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***Angie Debo:
First Lady of
Oklahoma History***

By Ernestine Gravley

Eighty-six years ago last fall, a covered wagon creaked across the plain and into a raw little frontier settlement in Oklahoma Territory. The village of Marshall drowsed in an early November sun surrounded by greening fields of winter wheat. Edward Peter Debo, his wife, Lina Elbertha Cooper Debo, and the children lumbered along to the farm Mr. Debo had bought on land opened to white settlement. The spot was in the extreme northwest corner of Logan County.

Nine-year-old Angie looked from the wagon with lively interest at a land later to be known as the home of one of the foremost author-historians of Oklahoma and nationally recognized authority on Western and Indian history—Dr. Angie Debo.

"Miss Angie," as she is called in Marshall, where the 95-year-old scholar still lives, says she never particularly intended at the beginning to be a champion of the Indian.

"I have had only one goal," she commented. "And that is to discover truth and publish it. My research is objective, but when I find all the truth on one side, as has sometimes happened in my study of Indian history, I have the same obligation to become involved as any other citizen." That was putting it mildly. She has devoted a very long life to being involved.

Angie Debo was born January 30, 1890, near Beattie, Kansas and attended one-room country schools in Kansas and Oklahoma Territory. "There was no library," she said. "Never a library. No magazines, and only the one book our parents managed to buy for each of us children as a Christmas present."

She waited—and waited—for a high school to open—"The most anxious time of my life," she declared.

Meanwhile, at sixteen, she passed a Territorial examination and got a position teaching in a rural school near home. And then it happened. The small town of Marshall opened a four-year high school, and Angie enrolled as a student. In 1913, at the age of 23, she received her diploma. She served as principal and history teacher of a small school in Enid for two terms and then went away to the University of Oklahoma where she earned a B.A. degree in 1918. Six years later, she was awarded a Master's degree from the prestigious University of Chicago. There, she was a well-known student at the top of her classes and looking forward to a career teaching history on

the college level.

"I was in for a dreadful shock," she says. "I discovered that the history field was strictly off limits to women—the old discrimination syndrome even then." Thirty colleges applied that year to the University of Chicago for history teachers; all but one said that they wouldn't accept a woman under any circumstances, and the other college indicated that it would take a woman instructor only if no qualified man could be found."

That was when she turned to writing. "I found no sex discrimination against scholarly books, and I've been writing them ever since."

She credits Dr. Edward Everett Dale with steering her toward the topic of Indians. "I was looking about for a

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subject for my doctoral dissertation at the University of Oklahoma when my mentor suggested I write a history of the Choctaws." The result was *THE RISE AND FALL OF THE CHOCTAW REPUBLIC*, a book so successful that she left the classroom for fulltime authorship, except for summer terms teaching history at Oklahoma State University and acting as OSU's curator of maps for eight years to the mid-50's. Her "fulltime writing" didn't totally eliminate academe. She taught briefly at West Texas State Teachers College (now West Texas State University) while curator of the Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum of Canyon, Texas, and one summer at Stephen F. Austin State Teachers College.

Angie Debo was the logical choice for state director of the Federal Writers Project in Oklahoma during which time she was editor of *OKLAHOMA: A GUIDE TO THE SOONER STATE*.

Dr. Debo's devotion to duty blossomed during the Second World War when most men of her town went into the armed forces. She consented to teach at Marshall High School and to fill the pulpit as minister of the local Methodist church, though her religious affiliation is the United Church of Christ.

A lifetime Democrat, Angie Debo has the courage of her convictions, especially when it comes to the Native American. "I simply report facts based on careful

research," she says with a smile. She is a member of the Association of American Indian Affairs (and member of the board of directors from 1956-1966) and the American Civil Liberties Union (board of directors, 1973-1977).

Highlight of her life? There are so many highlights, and Dr. Debo could never play favorites among the organizations that have honored her. She was inducted into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame in 1950; received the John H. Dunning Award from the American Historical Association in 1935 for *THE RISE AND FALL OF THE CHOCTAW REPUBLIC*; the Alfred A Knopf History Fellowship, 1942; fellow of the University of Oklahoma, 1946; extraordinary service award from Navajo Community College, 1972; Henry G. Bennett Service Award from OSU, 1976. In addition, she is an honorary life member of the Oklahoma Writers' Federation, Inc., the Oklahoma Historical Society, and the Stillwater Writers.

Yes, and the Rebekkah Lodge and Marshall Women's Club. This little five-foot-two, 110-pound dynamo is loyally proud to include even a small local club.

Connie Cronley said in an *OKLAHOMA TODAY* article a few years ago that Miss Angie sometimes smiles at her fame as an Oklahoma historian and quoted Dr. Debo as saying, "I've told more unpleasant truths about Oklahoma than anybody else who ever pecked out the name on a typewriter." A powerful case in point was her book *AND STILL THE WATERS RUN: THE BETRAYAL OF THE FIVE CIVILIZED TRIBES*. With typical candor, the author told the story of the liquidation of the Five Civilized Tribes in Oklahoma and disclosed the corruption she found in governmental, social, and religious organizations.

Everything about that story was slimy," Miss Angie told Cronley. "It was so unpleasant that it might have destroyed the University of Oklahoma Press had they published it." So she withdrew the manuscript. Four years later, the expose was published by the Princeton University Press.

This brilliant and energetic historian has written and edited 13 books. Other titles are: *THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE AMERICAN POLICY OF ISOLATION*; *THE ROAD TO DISAPPEARANCE: A HISTORY OF THE CREEK INDIANS*; *TULSA: FROM CREEK TOWN TO OIL CAPITAL*; *PRAIRIE CITY: THE STORY OF AN AMERICAN COMMUNITY*; *OKLA-*
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under separate cover.

Sick at heart, your mind a blank, you stagger into the den and slump into your chair; the ragged envelope seems to mock and laugh at you.

With an explosive curse, you grab the envelope and fling it across the room where it bursts open spilling out a shower of white pages which float down around you like snow. Your wife rushes in to see if you have hurt yourself. But the only thing that's hurt is your pride.

With a knowing nod, she retreats and quietly closes the door behind her. After a few tears of disgust and two full glasses of a cold drink, you feel somewhat better.

The time has come to get an agent. Why go through all the torture of rejection? After all, let him do the worrying; he gets ten percent. You pick a good-sounding name from a list of over two hundred and off your query goes.

It comes back to you six times in a

row with one of two excuses. It sounds too much like something else that has been done, or they don't accept new clients unless they have sold ten thousand dollars worth of work. You're furious again. If you already had ten thousand dollars from sales, why would you need an agent?

Finally, one agent agrees to have a look. Your hopes soar to the heavens; this is your big chance. He'll have connections and make a sale right away. You pop a fresh copy in the mail and dive into your work with better feelings.

Almost before it has had time to reach the agent, it's back. He's got to be the quickest reader you've ever seen, and he did it without denting a sheet. The note enclosed tells you it's pretty good but nothing he'd care to handle — maybe one of the small publishing houses would be interested. By now, you're a nervous wreck of a person; you're worrying too much; your ulcer is threatening to

burst, and your wife's considering an extended vacation with her mother.

You calmly pick up the wrinkled package and drop it into the waste basket along with the notes on your latest idea. You wash your hands of the whole idea of becoming a writer. It's a quick way to starvation and to getting rid of your entire family.

The only job available is frying hamburgers at the local diner. You grit your teeth and tackle it. You feel that you'll never be able to wash the smell of fried onions out of your skin, and you never did like hamburgers anyway.

A few weeks later, you happen by the typewriter. The manuscript still lies in the waste basket. Maybe the small houses would be interested; just to get the book published would be a start — you have to crawl before you can run.

What do you do now? Will you try that small house or simply give up in despair? ❧

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HOMA: FOOT-LOOSE AND FANCY-FREE; THE COWMAN'S SOUTH-WEST: BEING THE REMINISCENCES OF OLIVER NELSON; THE FIVE CIVILIZED TRIBES OF OKLAHOMA: A REPORT ON SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONDITIONS; HISTORY OF THE CHOCTAW, CHICKASAW, AND NATCHEZ INDIANS; A HISTORY OF THE INDIANS OF THE UNITED STATES; and GERONIMO: THE MAN, HIS TIME, HIS PLACE.

Dr. Debo was a contributor to *ENCYCLOPEDIA AMERICANA*, wrote a column, "This Week in Oklahoma History," for the *OKLAHOMA CITY TIMES*, 1952-1954, and published a great many articles and reviews in magazines and newspapers. Debo's historical works are so numerous, in fact, that five years ago Oklahoma State University produced a complete bibliography of her published books and articles. She continues in an advisory capacity for the Nebraska Educational

Television Network on Indian-white relations in the settlement of the Northern Great Plains, as told by Indian participants.

One might assume that the Debo style is altogether too stiff and scholarly for the average reader. Not so. She is a masterful storyteller whose writings entertain with warmth and homespun philosophy while incorporating results of her exacting research. She says she did research in Washington before the National Archives were established. When researching, she does nothing else. She stays at it eight hours a day, six days a week, writing in longhand on half sheets of paper. The result is such meticulous organization that she can use whole blocks of these half pages as chapters in her books. She used original notes from interviews with the Apaches made many years earlier when writing the Geronimo biography, adding later research as needed. This is her most recent, and possibly last, book, an award winner

published in 1976 when "Indianism was a popular social issue and turquoise jewelry one of the best selling items in America."

Angie Debo has a special feeling about her *OKLAHOMA: FOOT-LOOSE AND FANCY-FREE*. When Greenwood Press reissued it from the 1949 release in time for Oklahoma's Diamond Jubilee, she said, "I have a special affection for this evaluation of the Sooner spirit, but it marks the golden anniversary of the day I became an Oklahoman. It never occurred to me that one day I should be asked to write an interpretation of the society I entered. . . Many outward changes have come. . . but here are the roots of the past, present, and future. The Oklahoma spirit is ever the same. This work is not a history nor a description of the physical background of the state but my definition of the special quality of its people."

A quality exemplified by Angie Debo, First Lady of Oklahoma history. ❧