahoma Historical Society was scheduled to take us right through this little town of Castle. In fact, we did pass directly in front of the McKernan homestead.

"At Irvington, New York, in the latter part of March a reception was given in honor of the delegation from the Oklahoma Historical Society. Following this tea and reception at Sunnyside, which Mrs. Alice Runyon and Dr. Hugh Grant Rowell gave in honor of the visiting group of Oklahomans, the air in New York was filled with "the Oklahoma Tour." This event was a huge success. Muriel H. Wright and R. G. Miller spoke of the plans of the Oklahoma Historical Society and made a fine impression as did the others who had made the trip to New York. The other Oklahomans who were present in Westchester County were Mrs. Sue Ruble, representing Governor Raymond Gary, Colonel George H. Shirk, Mrs. Harold Westcott and Miss Hallie Johnson.

"Our Westchester papers gave widespread coverage to the visit of the Oklahomans. *The New York Times* ran a fine story which included a map and pictures. *The Christian Science Monitor* sent a staff to cover the reception at Sunnyside and the *Monitor's* full page of drawings and feature story ran in its international edition in April. Foreign publications such as *France-Amerique* also carried news stories of the re-run of the "Tour on the Prairies."

"The decision to plant ivy originated with Miss Maureen McKernan but it fell to Mrs. Alice Runyon to follow through with this wonderful idea. Mrs. Runyon, one of the nation's outstanding authorities on Washington Irving, took care of this ivy detail from the time the ivy was cut from the vine at Sunnyside until it reached the Oklahoma soil. Mrs. Runyon was a "woman with a mission" among us. Johnny Appleseed could not have taken his planting much more zealously than Mrs. Runyon when she planted the ivy in Oklahoma.

"Our New York group had its fair share of excitement. Washington Irving displayed great agitation on finding Count Pourtales missing as did our party on finding Mr. Elliot Baldwin Hunt missing at departure time. I can still see Miss McKernan striding down the platform, photographers at her heels, shouting "Where's Elliot?" as the 20th Century Limited sounded its warning whistle. Fortunately Mr. Hunt, President of the Westchester County Historical Society and official delegate of Westchester County, was finally located.

"With Mr. Charles Schwab, the representative of the Mayor of the City of New York, on hand to wish us Godspeed our party left New York. Throughout the run to Oklahoma City, this Pullman car was given special attention and designated as the "Oklahoma Irving Tour."

"We arrived safely and were given a wonderful reception at Oklahoma City. From the railroad station we were taken to the Governor's Mansion where Mrs. Raymond Gary greeted us. The party was served breakfast and were overwhelmed by the graciousness of our hostess. I know the Easterners melted considerably at the warmth of this greeting.

"The story of the Tour in Oklahoma is well known and there is little that I can add, except to mention that this Irving Tour has had far-reaching significance. Since Oklahoma received her cuttings of ivy, other states have requested slips of this Kenilworth Ivy which henceforth may be better known as Irving's Ivy.

"Other Historical Societies throughout the nation may well follow the lead of the Oklahoma Historical Society in initiating tours to teach history. Our own Westchester County Historical Society for its Fall Pilgrimage has adopted many things we learned from the Oklahoma Historical Society's Irving Tour in Oklahoma."