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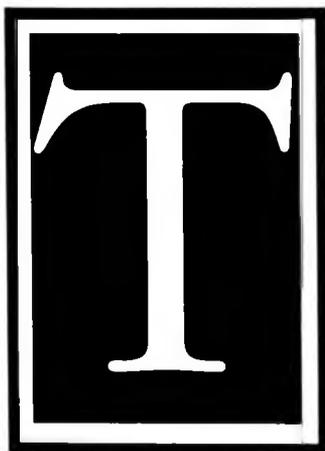


# Marquis James

## The Cherokee Strip:

### *A Tale of an Oklahoma Boyhood*

BY ALVENA BIERI



The young Marquis James, growing up in Enid around the time of Oklahoma statehood, describes a valuable lesson he learned from his newspaper editor boss. One day two men were electrocuted. James saw it happen, and he reported the story to his paper. The editor wanted more details. But everyone in town already knows the facts, the cub reporter said. The editor's advice stuck with him—the very people involved in any happening are always the ones who want most to read all about it.

Following this logic, Oklahomans and especially those living in the old Cherokee strip and in Enid will be the most interested in re-living the settlement and early days of the Strip as seen through the eyes of an imaginative writer. The OU Press has recently reissued in paperback the James book, *The Cherokee Strip: A Tale of an Oklahoma Boyhood*, written in the 1940's when James was at his height as a writer, winning Pulitzer prizes for his biographies of Sam Houston and Andrew Jackson. This recollection is his memory of growing up in Enid and is a perfect mix of time, place, and personal impression. He was born in 1891, came to the Cherokee Strip with his parents at age three, and grew up in and near Enid. He became a widely-roving newspaperman, and then a free-lance writer in the mid 1920's. He died, laden with honors, in 1955.

Historian Henry Steele Commager called James' book part history, part poetry, and part imagination. Markey, as James was called, was a boy into everything: farming on the family claim, soldiering in the militia, reading, writing poetry, dating girls, hanging out at print shops and newspaper offices, and, in general, enthusiastically savoring what life in Enid had to offer, which was a lot. James' dad was both a struggling farmer (for a time he was raising the only tobacco in the Strip and sugar cane as well) and a struggling lawyer. The younger James tells how his life changed and became more exciting when the family moved into town. His social forays keep us smiling as he tried to learn sophisticated ways of living. He takes as his model for such sophistication Enid's West Side where he was convinced

that at social gatherings everything was either witty or worldly.

James' early familiarity with every nook, cranny, alleyway, street, and building in town makes us feel at home as he lives these precious years. Like everybody else, he took pride in the town. He admired the new brick and limestone courthouse and writes that its beauty was never mentioned to a stranger without naming the cost, which was \$100,000. In fact, the entire Square was a wonder, called the White Way as soon as street lights came in. It boasted not just lights but two skyscrapers of five stories each, three movie houses, and Delmar Garden, which was called the roofless summer theater. There were also Parker's bookstore, the Peerless (a high school hangout), the Loewen Hotel, and, on the east side, the Cogdal-McKee Building on Grand Avenue.

Many of James' happy reminiscences are of working on papers. Amazingly, at that time Enid had five newspapers—three dailies and two weeklies. He worked at almost every one of them, ending up at the Eagle. Here the editor emphasized local news so much that he would trim an AP report of President Taft's cabinet troubles to make room for a four-line item about H.H. Champlin's hunting trip. . .

Not everything was perfect in James' life. One time an editor advised him to quit the paper business and just go to the A&M over in Stillwater for a couple of years, hire out on a farm, marry the farmer's daughter, and raise Poland China hogs.

I for one am glad Marquis James did not follow that advice. ■