

**"It Was In This Way:"
The Influence of Oral Tradition on Life And Literature of
Oklahomans**

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"It was in this way, the stories were told." Te Ata, Oklahoma's greatest performance storyteller, used this closing statement to indicate that the story was traditional. Her storytelling always stemmed from traditional sources and her "Oklahoma American Indian" accent further promoted the traditional elements of storytelling. It was, however, her ability, to invoke the story, to create the story anew, that separated her performance from others. [1] Te Ata used her experiences as a Chickasaw to understand and tell the stories of many tribal cultures of America.[2] The influence of Oklahoma's oral traditions as used by writers, performers, and public speakers is noted here.



Te Ata

Circa 1950.

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Oklahoma was settled east to west, similar to most western states; however, the periods of development are somewhat compressed as compared to most states. These eras include 1830-1860, the Antebellum Era; 1861-1865, the Civil War in Indian Territory; 1865-1889, Reconstruction of the Five Tribes and the encroachment of non-Indians in Indian Territory; 1889-1920, Pioneering, white settlement, allotment, land

grafting, and early Statehood; and 1920-1941, and the Great Depression.[3] These eras shared the common qualities of mobility, acculturation, and adaptation. It is believed very little documentation of oral traditions began before the Civil War. Many archival collections in Oklahoma show the influence of the War in music and songbooks as well as other areas notably, veterans organizations. It appears that most of the materials related to the Civil War era are preserved by people who arrived in Indian Territory or Oklahoma Territory in the later part of the nineteenth century. Evidence of oral traditions passed down from sources inside Indian Territory are minimal in published collections.[4]

From 1865 through 1890, cattle drives, ranching, wagon trains, lawmen and outlaws, and early industries became a part of the common experience of the residents of Indian Territory. This era's oral traditions are limited in documentation in literary and archival sources. Oral traditions from Texans settling in Old Greer County, Texas, showed Civil War and cattle-country influences earlier than other areas of Oklahoma.[5] Oral and literary traditions began to be noted between 1900 and 1920. One field of literary tradition used oral traditions in satire to criticize the Dawes Commission. It was used principally by Indian writers such as Alexander Posey in his Fus Fixico letters published in the *Indian Journal* and by many regional newspapers.[6] Posey's Fixico was satire in dialect humor. Perhaps Posey was influenced by old American traditions in literature from *Silence Dogood* and "Poor Richard," both from Ben Franklin.[7] Other Creek writers, a Cherokee, and a Wyandot used this satirical approach. A Caddo, Daniel M. Marano, created his voice through *Sidemeat Cholly* and did standup comic performances in to the 1950s. Thomas Moore, a Creek lawyer from Okmulgee, wrote articles for the *Tulsa World* in the late 1930s. Moore's character was called "Willie Fixico," whose dialect humor made fun of both sides of the Grand River Dam Authority issue and other issues of the day.[8]



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The pioneering experience, land runs, and other events of the early 1900s encouraged some to satirize this era. J. J. Callison's *Bill Jones of Paradise Valley, Oklahoma*, provides satire on the lore of the land run era. One of Callison's chapters deals with Buffalo Bill, Pawnee Bill, and Three Dollar Bill tracking down renegade Indians. Another section deals with homesteading and tells of the turnip crop of 1890 being used as hog feed. Even after the hogs had eaten more than their weight in turnips they still lost weight! [9]

Many oral traditions in music and song present in Oklahoma and Indian Territories were brought here by settlers from various parts of eastern America. The earliest traditions were tribal traditions preserved in ceremonies and in everyday folklife. However, Anglo traditions also arrived in the early days of the Indian Nations, preserved by fiddlers, singers, cabin builders, hunters, and others. Extant log buildings show that styles used by Anglo-Americans had been adopted by American-Indian immigrants to the West. Fiddle playing was common in the Indian Nations and by the late 1900s. The terms "Cherokee fiddle" (a style of fiddling) and "Creek ladder dances" (a fiddle dance using ladder-back chairs as a percussion instrument) are still well known by music lovers. Much of what is considered "playground musical traditions" in Oklahoma are play party tunes. Play parties were dance or movement games performed to singing. In the 1920s and 1930s B. A. Botkin found examples of play parties in every part of Oklahoma. They were and are widely known by African-Americans, American Indians, and most English speakers in America.[10] By the 1890s play

parties were common throughout present-day Oklahoma and are noted in several sources. Play parties are the most common cross-cultural form of children's traditions in Oklahoma.

Oklahoma Text and Tunes

(Paul Howard, Headrick, Jackson County)

Old Joe Clark a preacher,
Preached on the plains.
But the highest text he ever took
Was high, low, jack and game.

Chorus:

Fare ye well, old Joe Clark,
Good-by, Betsy Brown
Fare ye well, old Joe Clark,
I'm going to leave this town.

This is a facsimile of a section of a page from *The American Play Party Song* page 275. The source is Paul Howard from Headrick, Oklahoma. The author learned this song in the 1950s from family members who lived near Howard.

Folklife related to churches began with the arrival of the Five Civilized Tribes. Translations of songs and hymns from English into Cherokee, Choctaw, and other languages promoted cross-cultural musical traditions. Some members of the Five Civilized Tribes brought African-Americans slaves to the Indian country. Before the Civil War an early field documentation of African-American church traditions was noted by a collector in southern Arkansas.[11] Even earlier, "Uncle" Wallace Willis, a slave on a large plantation near Doaksville in the Choctaw Nation, is credited with the songs "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" and "Steal Away To Jesus." These songs and others credited to Uncle Wallace and Aunt Minerva, his wife, were used by the Fisk Singers of Fisk University to popularize "spirituals" in the North just before and after the Civil War.[12] The impact of the cross-cultural language experience in Oklahoma through church-related folklife is very significant and continues into the twentieth century with congregations singing in multiple languages and musical forms.

Although the 1920s are known as the Jazz Age, it saw the rise of an era in nostalgia in Oklahoma. The nostalgia was for pioneers, Indians, and cowboys. This era produced many of Oklahoma's most important writers. George Milburn's *Hobo Hornbook* and *Oklahoma Town* used traditional stories reworked to "fit" his interests, while Stanley Vestal (Walter Campbell) borrowed from oral traditions in his *Short Grass Country*. Perhaps the most important writer of this era was Lynn Riggs. Riggs's *Green Grow the Lilacs* used oral traditions more successfully than all others. The play used the old theme of the farmer versus the rancher. He added local color from his childhood and traditional songs he had collected and sung. The songs included: "Whoppie Ti Yi Yo," "Ole Paint," "Green Grow the Lilacs," "Miner Boy," "Good Girl," "Sam Hall," "My Little Darlin'," "The Dyin' Cowboy," "The Blind Child," "Custer's Last Charge," "Skip To My Lou," and several others. Richard Rogers and Oscar Hammerstein adapted new music to the play with Riggs's help and it became the musical *Oklahoma!* Riggs had first entitled the play *Shivaree* after the old French wedding custom still present in

Oklahoma.[14] Even the influence of the play-party movements of the original script survived the transition into the musical's choreography.

John Lomax and J. Frank Dobie began the study of folklore in America in the twentieth century in Texas. Both had published several titles related to oral traditions when B. A. Botkin began *Folk-Say, A Regional Miscellany* at the University of Oklahoma in 1929. The four annual volumes were anthologies of poetry, song lyrics, stories, regional speech, and more. Botkin went on to edit the folklore content of the of the Federal Writer's Project (1938-1939) on the national level and to publish hundreds of articles and books on folklore of America.[15] *Folk-Say* was Oklahoma's first effort of written documentation of oral traditions. Botkin called the fieldwork process "the science of folklore." Both obscure and soon-to-be-famous writers contributed to the effort. Mari Sandoz, Vance Randolph, and Stanley Vestal became well known writers while Della Cann Young of Cheyenne and Orville von Gluker of Drumright were less known. Most contributors used the publication to demonstrate their writing as influenced by oral traditions. Some provided a timely documentation of many forms of Oklahoma lore such as Daniel M. Garrison's "A Song of the Pipeline." Garrison's "Glossary of Pipeline Terms" is one of many examples of the non-narrative forms found in the four *Folk-Say* volumes.[16]

While *Folk-Say* provided a foundation for the documentation of Oklahoma's oral traditions, the Federal Writers Project, Indian-Pioneer History Collection, provided the first large-scale documentation of Oklahoma folkways. The 112 volumes include oral histories (with much indexing) of the folklife of Oklahoma. These collections remain at the University of Oklahoma's Western History Collections and at the Oklahoma Historical Society. As a source for writers of Oklahoma's past, this is the most used collection held by the Oklahoma Historical Society.[17] In 1996 T. Lindsay Baker and Julie P. Baker completed editing the *WPA Oklahoma Slave Narratives* which was published by University of Oklahoma Press. The slave narratives were done as a part of the Indian-Pioneer History project but were indexed separately. The book provides a convenient way to read and research the slave narrative papers and provides an extensive look into the experiences and folklife of African-Americans in Oklahoma's past. In this case, folklife of Oklahoma takes center stage as a means of interpretation.

Oklahoma is known for producing many creative writers and performers. Certainly Will Rogers was the best known in the twentieth century. He spoke in a southern "sing-song" style, using a natural but perhaps cultured humble "wise guy" approach. This was the style of the old-time storyteller of the South, although his persona always reflected his affection for the West. These were well understood and non-conflicting approaches to communication that were, and are, revered in Oklahoma today. His use of oral traditions were mostly in speech of the Ozarks, the Cherokees, and the cowboy. Another son of Oklahoma also was tied forever to its soil and like Rogers, he lived most of his life outside Oklahoma. Woody Guthrie struggled to use oral traditions in most of his creative work. Guthrie borrowed the tunes of many songs and added new words or just changed a few to suit his purpose Guthrie borrowed the old-time style of Rogers and was just as effective. Will Rogers said "he was with the 'outs' and against the 'ins'," while Guthrie reminded everyone of his humble approach, " Feller asked me if I was a Folk Lorst, and I said--Nope, I'm a Poor Folkist." [18][19] Guthrie and

Rogers borrowed from oral and literary traditions freely and provided a consciousness of traditions for years to come.

In 1953 Vance Randolph and George P. Wilson wrote *Down In The Holler, A Gallery of Ozark Folk Speech*. Wilson was a professor of English at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and the editor of the *Publication of the American Dialect Society*. Randolph was an old-time collector and writer who had published many books on Ozark lore. He had already captured stories, songs, and other traditions of the Ozarks in several publications. This book focused on the preservation of older forms of English through a regional vocabulary. Oral traditions of the region extended into Oklahoma especially in the Cherokee Nation. Until the end of World War II many Oklahomans were still using speech common to the Ozarks.

Marion Thede had begun her teaching career in 1928 in Amorita, Oklahoma. She had been trained to play violin at the University of Oklahoma. Soon after her arrival at Amorita she encountered a local old-time fiddler. Her association with this fiddler and others began a lifelong effort to study and record fiddling. Although her interest in the fiddle carried her to many other places in America her focus was always on Oklahoma fiddlers. Her work, *The Fiddle Book*, published by Oak Publications in 1963, became a classic reference for fiddle players all over America. For years it was the best selling book on the subject. It served as a primer for new fiddlers and as a documentation of Thede's understanding of fiddlers. With one or two exceptions all the tunes and references are from or about Oklahoma.

Ethel and Chauncey Moore collected folk songs from most counties in Oklahoma and published *Ballads and Folk Songs of the Southwest* through the University of Oklahoma Press in 1964. Although the title is misleading most of these songs were known in other near-by states. It divides the collection into English and Scottish ballads, British songs, and American songs. The titles represent the Civil War, the Indian Wars, the American Revolution, and much of American history as well as the cultural heritage of English speakers of the Southwest.

Perrie, Merrie, Dixi, Domini

I had four brothers over the sea,
Perrie, merrie, dixi, Domini;
They each sent a present unto me,
Pe-trum, par-trum, Par-a-dis-i, tem-po-re,
Per-rie, merri, dix-i, dom-i-ni.

This song was recorded in *Ballads and Folksongs of the Southwest*, page 243. It is an example of Latin in folk songs found in Oklahoma. It is believed this song is not extant today. The source was Mrs. W. F. Lawson of Jenks, Oklahoma, who had moved to Oklahoma from Pennsylvania in 1923. Similar variants of the song were collected in the Ozarks in the early part of the twentieth century.

The interest in oral traditions reached a significant peak among Oklahoma musicians in the 1960s. This was the folk-song revival that swept America. However, most local singers failed to use old sources and instead used nationally published songbooks or learned directly from field recordings or commercial records. Interest in local oral traditions waned as most writers and performers sought new identities. Some notable exceptions include Mason Williams,[20] who adapted old forms into popular culture, or Hoyt Axton, who used old forms for popular music. Tom Paxton, Oklahoma's most prolific song writer, created songs entirely within old forms.[21] Many of Paxton's ballads sound as if they had been filtered through the oral traditions of 100 years. Other musicians like Otto Grey and his Oklahoma Cowboys performed traditional songs and skits during the 1930s to very receptive audiences but failed to have an influence on oral traditions of their era. Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys used old forms and spun them into new traditions in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. It was not until the late 1950s that western swing became the most dominant influence on fiddling in Oklahoma. Wills's performances preserved the image of the fiddler as an entertainer in the middle years of the twentieth century. His playing and recording had the most significant influence on performers of any musician in Oklahoma's history.

By the 1980s Oklahoma writers had begun to reinvestigate traditions of American Indians. Alice Marriot's *The Ten Grandmothers* provides a field documentary view of the Kiowa people while N. Scott Momaday's, *The Way To Rainey Mountain* and *The Names* incorporated oral traditions in productive ways not seen since Lynn Riggs or Alexander Posey. Momaday succeeded in creating good prose and encouraging others to pursue old ways in understanding and explaining life's mysteries.

In recent times "old ways", or oral traditions, have continued to influence Oklahomans in their daily lives and in their creative efforts. Joyce Carol Thomas's *Hush Songs* provide an insight into African-American folkways, Joy Harjo's *The Last Song* incorporates the wisdom of Creek ways, and Vince Gill's *Oklahoma Line* reminds the listener of Oklahoma's swing music heritage. There is a vitality in oral traditions in the Sooner State.

1 Moroney, Lynn, *Baby Rattlesnake as told by Te Ata*, adapted by Lynn Moroney, Children's Book Press, 1989. *Festival of Storytelling: A Time of Enchantment*, Oklahoma City Arts Council, 1982., Video Collections, Archives Division, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City, OK.

2 Jane Werner Watson, "As I Remember It: Te Ata" an unpublished manuscript compiled in 1977, released 1989. "Te Ata Collection," Archives Division, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City.

3 Grafting was the term used to describe illegal or unethical acquisition of Indian lands.

4 Botkin, B. A., *The American Play-Party Song*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1937.

Moore, Ethel and Chancey, *Ballads and Folk Songs of the Southwest*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964. Thede, Marion, *The Fiddle Book*, Oak Publications, New York, New York, 1963. Dobie, J. Frank, *Guide To Life and*

Literature of the Southwest, Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1962.

Pearce, T. M. and Thompson, A. P., *Southwesterners Write*, Albuquerque: The University of New Mexico Press, 1946. A survey of these and other literature shows the influence of the Civil War in politics and economics but direct evidence of oral traditions preserving the era are minimal. In neighboring Arkansas a significant body of oral traditions exist related to the war.

5 Gibson, Arrell Morgan, *Oklahoma, A History of Five Centuries*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981. From 1880 until a U. S. Supreme Court decision in 1896, "Old" Greer County was a part of Texas. Settlement patterns may account for the more common occurrence of Civil War and cattle country influences in oral traditions.

6 Littlefield, Daniel F. and Hunter, Carol A., *The Fus Fixico Letters by Alexander Posey*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993.

7 Ford, Paul Leicester, *The Many Sided Franklin*, Freeport, New York: Books for Library Press, 1898. Franklin's use of *Silence Dogood* is a model for many Americans to criticize government using pen name and using dialect humor as satire.

8 Harjo, William (Thomas Moore), *Sour Sofkee*, Muskogee, Oklahoma 1983.

9 John J. Callison, *Bill Jones of Paradise Valley*, Oklahoma, Kingfisher, 1914.

10 Ibid., Botkin, Moore, Thede.

11 Ibid., Botkin, B. A., *The American Play-Party Song*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1937. Play parties are dancing games performed to songs. The songs maybe also known as fiddle tunes or have other traditional sources. It is believed that play parties evolved from traditions in the British Isles and from the eras when instrumental music was considered improper for religious convictions.

12 Allen, Ware, Garrison, *Slave Songs of the United States*, originally printed in 1867, Baltimore: Clearfield Company 1992.

13 Works Projects Administration, *Oklahoma: A Guide To The Sooner State*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1941.

14 Braunlich, Phillis Cole, *Haunted by Home, The Life and Letters of Lynn Riggs*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988.

15 Hirsch, Jerrold, *Benjamin Botkin's Legacy-in-the-Making*, The American Folklife Center, April 5, 2002, <http://www.loc.gov/folklife/botkin/hirsch.html>

16 Botkin, B. A., *Folk-Say: A Regional Miscellany*, vol. 2. Norman: University of Oklahoma, Norman, 1930.

17 Bill Welge, interview. April 5, 2002. Welge is the Director of the Oklahoma Historical Society Research Division.

18 Wortman, Art, editor, *Will Rogers; Wise and Witty Sayings*, Claremore, Oklahoma: Halmark Editions, Will Rogers Company, 1969.

19 Guthrie, Woody, *Woody Sez*, New York, 1975.

20 Mason Williams interview, by Rodger Harris, Oral History Collections, Research Division, Oklahoma Historical Society, July 1992.

21 Tom Paxton interview, by Rodger Harris, Oral History Collections, Research Division, Oklahoma Historical Society, Feb. 4, 1993.

22 Thomas, Joyce Carol, *Hush Songs: African American Lullabies*, Jump at the Sun, 2000, Harjo, Joy, *The Last Song*, Las Cruces, Puerto Del Sol, 1975. Rodger Harris is the Oral Historian for the Oklahoma Historical Society and the creator of Oklahoma Folks.

