

SOME PERSONAL REMEMBRANCES ABOUT LYNN RIGGS

By Joseph Benton*

All during his almost fifty-five years, Lynn Riggs' life was a continuous striving to satisfy the urge to achieve that which burned within him. A native of Claremore, Oklahoma, his mother died when Lynn was still a small boy and a few years thereafter his father remarried. The new surroundings were not too happy for the lad and he went to live with an aunt. Lynn loved music, or what passed for music among the pioneer settlers of Indian Territory at that time. Being of Cherokee descent, as a child Lynn heard the chants of his family's original tribe and learned many of the folk-ballads of the hardy pioneers, songs which later he used in several of his plays.

After graduating from Claremore High School, Lynn wanted to go to college but such took money. He also wanted to see the world. Hoping for a job somewhere, he "rode the rods" to Chicago, where he worked briefly for the now extinct Adams Express Company, then pressed on to New York. But the big city was unkind, so he crossed the continent as a freight-train bum to Los Angeles where a job finally appeared as proof-reader on the *Los Angeles Times*. He was working on such eye-straining night-time job in the early morning when a bomb planted in the Times Building by disgruntled former employees, exploded and killed many persons. He was among the first there, naturally, wrote an article about what he saw, sold it immediately to the old McClure Newspaper Syndicate and with those three hundred dollars came back to Oklahoma, this time as a paying passenger inside the train. That fall (1920) Lynn enrolled as a freshman at the University of Oklahoma, since by that time he realized that he could never get ahead in the highly competitive game of newspaperdom without a college education. He chose the University of Oklahoma because tuition there would be less since he was a native of the state.

It was in September of 1920 at the University of Oklahoma that I first met Lynn Riggs. He was then enrolled in Speech in the College of Fine Arts, sang second tenor in the O. U. Men's Glee Club and in order to stretch those three hundred dollars as far as possible, washed dishes at the Pi Kappa Alpha fraternity house for his room and board in the basement of "the Old Red Barn." There was a bond of friendship between him and me immediately and a few weeks after the University opened I invited him to my home

* Mr. Joseph Benton was former leading tenor of the Metropolitan Opera Company, New York, and at present is on the voice faculty of the University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma.—Ed.

one Sunday afternoon for some music. When my mother met Lynn she lost her heart to him and arrangements were made for him to move from his dark basement room into the southeast corner bedroom of our house. He occupied that room as long as he was a student at O. U. The friendship between Lynn and my mother never waned; in fact, he would read to her each poem or scene as a play took form, and she would offer suggestions. Never having known for long his own mother, Lynn turned for love and understanding to other mothers and guarded their opinions carefully.

Lynn's grades at O. U. were average. But at the outset of his Sophomore year he changed from Fine Arts to English in the College of Arts and Sciences. This decision was made largely because by so doing he would become eligible for a gradership in English. He got the job. All of this time he was rapidly turning out poems and short stories, writing late each night. His social life began to blossom, too, since he suddenly had discovered girls. It was that fall (1921) that I was successful in persuading Lynn to become a pledge to Pi Kappa Alpha. Lynn was popular among the coeds, well liked by his male associates and often invited into the homes of his teachers, especially those of the English faculty.

During the time that Professor William G. Schmidt, Professor of voice and Director of the O. U. Men's Glee Club, was studying singing with Jean de Reszké in France, I filled in as the Glee Club's director. In the winter of 1922 some of us conceived the plan of making some money by taking a group from the Glee Club on a Chautauqua tour that coming summer. I got together a double male quartet, a solo quartet and four other members of the glee club who did specialty numbers, and trained them, we auditioned and were signed for a ten-weeks tour with the Midland Chautauqua Company of Des Moines, Iowa. The membership of the solo quartet consisted of the following: bass, Elmer Fraker; baritone, Laile Neal; 2nd tenor, Lynn Riggs; and 1st tenor, myself. The others who did specialty numbers were: reader, Charles Green; tap-dancer, Skeet Carrier; chalk-talker, Leo Morrison; and piano accompanist, Jack Foose. Each day on tour the solo quartet gave a twenty-minute prelude to the afternoon lecture presented by a fine woman speaker known as "Mother Lake," and in the evening the eight of us gave an all-music program, the first part of which was made up of solo, quartet, and specialty numbers, the last half being an old-time black-face minstrel show. The solo quartet wore identical suits, and as minstrels the costumes of all of us were loud and colorful.

That summer the New York Central Railroad system employees were on strike and since the ten states where our Chautauqua tour took us was almost completely in such territory, we had many transportation difficulties. Highways did not exist in 1922, and numerous times we of the solo quartet would have to change into our identical suits to be on time for the afternoon prelude to the lecture, while

chugging along over rutty roads in a truck or steaming flivver. We indeed earned the \$25.00 per week each of which our salary consisted. (As manager and director of the group I received \$35.00 weekly. That was a lot of money in 1922.) Highlights of that tour include Lynn's and my meeting and being invited to the home of the novelist, Willa Cather, in Red Cloud, Nebraska where one of the group's dates was; our seeing Niagara Falls for the first time for each of us; and a program over Des Moines radio station WHO at the close of the summer's work as a bonus for being the foremost musical aggregation put out that summer by the Midland people. Radio in 1922 was still an expensive toy in most American homes. We were really thrilled when we received, weeks later, forwarded fan-mail for our singing from as far away from Des Moines as eighty miles.

All along during the Chautauqua tour, Lynn by day made notes in his small notebook regarding what he saw and heard—notes especially of Americana—and almost every night, following the program, he would write late. He and I usually shared the same hotel room on tour. It was then that I first was able to go to sleep with the light burning. Certainly there was much chance for the practice of such that summer.

The fall of 1922, there was an over-enrollment in classes in Freshman English at O. U., and Lynn was given two of them to teach. He continued to teach English as long as he was a student in the University but he always found time to do some writing of his own. His first check for something sold was from H. L. Mencken: \$18.00. I was with Lynn when he cashed the money order at the Norman post office. Then came a \$35.00 check from George Jean Nathan, co-author with H. L. Mencken of *The Smart Set* (later *The American Mercury*), and the following summer Harriet Monroe devoted an entire issue of *Poetry Magazine* to Lynn's poems. He also wrote poems for his friends, and sent them as Christmas and birthday remembrances.

When the muse of poetry and the inspiration for writing short stories became fagged, Lynn turned to play-writing and in the Summer School of 1923 at O. U. his first play, "Cuckoo," was produced. It was a raucous farce, full of fun and contained some of the pioneer ballads which Lynn had heard as a child in Claremore. Lynn had an excellent tenor voice but he could not write music on paper so that others could learn it, so he would sit at our piano and "chord" as he sang these old songs and I would write them on music paper. (He and I collaborated also on "Honeymoon" which today is still printed in the National Songbook of our fraternity, Pi Kappa Alpha.) "Cuckoo" had two performances that summer at O. U., and was the first of the Lynn Riggs plays.

The beautiful coed whom Lynn had met when a Sophomore began more and more to take up his time, so his prose-writing

suffered but not his writing of poetry. He gave this beauty-queen his pin and she in turn liked Lynn quite well but in her own venerated, superficial way. Then in September of 1923 there came to O. U. to study geology the son of a beer baron from Wisconsin. The young man drove a Stutz speedster, and had a well-padded wallet. He set siege to Lynn's love-castle, and soon won out over Lynn. Lynn had a nervous breakdown, withdrew from the University before the first semester of 1923-24 was over, and went to New Mexico, with a deeply-rooted case of pulmonary tuberculosis, where he worked—doctor's orders—as a manual laborer. He found employment as a man-of-all-work on the ranch of Whitter Binner, the poet whom Lynn had met at an O. U. lecture-recital and with whom he had corresponded occasionally thereafter. After many adjustments, Lynn built his own adobe house in Santa Fe where the one upstairs room was his writing room. It was there that he completed several of his plays and made drafts for others, some of them never finished.

The period from September of 1923 to May of 1935 I lived, studied and sang in opera in Europe, so I do not know much regarding Lynn's dramatic endeavors save for occasional letters, but in the fall of 1935 we met in New York. One day following lunch as guests of George Gershwin, Lynn and Gershwin went over their plans to collaborate on a folk-opera, something similiar to "Porgy and Bess" which was then playing in New York City, but they never concluded these plans before Gershwin's death in 1937.

Lynn telephoned me in New York very early one morning shortly after our lunch with Gershwin—it was November of 1935—to say that he was flying back to Santa Fe at once in answer to a telegram from the old Mexican man who had helped him build his adobe house there, that that water pipes had frozen and burst in the kitchen and that the house was melting away. He was gone several weeks but meanwhile plans had matured for the New York presentation of Lynn's play "Russet Mantle," so he flew back to New York to help with its preparation. This was his first play where the locale was not laid in Oklahoma but in New Mexico.

January 10, 1936 was the date of my rather sudden debut at the Metropolitan Opera in Massenet's opera, "Manon," and opposite that great lady of opera, Miss Lucrezia Bori. Despite the rush of rehearsing, I took time to telephone Lynn and ask him to be my guest at the debut that night, but he could not come due to the first dress rehearsal of his play, "Russet Mantle." However, he did attend several subsequent performances at the Met where I sang, even as I did one of his play's presentations. In "Russet Mantle" Burgess Meredith was starred and in this play he was "discovered" for Hollywood, even as Franchot Tone had been "discovered" for Hollywood in Lynn's play "Green Grow the Lilacs." It has always been a keen disappointment to me not to have been able to hear and see "Green Grow the Lilacs" since it is the play from which

the great musical hit "Oklahoma" was made by Rogers and Hammerstein. I was still in Europe when it ran its very great success in New York. Almost every one of the folk-melodies in that play, the melody-line of which appears in print in the Samuel French edition of the play, had been written on paper as Lynn sang each song with my writing down the tune, at various times back in 1921-22-23 in my parent's home in Norman, Oklahoma.¹

Lynn was allergic to letter-writing. I used to remind him, "You write for a living but seldom to your friends." He agreed readily and always seemed duly penitent but the allergy persisted. Hence it is that many of the details of his activities in the field of the theatre must be related by those who know about them first-hand. After 1936 in New York, the next time we saw each other—and the last time—was at the National Convention of Pi Kappa Alpha in Los Angeles in September of 1938. My father had died that May and in order to change the scenery and her ideas a bit, I had persuaded my mother for us to go to California for the summer, since many of her relatives lived there then. We had taken an apartment in Monrovia, and from there as home-base, we made trips to see relatives and to visit places of interest up and down the West Coast. As the days drew near for the opening of the Convention, I took a room at the Convention's headquarters, the Biltmore Hotel in Los Angeles, and from there telephoned Lynn. He was then writing for MGM, and it was a real chore to reach him by telephone through the battery of secretaries, each of whom wanted to know who, what, and why. Lynn came to several sessions of the Convention, and at the Night of Stars at the Coconut Grove he received a standing ovation when prominent members of the fraternity were honored on the program. My mother was also a guest there that night and, she was greatly moved—and most happily—when she saw her two "sons" receive the plaudits of their fraternity's national delegates. She was among the first (1921) who had helped Lynn with his beginning literary efforts and had through all the intervening years encouraged him to continue his writing. That was, as said before, the last time I ever saw Lynn. In 1947 my mother died, and when moving to my new home I found in our basement a wooden cracker-box labeled, "Lynn Riggs' things" which he had left there when he had withdrawn from O. U. and left suddenly for New Mexico following his nervous breakdown. I wrote Lynn about the box and he answered for me to burn all letters therein and send him only a few of the other contents: his mother's shirt-waist-watch, a pair of award cufflinks, his Pi Kappa Alpha pledge-ribbons, etc., all of which things I sent to him and which he acknowledged.

¹ These were not the tunes used in the musical, "Oklahoma," by Rogers and Hammerstein.—Ed.

As cancer of the stomach developed, Lynn never once mentioned his being ill in the occasional letters he wrote me, so it was a sudden and painful shock when I read in the papers for July 1, 1954 that he had died the preceding night in Memorial Hospital in New York. His sister, Mrs. Cundiff ("Sister Mattie" whom he loved dearly) of Tulsa was with him during the final days of his illness. It was the family's wish that I sing at his funeral at the Methodist Church in Claremore, and I did so, but rarely ever have I had such difficulty controlling my voice and emotions. The solo used was "Thy Will Be Done," music by Ward-Stephens, poem by Anne Campbell Stark. (see below). Miss Virginia Lemonds was the organist, W. Angie Smith, Bishop of the Methodist Church for Oklahoma and New Mexico, gave the beautiful eulogy, and Governor Johnston Murray sent an Oklahoma flag which for the first time in our State's history was used to drape over a coffin. And when the organist played softly "O what a beautiful morning," every one of us present was made to realize, and more poignantly than ever before, what vast goodwill Lynn had brought to our state nationally and internationally.

Like his Claremore townsman, Will Rogers, Lynn's strength lay in being his own natural self. Lynn wrote about people he had known, entwining their foibles, weaknesses and strengths, their garrulous chatterings and grass-roots wisdoms throughout his plays even as Will Rogers had columnized and spoken of national and international personalities with the same native sense as weighing-scales for their intrinsic worth. Both were unique and both were great Oklahomans and great Americans.

Following is the poem of the song used at Lynn Riggs' funeral, July 6, 1954:

Thy Will Be Done
By Anne Campbell Stark

The moon rises out of the sea
With the setting of the sun,
And the steadfast stars shine down on me
Silently one by one.
The green leaf comes with the Spring
And goes to sleep in the Fall
Obeying Thy will in every thing,
Thou Watcher over all.
Each bird in Thy wonderful plan
Sings with a heart of faith,
Contented to leave to man
The doubter's questioning breath.
Our Father, can it be
I am less than the smallest one?
Swing me into harmony,
Teach me to say to Thee: "Thy will be done."