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Joanna Thurston Roper

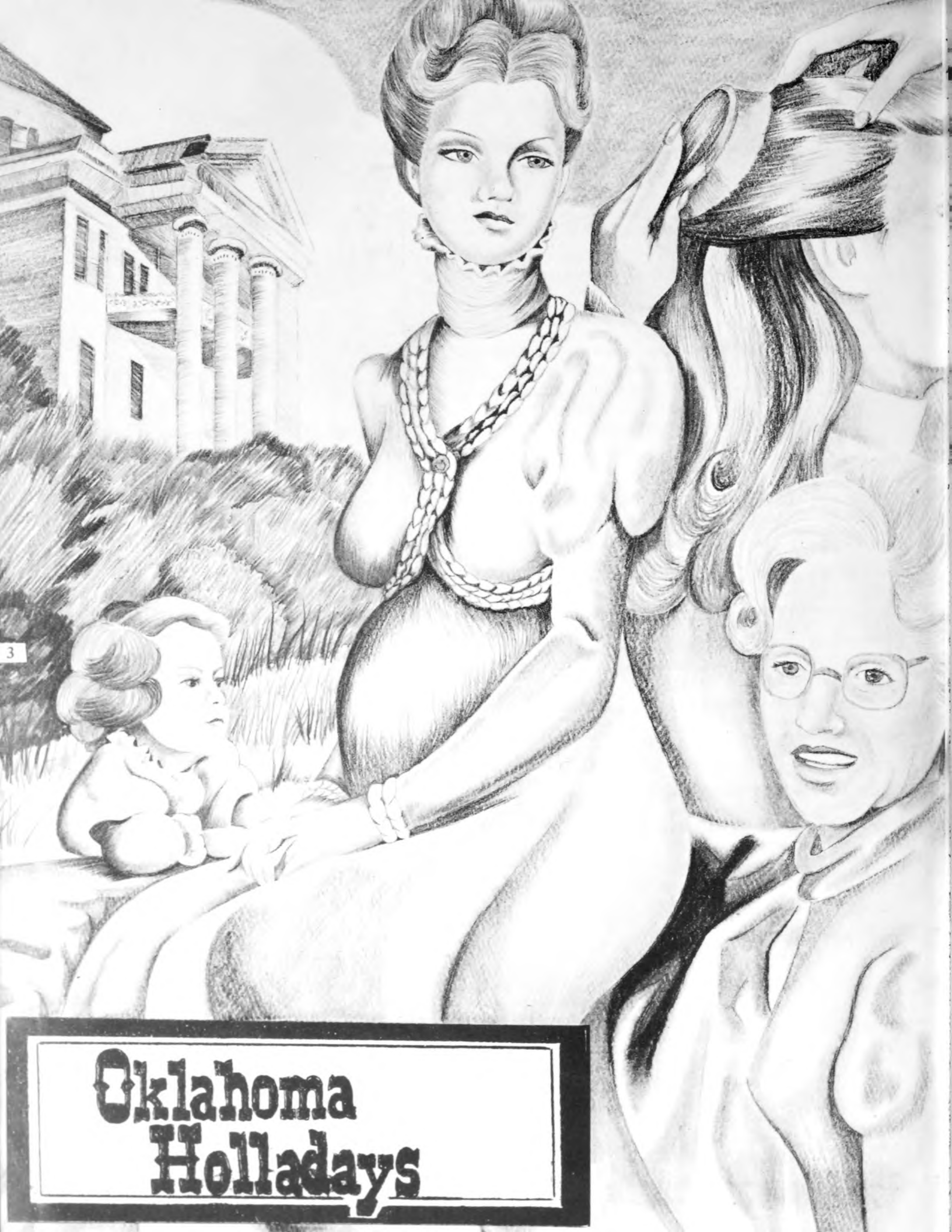
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Oklahoma Holladays

OKLAHOMA HOLLADAYS

— by Joanna Thurston Roper

My ties to Oklahoma reach far back in both time and distance. At the time my grandmother married at age 21 in 1900, there was no hint — not a glimmer — of a farm in Oklahoma. Her life was pledged to a man who was firmly implanted in the lumber industry of Arkansas and Tennessee. That man, by the way, had moved from Michigan to the South. Had he lived longer than his early thirties, there is no way I would have even existed perhaps, and certainly no way I would have been an Oklahoman.

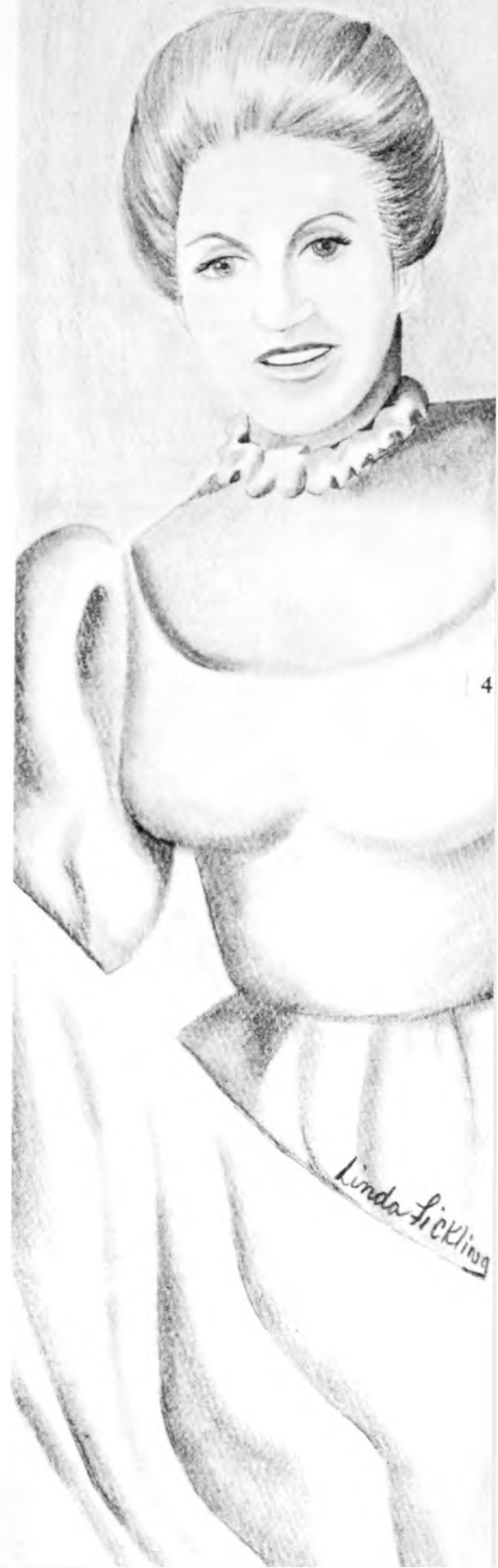
But before Maude Wartz, my grandmother, was 23, she was a mother, a widow, and an expectant mother. A seemingly happy and prosperous life had been interrupted, so Maude and her baby daughter Louise returned to her father's house in Holladay, Tennessee, to await the birth of another child. He was born in 1903 — the same year his father had died.

Maude and her little family lived comfortably in the big house with her parents. Louise and the baby Fred grew up in the security of family, servants, and townspeople. They roamed the wooded pasture lands of the plantation bounded on one side by Birdsong Creek and on the other by the old Natchez Trail. Or they ran with unbridled joy up and down the wide halls of Grandpa's house. In the yard they played under enormous oak roots that arched high up out of the ground. How little did they realize when Mama entertained gentlemen callers in the parlor that life could change.

All the while Mack had been considering his daughter's future. Her insurance money had not yet been invested, and Mack was generating a plan. Two thoughts prompted the plan he had. He was a thwarted adventurer; it was, after all, his generation that had moved west. But Mack had married a genteel daughter of the South. To have left Holladay to move to that "barbaric west" would have violated every tradition she lived. She was, after all, a Holladay by name and residence, and Holladays didn't leave Holladay. One Holladay had gone west and disgraced himself. But the least said about him, she reasoned, the better. No, Miss Lou as she was fondly called by everyone who knew her from field hands to the orphans they took in to raise, intended to remain in her little fiefdom that was Holladay. Mack was the one who gave the orders, of course, but no one ever doubted that the reins were in Miss Lou's firm little hands.

So Mack had long ago ceased speaking of a "good" time to move out west. But now, here was Maude, widowed, perhaps, but adventurous like her father. Once she had been the tomboy — the one who dared to do the outrageous. Why not, he pondered, send Maude out west? She had the money to buy a farm there.

With such a plan in mind, Mack traveled to Oklahoma in search of a suitable place.



His dreams took him — for whatever reason — to Southwestern Oklahoma, Old Greer County. There after much sightseeing and comparing — and soul searching — he made a purchase for his daughter. He bought a farm that had been “squatted on” by “Old Man Davis,” the patent signed by none other than Theodore Roosevelt himself. His choice had finally been made between the farm he bought near Granite and another near Mangum. That final decision was made because the one near Granite not only had a beautiful view of the mountain, but it also had a house on it. Not, he admitted, a very good house, but it would be sufficient for a few months. Its being there meant to him that a family could get established without having to begin building immediately. Dear man! How could he have known that not until his great-granddaughter’s birth would there be a new house on that land!

So Maude was a landowner, but the move was still far in the future. A young lawyer, a widower, Oscar Cummings, from Jeanette, Tennessee, had been courting Maude. Oscar was a schooled and literary man — one whose tastes were similar to Maude’s. He was also an easily managed man, and Maude was a manager.

And so they were married — Maude and the lawyer, an ex-Tennessee representative. In February the new family — Oscar and two daughters and Maude and a son and daughter — left the state of Tennessee for Oklahoma. Why? Both sides of that spliced-together family have pondered that question. There’s still no answer. Perhaps — just perhaps — Maude foresaw two things. She, like her mother, was determined to rule those around her. But Holladay was Miss Lou’s domain, and another female could not survive there. So Oscar provided Maude the way to set up her own territory. As the male he would be the head of the household, but his pliable nature would make him only a figurehead. However, that is only speculation.

Leaving Memphis bound for Oklahoma City by railroad seemed to be only another adventure for Louise and Fred. They had traveled extensively in their young lives, especially to Michigan and back, and this was just another trip. Trips always ended sooner or later by returning to Holladay. It was not until they surveyed the bleak winter expanse of Granite from the depot that they knew with numbing certainty that this trip was different. The wide gravel street and gray false-fronted buildings unrelieved by even a single tree was the most desolate sight Louise had ever seen. It was a town completely lacking in any of the comfortable amenities that made Holladay friendly.

After spending their first night in Greer County at “Miz Vaughan’s Boarding House,” they traveled the last five miles of their journey “out west.” At last they had reached the farm they owned — the little house, the view of the mountain — and almost totally treeless. Little did Louise know then that except for absences to attend school, that farm would be her home for nearly half a century. To have had such foresight on that February morning would have been devastating to the eight-year-old girl from Tennessee.

To Maude there was challenge. They could, she was sure, turn this into a prosperous farm like Papa’s back in Tennessee and then hire hands to help with the work. One thing, however, was soon deadly certain. Preparation for the bar in Tennessee did not equal preparation for farming in Western Oklahoma. Oscar was a dismal failure in the field. His sense of timing with words was rapier sharp; his sense of timing with crops was nonexistent. When other farmers were picking cotton, Oscar was still chopping; when most farmers’ plowing was finished, Oscar was still picking. But soon he did gain a reputation of another sort. He was sought after as a popular speaker, and then he ran for and was elected to Oklahoma’s fourth legislature. At last he was in his own element. He was successful, and re-election was assured.

But no. That was not to be. Maude was opposed. The political career was stopped dead in its tracks, and Oscar went back to the farm in Greer County. Again the children of their children have pondered that turn of events. Why? Again, no answer. To Louise and her step sisters the decision meant an end to spending part of the year in the new and glamorous Huckins Hotel. But Maude was implacable, and the family went back to farming full time — more or less.

They continued to live in the little house Mack had foreseen being replaced in a few months. However bleak it looked on the outside, Maude’s artistic hand had made the interior an attractive and tasteful home. Visitors — and there were many, preachers, judges, Chautauqua speakers — were entertained there and often formally. Maude’s china, cut glass, and silver graced the table, and the old-fashioned bouquets were of wild flowers.

As hard as life was reputed to have been for early Oklahomans, Maude and her girls went fashionably dressed when others wondered perhaps where the next feed sack was coming from. To say that Maude was a seamstress is to state a fact that was more or less true of every pioneer woman. But Maude was a designer of the highest calibre, so she and her girls wore one-of-a-kind models along with accessories she ordered from Mem-

phis or the Oskamp Catalogue. Often neighbor ladies asked to borrow a pattern, only to find that there really was no pattern other than one blocked out of a newspaper. An amateur seamstress was helpless with such patterns, and the dresses she attempted bore no resemblance to the original.

Life wasn't the completely joyless existence in the early days that we often think of. There was perhaps more party giving then than now. Not surprisingly, Maude's parties were among the best attended — both the young and the old trekked to that little house to be entertained. Oscar could hold a group spellbound with humorous yarns, and Maude directed the fun and games of the youth with a fervor unknown at other homesteads. Or when there was a Community Day get-together, it was Maude who played the piano and sang, or on occasion even did dance routines of tap or soft shoe. People never tired of hearing her play "Under the Double Eagle," "12th Street Rag" and "Maple Street Rag." Perhaps those are the "good old days" people refer to now.

Church services were by no means unavailable — though the exact denomination one preferred might not be found in horse-and-buggy driving distance. The church attended by the majority was a Community Church. Although Maude and Oscar were members of a church that used no instrumental music in the services, they did go to the Community Church since one of their own faith was much too far away. Maude played the piano for the services, albeit reluctantly, and Oscar provided the preaching on a near regular basis.

Education, too, was to be had — needless to say, the system was hardly elaborate, but three of Maude's and Oscar's children finished high school and went away to college. Louise went to the most trouble to get a better education than was available in the neighborhood. She completed the eight grades in the one-room school named Red Top then went to Mangum where she boarded with the Dr. Mabry family to attend high school. After graduation in 1922, she went to Stillwater to the college known then as Oklahoma A & M. Fred was a member of the first graduating class in the Ozark community — a new school built near the farm. For college he went to Freed-Hardeman in Memphis. Oscar's younger daughter graduated from Granite high school, one of a thirteen-member class. An interesting sidelight on that class is their reunion in 1973, fifty years later, when nine of their number returned to Granite from all over the United States. From Granite she went to college in Canyon, Texas. And Oscar's older daughter married a young man who worked for the

Rock Island Railroad.

Looking back from the vantage point of seventy years since Maude arrived in Greer County, the events seem fairly fast paced and normal. But the day-to-day existence for the family was not fast paced, for times were indeed hard on that farm that had been Mack's dream for his daughter. There were probably times when she saw it as more nightmare than dream. But through it all Maude persevered, and the family maintained the tradition of family pride and love that she learned from Mack and Miss Lou — who in their time had received it from generations of Holladays, Kings, Tuckers, Johnsons. That same family closeness still prevails today in their descendants. And if one wonders if, in the passing of the years, Maude continued to be the dominant member of the family, suffice it to say: yes. Maude called the marching orders; she was born to be the major domo.

Louise came home from A & M and got a job teaching the first and second grades at Ozark. But that job lasted only a year because she met and married Foster Thurston, a young man who had recently moved to Greer County from Texas. ■



MAUDE AT 20



MAUDE AT 80