

LYNN RIGGS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

*By Charles Aughtry**

One likes to think of Lynn Riggs's days at the University of Oklahoma as among his most happy and most satisfying. During his three years there, he occupied a position of esteem and received the recognition which artists especially seem to crave. The whole world lay before him, as it does in such years. Riggs the young poet, teacher, editor, and playwright appeared likely to leave his name in the volumes of American literature.

In September, 1920 R (for "Rollie") Lynn Riggs came down from Claremore to enroll at the University of Oklahoma.¹ He had just turned twenty-one, and as a result of natural endowments plus the experience of having traveled on his own to New York and Los Angeles, he was an unusually sophisticated freshman. He enrolled in the College of Fine Arts that fall but changed to Arts and Sciences the following January where he majored in English with minors in French and English philosophy. (At the University Riggs spent three full years plus the summer of 1921 and withdrew during the fall of his senior year (1923).)

While Riggs was at O. U., the English department numbered among its members several men who became well-known to thousands of graduates as well as a few who were to achieve national and international fame. Riggs studied under Sanford Salyer (whose course in versification he praised in the student magazine), Theodore Hampton Brewer, Andrew Robert Ramey, and Sardis Roy Hadsell—to name some of the senior members of the department. He also took two courses from Randall Stewart, later renowned as a Hawthorne scholar. At the same time Walter Campbell, the western writer, and Ben Botkin, the folklorist, were young members of the English department. It is not surprising that Riggs's budding talent was nourished in this atmosphere.

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¹The files in the office of the Registrar and the President of the University as well as the files of various University publications are the sources of most of the facts in this article.

Riggs had to overcome parental disapproval to attend college. He mortgaged his Indian land allotment of ninety acres to pay part of his expenses, and worked for some time as a dish washer. In spite of the lack of encouragement from his father (his mother was dead) and the necessity to consider finances, Riggs distinguished himself academically at the University. He made all A's and B's, except for a C in physical education. He began his days at O. U. living in the basement of the Pi Kappa Alpha house where he washed dishes for his room and board. However, soon after Joseph Benton's mother met Riggs, he moved into the Benton home where he lived during the rest of his time at the University.² Sometime during 1921 Riggs pledged Pi Kappa Alpha. That same year he collaborated with Joseph Benton on "Honeymoon," a song still included in the fraternity's national song book. During his first year, Riggs joined a social fraternity, the men's glee club, an honorary dramatic fraternity, and the honorary freshman society but did not join any of the several literary societies. He also appeared in his only dramatic role at the University, as Francisco in *The Tempest*.

— After attending summer school in 1921, Riggs returned in the fall as a Student Assistant in English. At this time the University first began hearing of Lynn Riggs. The *University of Oklahoma Magazine* first listed Riggs as an editorial assistant in the November, 1921 issue. During the fall Riggs also began writing for the *Oklahoma Whirlwind* and the *Oklahoma Daily*. In December, R. Lynn Riggs became editor of the "Poems of the Month" page of the *Magazine*. The young editor's opening statement of policy was extraordinary. It is an exceptionally mature pronouncement of critical standards to come from a student editor, and is bold in its sincere encouragement of originality in verse. Riggs writes:³

On this page will appear every month the best original poems submitted to the editor. Jingles and infantile efforts will not be considered; neither will mountainous or untyped manuscripts. Free verse, striking variations on old themes or meters, new imagery,—in short, anything that is modern and vigorous and individual,—will take precedence over preachments in verse, childish imitations, or facile eulogies of the obvious and trite. The editor hopes to uncover some creditable Oklahoma verse, to give first publication to coming poets, and to establish a more rigid standard of poetic criticism at this University.

This declaration bespeaks Rigg's high standards for literary art throughout his career.

² Joseph Benton, "Some Personal Remembrances about Lynn Riggs," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. XXXIV, No. 3 (Autumn, 1956), p. 297.

³ Lynn Riggs, *University of Oklahoma Magazine*, Vol. X, No. 3 (December, 1921), p. 17.

During the Christmas vacation of 1921-1922 Riggs remained in Norman and wrote his first play, a one-act farce entitled "Cuckoo." The drama department soon heard of it and the January 21, 1922 *Oklahoma Daily* first reported its coming production. Several times during the spring the newspaper announced its performance, but there were delays for one reason or another.

The spring semester of 1922 was a busy one for Riggs. In addition to studying and teaching one section of freshman English, Riggs wrote a good deal. Vachel Lindsay had visited the O. U. campus to speak during the first semester, and the cover of the *University of Oklahoma Magazine* for February, 1922 carried a poem, "To Vachel Lindsay"—apparently Riggs's first poem in a University publication. This same issue reported that Riggs had recently had his first acceptance of any importance; it was the publication of two poems, "Song" and "I Was A King," in Mencken and Nathan's *Smart Set*. Joseph Benton recalls being with Riggs when he opened the letter containing his first payment—\$18.

On March 30, Riggs appeared before the Poetry Club to read the poetry of John P. McClure, at that time probably the outstanding literary graduate of the University. Riggs later acknowledged McClure's influence on his own poetry, and at this time he had already grown to know McClure personally. On May 4 Riggs also read O'Neill's recent Pulitzer Prize play, *Beyond the Horizon*, to the Drama League. By this time he had become one of the most influential students among those on the campus who were interested in the arts. In the final issue of that year's *Magazine* Riggs wrote, "The growing interest in this [poetry] page is a very gratifying thing . . . it becomes constantly more difficult to make selections for the month."

May 18, 1922—this date marks the first production of a play by Lynn Riggs. The farce, "Cuckoo," was sandwiched between two pantomimes on the final dramatic bill of the year. It is a situation comedy in which two geology students seeking shelter on a field trip in the Arbuckle Mountains try to defeat the schemes of Maw Hillbank as she connives to grab one of them for her fast-aging hillbilly daughter, 17-year-old Josie. The comedy is of the broadest: caricature, slapstick pummeling, and obvious wit. The student paper thought it the best local-talent production of the year, and concluded its review, "'Cuckoo' went over Big." The play was so successful that it was received with equal approval during a summer session performance on July 11.

On June 9, the summer edition of the student newspaper, the *Sooner Student*, reported "Sooner Minstrels Ready for

Tonight." The article described the group of O. U. teachers and students who were about to spend ten weeks on a Chautauqua circuit as the Southern Minstrels. The group was directed and led by Joseph Benton, then an instructor in music and by that time one of Riggs's best friends. Riggs, Benton, Elmer Fraker, and Laile Neal made up the solo quartet. That summer of touring the north central part of the United States made a lasting impression on Riggs; probably the most important result was Riggs's association with a maternal figure billed as "Mother Lake" who gave good advice to young ladies—and apparently to Riggs. He memorialized her in a television play written shortly before his death in 1954, "Someone to Remember."

Riggs returned to Norman in the fall as a Teaching Fellow in English. During the first semester he was enrolled in only one course, apparently busy with his work as a teacher and editor. At this time first dropping the initial 'R' from his name, Riggs again appeared as poetry editor of the *University of Oklahoma Magazine* with a declaration of editorial policy similar to his earlier one. He contributed no poems to his poetry page until March, 1923—when the work of several months appeared as the entire poetry section of the magazine. Ben Botkin wrote a laudatory introduction to the eight poems entitled "The Gift of Singing" in which he praised Riggs for his critical eye as well as his lyric voice. In this same issue Riggs as poetry editor of the magazine debated the question, "Should Students Write Criticisms of Fine Arts Productions?" with Mike Monroney as editor of the *Oklahoma Daily*. Monroney said "Yes," but Riggs said "No." Riggs argued that a critic should be specially qualified and trained, as students are not likely to be. He was very strong in stating that "it borders somewhat on a crime" to permit inept criticism in print by the ignorant and inexperienced.

In March, the *Oklahoma Whirlwind* announced in the "Pins Going Out" column, "Lynn Riggs-Aleene Yost." This romance lasted till the fall when, as Joseph Benton says, "The son of a beer baron from Wisconsin [with] a well-padded wallet set siege to Lynn's love-castle, and soon won out over Lynn."⁴ From all evidence it appears that this romance was a serious one for Riggs and its impact on him lasting. His loss in love was the blot on his experience at the University.

During the summer of 1923, Riggs accepted an appointment as an Assistant in English to teach two sections of freshmen; he also took an extension course in constitutional law. He

⁴ Benton, *op. cit.*, p. 299.

returned to the campus in the fall, no longer as poetry editor on the *University of Oklahoma Magazine* but only as a staff contributor. The first number of the magazine carried a finely expressive poem by Riggs, infused with his current mood and entitled "Beauty Has Gone." The concluding stanza reads,⁵

I am lost in straight walls of the thoughts of men
Beauty could not inhabit if she willed.
O, who will lead me till my cries are stilled?
O, who will bring me to the plains again?

On this plaintive note, one might say, Riggs bade farewell. Shortly after this poem was published, his health failed and he withdrew from the University. Joseph Benton writes, "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"⁶ After leaving the University, Riggs contributed a few poems and a short story to the *Magazine*. His last poem appeared in the Winter, 1928 issue.

While he was at the University, Riggs was gaining experience and momentum for the career as a dramatist which was to follow upon the recovery of his health. In addition to his University publications, Riggs had poems in *The Reviewer* and *Smart Set* in 1922, and *Palms* and *Poetry* in 1923. He was learning to exercise his exceptionally fine ear for lyricism, the lyricism which predated the language of his folk plays. In his days at O. U. Riggs worked hard and was rewarded appropriately. Despite the emotional distress which prompted his departure, Lynn Riggs must have known joy and satisfaction at O. U.—as his frequent sojourns on college campuses throughout his life suggest.

⁵ Riggs, *op. cit.*, Vol. XII, No. 1 (Fall, 1923), p. 2.

⁶ Benton, *op. cit.*, p. 299.