

The Oklahoma Experience: In Our Own Words

One prominent historian has mourned the lack of historical attention to the disappearance of the patterns of small town and rural life. Another calls for "a peoples' history," to offset the false impressions created by the triumphant stories of great men. Such histories would be written "from the point of view of those who have been exploited politically and economically and whose plight has been largely omitted from most histories." In fact, many of these aspects of our past have been documented in the personal memoirs of ordinary people such as those in this series of readings. Together, such sources create a collective autobiography of Oklahomans from the frontier era to the recent past. Their theme, however, is not exploitation. Instead, these Oklahomans stress their recall of good times defined by personal growth and relationships with family, friends, and neighbors. Their memories have been softened by the passage of time and the belief that they were strengthened by their experiences. Sometimes the writers fall into nostalgia or celebrations, as implied in the title of Leon Fouquet's *Hurrah for My New Free Country*. Yet, the memories they share are also more complex, reflect harder realities, and point to bigger truths.

For the most part, these books are written by and about individuals known only to their communities or families. Marquis James and Judson Jerome are exceptions to this rule, but they share a perspective rooted in the experience of ordinary people. Each author in this series presents his/her life as the product of localized encounters and influences. The writers contributed to and were shaped by families, individuals, and institutions typical of the farming communities and neighborhoods that were still characteristic of Oklahoma a generation after their demise in other parts of America. Glen Ross's memories of the depression era in eastern Oklahoma and Ladonna Meinders' recollections of the decades following the depression in central Oklahoma both illustrate continuities with the frontier past. Their memories of local concerns, people and institutions and the everyday activities of work, recreation, and community define their experience and create an understanding of the state's past, somewhat different from the textbook history, revealing its qualities and varied content rather than its quantities and significant specific events.

The perspectives of these memories and autobiographies offer important correctives to conventional histories that focus on the great and large, often missing the rhythms of the past and the small details that defined it. In fact as well as in memory, Oklahoma did not attain the levels of economic development and urbanization characteristic of the rest of the nation until well after World War II. This meant that most Oklahomans before that time were raised in communities where farming and the corresponding patterns of life shaped their existence. World views, goals, language, and stories all mirrored local realities and understandings. Oklahomans knew they belonged to a larger world, but they perceived its influences infrequently as remote and indirect. Their world was one in which

a single teacher often enriched the lives of whole communities along with those of individual students. Work was defined by task rather than by the clock, while the seasons, agricultural cycles, regular religious revivals, community celebrations, and school terms marked larger units of time. Such an environment often required strong women to assume varied roles in accord with their interests or their family's economic survival. Their other activities cemented relations within families and communities. A child's world frequently consisted of as much work as play and school. And, twenty miles distance could be a major barrier to one's receiving medical help or to a young person's access to opportunity.

Many families lived on the verge of economic disaster only one step away from frontier living conditions. Isolation, limited access to medical care, and similar hardships added to their struggles, while the labor required of men, women, and children frequently made them old before their time. Even those who were relatively better off lived amid circumstances largely foreign to contemporary Americans. Our writers, though, saw such conditions as barriers to overcome, the measure of their opportunity. Most achieved a degree of success, but balance the celebration of their accomplishments with a sense of awe and wonder.

The authors tell their stories to share, not to gloat, in much the same manner as traditional village elders. Much of their writing has the quality of communications from grandparents to their descendants, and many consciously address the future. Ultimately, they are exploring the meaning of their lives in the hope that others might profit from their experiences. The stories that arise from such goals are often valuable simply as stories. Others offer important reminders about such matters as human character, the varied paths to success, and the significance of relationships. These perspectives also reflect dimensions of the writer's faith. Although many avoid conventional religious expressions, they share faith in the land, the meaning of ordinary lives, and traditional values along with a belief in the importance of their own stories. The collective autobiography they have created permit present and future generations to pursue such meanings in their own lives and communities. In doing so, readers will also find that they are probing the soul of Oklahoma, gaining a broad appreciation of the rich and complex story of our past.

Leaves in the Wind

by Ladonna Kramer Meinders

Ladonna Kramer Meinders grew up in central Oklahoma in Kingfisher County during the 1940s and 1950s. Her autobiography centers on her family's role as farmers producing wheat and eggs while modernizing the home place with indoor plumbing and up-to-date machinery. Meinders illustrates her book with drawings and photographs of baby chicks, relatives, and outhouses, so readers learn of the changes that Meinders sees in the people and country around her. Meinders, a former Miss Oklahoma, has written her book in an episodic style; however, as she relates separate incidents about Kingfisher County

tornadoes, wheat harvest, Loyal schools, and lye soap, she offers a comprehensive picture of the lifestyle that the majority of rural Oklahoma residents engaged in during the years following World War II.

Each chapter sketch gives a glimpse of things that a typical Oklahoman of the period deemed an important ingredient for happiness and well-being. Above all, Meinders reminds us throughout that, even though she and her family relied on canned goods, church activities, toilet paper substitutes, and well water to survive, there is an even more important and necessary element to survival regardless of the environment--family and the love shared by mother, father, sisters, brothers, uncles, aunts, grandparents, and friends. Without such a bonding spirit of devotion and foundation of support, we simply exist as "leaves in the wind."

Hurrah for My New Free Country
by Leon Charles Fouquet

A transplanted Frenchman's detailed and exciting journal shows him being Americanized in the post-Civil War West. Leon Fouquet finally settles near Chandler, Oklahoma, tending a famous fruit farm and silk producing operation. Before coming to Chandler, he meets Bat Masterson and Bill Tilghman and works at diverse occupations in Kansas and Oklahoma. He witnesses traditional Indian life, the destruction of the buffalo, and the run for and settlement of the Cherokee Strip. Fouquet obviously possessed the unique French view of freedom and equality and revels in the fact that their true meanings found fruition on the American plains, especially in Oklahoma.

Fouquet's prose contains copious dates, places, numbers, and prices. Reading this autobiography is more like reading a man's diary rather than memoirs penned for profit and self-promotion. Fouquet, an American via France, saw more of America than did most "real" Americans of the 19th century--the development of a country, the transition of a territory, the immigration of peoples, and the passing of an age. Oklahomans like Fouquet created a new territory and state unique in its populace, outlook, and history.

The Cherokee Strip
by Marquis James

James divides his manuscript into three parts: Marquis James' family's Cherokee Strip claim; life in Enid, Oklahoma; and James' experience as a cub reporter and newspaperman. The inclusion of Enid High School cheers, immature poetry penned by the author, and frequent interjections recreates the experiences of coming of age in small town Oklahoma in the early part of the 20th century. The volume ends with the youthful James traveling to Kansas City where he continued his journalism career that led him to regional prominence as a writer, but before that trip, he chronicles the life and times of Enid in delightfully vivid local color.

James fondly describes an unhurried, optimistic, innocent time. He laments his lost cat, enjoys varsity rivalries, and acknowledges the benefits that the arrival of the railroad brings to his hometown. He records conversations in the vernacular that his ear heard. He is the main character, but Enid often rivals his position in his accounts of the day-to-day growth of an Oklahoma city. This book is uniquely seen and transcribed by a fledgling, starry-eyed reporter for the Enid Morning News who is perceptive about the reasons for Enid's economic and social development. Youthful Marquis James "deplored the circumstances" that kept him in Enid, but readers will be glad that he stayed long enough to create the memories reflected in this intimate chapter of American history.

On Coon Mountain

by Glen Ross

From the onset, readers know that Glen Ross perhaps didn't want to be born and that he is sarcastic and cynical. He views life in a unique, inquisitive fashion, and his autobiography reflects that. Born in northeast Oklahoma in 1929, Ross reveals much about himself in this book and also much about the Great Depression in Oklahoma. He writes of Stilwell public schools, digging water wells, making hominy, listening to "One Man's Family" on the radio, trapping groundhogs, picking corn, and hunting skunks in the winter. However, what impresses readers the most is Ross's view of and affection for the land. His descriptions of Oklahoma rivers, bluffs, and woods are lush, vivid, and intense; they are so clearly written that we can see what Ross saw with his adolescent eyes. He writes of family in a fond, familiar, nostalgic way. Dad, mom and Grandma loom as major figures much loved and respected by the author. Ross keeps dialogue limited, so what we read is prose full of images expressed simply and beautifully. Readers go with Ross to see swarming bees and wasps and to harvest poke plants in woods around the Ross family home. The Depression forces the Rosses to seek greener pastures in Oregon, but Oklahoma welcomes them back within a year. As the Depression closes, World War II draws Ross and his family into the twentieth century and the world at large. Readers go along too, but without resentment, for *On Coon Mountain* will always offer a comfortable and secure part of the past where we may escape and vicariously live a less hurried and simpler way of life in those Oklahoma hills.

Flight from Innocence

by Judson Jerome

Autobiography told via poetic flashback vignettes best describes this book by Jerome Judson, poet, journalist, and author. Jerome's detail allows readers to perceive the author's sensory and mental impressions and sensitivity. From his crib, to his first haircut, to his mother's soft arms, to his experiences at the University of Oklahoma, to living as a cowboy, to questioning his manhood, to World War II Okinawa, Jerome offers his readers substantial facts about Oklahoma and the world as his own personal philosophy. Primarily

living in either Tulsa or Oklahoma City, he details his past from 1927 until 1947 and offers speculation on how children learn to think, the value of women, and why his oil field farther drank. Jerome seems particularly concerned with the notion that inhabitants of the American Southwest must cope with their circumstances and not complain about them, something he learns to do in his urban Oklahoma experience.

Incorporating his own poetry and excerpts from family members' memoirs, Jerome weaves various incidents from his life into a fascinating, integrated story of a youth who grows into a man who lives life, enjoys life, and understands life because he admires, attempts, and achieves independence and individuality. He understands his own poet's sensitivity and its development so that the readers of this moving autobiography may do the same.

For Further Reading:

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