

Horse-and-Buggy Poet

By MARY JO TURNER

HER experiences as an early day co-ed at the University of Oklahoma range from sitting on a soap box studying Homer, to wading mud in a stable yard to hitch up the horse and buggy and go after a Christmas poem for the first student magazine, of which she was literary editor. Yet she liked it a lot, did Mrs. Zoe Tilghman, outstanding Oklahoma poet, novelist and pioneer organizer of the two present state writers' organizations, now living in Oklahoma City.

She was a student at the University of Oklahoma in 1897, when she enrolled as Miss Zoe Stratton, in the middle preparatory school, and stayed in the home of the late Dr. David Ross Boyd, first president of the University. This was a preparatory school for students to enter the college course, and was taught by Dr. Boyd himself.

Shortly after this, he ceased teaching and Mrs. Tilghman is the only person who had her first and last day's schooling under Dr. Boyd. He had also taught her at Arkansas City, where he was superintendent of city schools, in 1888. Young Miss Stratton was so eager for more knowledge, so adept at learning, that he offered to keep her in his home and see that she received a college education.

IN 1898, Mrs. Tilghman studied English under Professor Vernon Parrington, who late in life became internationally famous by winning the Pulitzer prize for his book, *Main Currents in American Literature*. She studied at O. U. until 1900, then taught in high school at Pond Creek, north of Enid. In 1902 and 1903, she finished her sophomore year at the University, where she became first literary editor of the first student magazine, *The Umpire*. During the years she was out of school, teaching at Pond Creek, this magazine had been started by faculty members as the first University publication. The next year it died, then there was a movement to revive it, using it entirely as a student publication, with the editorial staff composed of students. Miss Stratton was chosen as the first literary editor, and LeRoy B. Greenfield was the first editor. After two or three issues, he dropped out to teach school, and then Roy Hadsell, now of the English faculty, became editor.

There were really two important jobs facing the green young editors those days, laughs Mrs. Tilghman in recalling the early struggles of the youthful writers at O. U. There was not much social life



Mrs. Zoe Tilghman, student editor at O.U. in early days

at the University then, as the students were few and most of them were grimly interested in learning. So they got out a large lot of comment, which featured stories about each student and faculty member, and a special literary edition. In this, Miss Stratton starred. It was her job to hunt around to find stuff to "fill in," and this was no easy task, for the students simply were not literary in those days.

For the Christmas literary edition, the late Miss Rose Belt, a student who lived on a farm east of Norman, had promised to contribute a Christmas poem. Mrs. Tilghman went to Dr. Buchanan's home to borrow the horse and buggy which Tom B. Matthews used to deliver laundry in. There was no one there to hitch the horse to the buggy, so Miss Stratton put on Tom Matthew's boots to wade the sea of mud in the stable yard, and drove five miles for the poem. She got it.

In January, 1903, the University building on the site of the present Chemistry Building burned, and classes had to be held in various places down town, the Arlean Hotel, and the old stone Adkins building, which was heated by iron stoves. In the upstairs of this old stone building, Miss Stratton and LeRoy Greenfield, as the only students in Dr. Joseph Paxton's class, read Homer, sitting on soap boxes.

Mrs. Tilghman recalls that as one of the notable feats accomplished at O. U.

It required much sense of balance to translate Homer and also to keep the ramshackle soapboxes from teetering over.

Today Mrs. Tilghman ranks as one of the authorities on Oklahoma history. Her personal background is richly interwoven with early historical happenings right in her own family. She grew up on a ranch in Osage County. Her father, the late M. E. Stratton, drove the third head of cattle on the Chisholm Trail. In 1903, she was married to the famous peace officer, William Tilghman. She personally witnessed the Runs of 1889 and 1893. Through her associations with Mr. Tilghman and her father, both pioneer Indian traders, she has a background of understanding and feeling of those early pioneer days. She taught school and made her home in six counties—Payne, Kay, Grant, Osage, Cleveland, and Oklahoma, and has traveled all over the rest of Oklahoma, becoming thoroughly familiar with it.

For nine years, 1924 to 1934, Mrs. Tilghman, worked as literary editor of *Harlow's Weekly*, where 125 newspapers a week passed through her hands, giving her a vast fund of information. She is a charter member of the Oklahoma Writers' Club, and served as president for two terms. She founded the Poetry Society of Oklahoma, acting as president in 1934. She is a charter member of the MacDowell Club of Allied Arts, and of the Oklahoma Hospitality Club, and was editor-in-chief of the *State Anthology of Poetry* published in 1936.

FOR years she has encouraged young writers and fostered and discovered several poets and writers of note, throughout the state. Through her literary page in *Harlow's Weekly*, she gave free criticism and advice, and inspired many young poets. Mrs. Tilghman has contributed to *Outlook*, *Woman's Home Companion*, *The Lariat*, *Good Stories*, and poetry to the *New York Times* and *Sun*.

Mrs. Tilghman is the author of *Prairie Winds*, a book of poems published in 1931, and of three prose books, *The Dug-out*, *Outlaw Days*, and *Quannah, Chief of the Eagles*. From 1935 to 1938 she was assistant director of the Federal Writers' Project in Oklahoma City, where all state materials passed through her supervision and where she directed the writing of 125 persons.

Mrs. Tilghman's son, Tench, now an attorney in Oklahoma City, also attended the University. He was a member of Delta Tau Delta fraternity.