

THE ROBERTS, THE SCATORI AND THE MERRILL FAMILIES

By Maurice H. Merrill

The Roberts-Scatori-Merrill connection with Norman illustrates the extent to which Oklahoma's population presents a blend from many backgrounds.

James Lafayette Roberts, (born, August 12, 1859) descendant from a Welsh (or English, the family tradition conflicts) progenitor who came to North Carolina in pre-Revolutionary days, left his native Tennessee at the age of 18. He settled in South Fork community, next to the Arkansas boundary, in Howell County, Missouri. October 17, 1883, he married Izorah Josephine Cooper, the daughter of a substantial member of the community. All his life a man with his eyes on the lands "beyond the ranges" he decided, after a few years, that the gravelly Ozark hills offered inadequate prospects for the welfare of his growing young family. He settled in 1901 on the virgin prairie between Muskogee and Checotah, where he became a tenant on Indian controlled land, the only way in which one not a "native" or a citizen by intermarriage then could farm in the Indian Territory.

After a few years, he was attracted by accounts of promising new territory east of Abilene between Baird and Clyde.

When the Burk Burnett ranch north of Wichita Falls was carved up into farms, he settled in the community of Clara, where his daughters, Lora and Orpha, were schoolmates of Floyd Jackson, with whom they later were to renew acquaintance when he became a judge in Oklahoma. Drought, financial losses, and the death of his loved wife impelled Mr. Roberts to return to Eastern Oklahoma when his son-in-law, Albert Neumeyer, came back to administer the estate of the latter's father.

He farmed first near Oktaha, where Lora and Orpha attended high school, later transferring to Muskogee's Central High, because of the better facilities offered by what in those days was deemed a large city. There followed an interlude, with both girls engaged in teaching, which in those days was an available occupation for high school graduates. They summered at whatever farm Mr. Roberts, with his youngest son, Lester, was operating at the time. Finally, in the summer of 1918, Orpha, who was attending the summer session at Oklahoma University learned that the boarding and rooming house at 458 College was for sale by the proprietress. This seemed to her an excellent open door to college for the girls, to better scholastic opportunities for Lester, and to relief for Mr. Roberts from the arduous life of a farmer. A family council with the three others brought concurrence. As a result, in the short time between the summer term and the fall semester, assets were liquidated, the business was acquired, the house was leased, arrangements for necessary credit, staff, and university approval were made, and the Roberts House, which for four years enjoyed a select clientele of faculty and students, opened its doors on schedule.

The Merrill family came to the Indian Territory two years behind the Roberts migration. George Waite Merrill, scion, according to tradition, of Huguenots originally named de Merle who escaped to England after the St. Bartholomew massacre and there suffered anglicization of their name, was born in South Freeport, Maine, January 21, 1855. He left his native New England, after graduation from Williams College in 1881, to become an enlisted man in the Signal Corps, as a means to enter the weather service, then a branch of the army. After marriage to a schoolmate in high school, Mary Lavinia Hitchcock, whose ancestry went back to Dr. Gad Hitchcock, one of the patriotic New England preachers whose sermons fanned the flames of revolutionary resistance and to General Benjamin Lincoln, who received Cornwallis' sword at Yorktown, George Merrill left meteorology, which promised little financial benefit. Always a dreamer who sought to make his visions come true, he engaged in numerous activities, none of which resulted in great financial return. At the turn of the century, he was just through with a break-even gold hunt in Honduras and a non-productive venture for an electric railroad between Baltimore and Washington. The Atoka Agreement whereby Chickasaws and Choctaws finally yielded to federal pressure to accept allotment of their tribal domains, contained a provision whereby those Choctaws who had continued to live in Mississippi could share in the lands under certain conditions, including removal to the Indian Territory, which most of them were unable to meet. It occurred to many persons that it would be a proper mixture of altruism and self-interest to finance Choctaws who otherwise could not accept the bounty,

taking a contract for a share of the lands when restrictions were removed. One such group was composed partly of friends of George Merrill in Washington. They proposed that if he could raise enough to purchase a share in the syndicate, they would make him manager, with a salary and expense account. His job was to see to the placement of the Choctaw families on as good land as was available and superintend their compliance with the necessary formalities. Since it was realized that restrictions on the land would not expire for some years, and since the newcomer Indians were not accustomed to business or to the management of more land than the few acres they had farmed in Mississippi, the program called for the allotments to be leased to Mr. Merrill, on behalf of the syndicate. He, in turn, sublet most of the land in family sized tracts to tenants, under the customary share rent system. The cotton was sold for cash; the corn and other grain rent Merrill fed chiefly to hogs, which then were marketed. Merrill kept a small home place as headquarters for this activity, and he and his young son, Maurice, also worked in the field with the tenants or busied themselves with building "improvements" and keeping them in repair.

The major allotments which Merrill selected were in an area south and east of the present Stratford, although at that time the trading center was the old "inland" (railroadless) town of McGee. Thus it was that Maurice, born in Washington, October 3, 1897, did not attend an organized school until the family moved to Stratford in 1909, after his father secured the post office. For non-Indian children, in rural Indian Territory, there were no public neighborhood schools. Subscription schools, taught by wandering Ichabod Cranes, were available for a few months out of the year, but George and Vinnie Merrill, the former with his college degree and the latter with two years at Mount Holyoke College and both with teaching experience, felt that they could do better by their son at home. The training was rather irregular by modern standards. The boy would be drilled by his father while they worked together or were driving across country, and was taught by his mother on days when work or journeying was not on the program - or there would be sessions under both parents at night. The result turned out all right, apparently, as Maurice, unlike many of the rural children of the time, was able to move along with his age group in the Stratford schools.

At sixteen, upon completing the 10th grade, he had exhausted the then capabilities of the Stratford system. He then spent one year at the Eastern University Preparatory School at Claremore and completed high school at Castle Heights School in Lebanon, Tennessee. He saw Norman first in the fall of 1915, when he entered the University as a freshman.

At the spring of 1918 he had completed his junior year. Physically he did not meet standards for commissioning. He decided to wait out the draft, and meanwhile to attend summer session for courses in shorthand and typewriting that might give special skills of use in the service. In those classes he sat with Orpha whom he had met at a "mixer" on the opening of the summer session. So started a long and joyous association.

Stephen Scatori came to Norman as the last of the group in which we are interested. Born in New Orleans, September 12, 1889, of Spanish and Italian ancestry, he came in the fall of 1920 to the University of

Oklahoma romance language faculty. He joined the faculty table at Roberts House and became absorbed in the society that centered there.

Maurice Merrill had been accepted into the Students Army Training Corps (predecessor of the present R.O.T.C. training) in the fall of 1918, but his physical limitations prevented progress into any of the officers' training camps to which the program led. After the armistice, he was discharged in December, 1918. Orpha and he continued dating, and, friendship ripening into a warmer feeling, they became engaged in February, 1920, just after Maurice had completed his first semester in law. As it was not customary in those days for young men without ample resources to marry until their professional training was completed, the engagement was long, even by the standards of those times. Orpha graduated with Phi Beta Kappa honors in 1921. Maurice, who had been elected to that order a year earlier, had the honor of serving on the student committee that passed on her qualifications.

Orpha taught in high school at Boynton, Oklahoma, in the year between her graduation and Maurice's completion of his law course. They were married on his baccalaureate Sunday, June 4, 1922. He was admitted to the Oklahoma Bar on June 6. He had taught Government in the University while attending law school, and had been appointed instructor in that subject. However, after the close of the summer session, an opportunity arose for him to become associated with the law firm of Mason and Honnold in Tulsa. The newly married Merrills moved to that city in late August, taking with them Mr. Roberts and Lester, who was ready for his junior year in high school. Maurice had become convinced that his ultimate career should be teaching, as a result of his pleasant experience in college teaching. He desired to teach law, and felt that practice was necessary as a foundation for effective presentation of a professional subject.

Roberts House was sold after the summer session of 1922. Lora had accepted a teaching post at Mazie, Oklahoma. In the meantime, she and Stephen had become engaged. At Thanksgiving vacation, 1922, they were married at the Merrill home in Tulsa. As soon as Lora could find a replacement at the Mazie school, they set up housekeeping in Norman, which, with the exception of 1925-26, spent in France and Spain while Stephen was completing his doctorate at the University of Toulouse, and Lora was perfecting her knowledge of Spanish in El Centro for foreign students during their six months in Madrid, has been their home ever since. Their four daughters were born here. The first born lived only a few days, but the second daughter, Anita, survived (Mrs. Charles Bumgarner of Norman), she and Charles have three children: Susan, a junior at Oklahoma University is Mrs. Paul Tucker, of Norman, Terry, a sophomore, Oklahoma University, and Scott, both living at home; Lorita (Mrs. William Petree of Oklahoma City, recently widowed, has four children: Michael, married and living in Oklahoma City; Pamela, a senior in the University of Oklahoma, Nancy and Cathy, all residing at home); Margarita (Mrs. Donald Reeves of Mount Vernon, Indiana); has four daughters; Margye is a sophomore in Indiana University; the three younger girls, Donice, Stephanie and Caroline, live at home.

A few years after the birth of her children Mrs. Scatori finished

the hours needed for her degree, then did graduate work.

Stephen Scatori led a distinguished career as a professor of romance languages. He was the author of the authoritative treatise on the works of Galdos, the great Spanish novelist. He was also the author of numerous articles, and of texts for the study of Spanish. He was for years the advisor for the Latin American students and with Lora's aid inaugurated the annual Pan-American week ending with the Fiesta, for years one of the major cultural and social events on the campus. The department of State of the United States government cooperated with the University of Oklahoma in this valuable educational undertaking, sending well-informed experts from the department to lecture and conduct seminars. Latin American entertainers were brought to the Oklahoma University campus during the week. Large classes of students studying Spanish from many Oklahoma high schools attended the fiesta and other activities. During the decade that Stephen and Lora chaired this undertaking, "to bring a better understanding between the Americas" the United States State Department cited the University of Oklahoma as being second in the nation in this field of endeavor. This activity heralded the beginning of a better understanding of foreign students on the campus and in the Norman community. Distinguished visitors from Latin countries to Norman invariably sought Stephen out and his international contacts were extensive. A disabling illness put an untimely end to his teaching career, five years before his death, on November 8, 1961.

Under the needs created by Stephen's illness, Lora embarked upon a new career as technician in microbiology. Mastering that highly complicated subject at an advanced age, she disproved utterly the theory that learning ability ceases with mounting years. She continues to render daily service.

After two years of intensive experience in law practice, while Orpha taught in the Tulsa High School, Maurice and Orpha felt that their resources would justify a fling at graduate work in Harvard and Radcliffe. Lester, who had finished Tulsa High School, came with his father to live with Lora and Stephen in Norman, entering the University of Oklahoma as a freshman. Maurice was awarded the degree of S. J. D. by Harvard in the spring of 1925. Unfortunately, his father died in January 1925. It seemed essential that Orpha remain in Norman after the funeral, until Mother Merrill could be brought to Cambridge. This, and the responsibilities attendant upon Mother Merrill's translation to new surroundings made it impossible for Orpha to complete her M. A., although she did distinguished work in areas in which she could finish.

Maurice began law teaching in the University of Idaho in the fall of 1925. Lester and Dad Roberts made their home once more with the Merrills, Lester starting his Sophomore year at the University of Idaho. At the end of this year the Scatori family returned to Norman from a year in Europe, and Mr. Roberts came back to live in Norman with the Scatori family until his death, July 9, 1935. In the end, after some peregrinations, he made his life work in the Pacific Northwest, marrying a Moscow, Idaho, girl, Irene Peterson. He is now retired, "self-employed", as he terms it. They live in Stevensville, in the beautiful Bitterroot Valley of Montana.

by one of the new-fangled "horseless carriages", and "ran away", overturning the wagon and destroying his load of melons.

In 1921, four years before U. S. Highway 77 was paved, the established the first roadside market in the area. In fact, for many years it was the only one between Oklahoma City and Ardmore. This project involved every member of the family, the men bringing in the fruit and vegetables, and women serving the customers. Mr. Rule was always proud of the fact that he was the first in the area to produce melons that weighed one hundred pounds or more.

The first market was simply a brush arbor, but after the new highway was completed, this was replaced with a shingled roof open building with a storage room and serving tables. Tourists from practically every state in the Union and from Canada paused there for a chance to rest and enjoy the ice-cold melons. The Rule market also became very famous for its real apple cider made on the site.

During World War I, Mr. Rule served on a community committee, whose duty was to assist the County Draft Board in determining whether a potential draftee was needed more on the farm to raise food than in the army. His son, Johnie, had volunteered early in the War and served in the Navy until after the Armistice was signed. The Rules worked side by side in the fields to keep production up to standard. Mrs. Rule and the daughters were also very active in food conservation projects, such as promoting wheatless and meatless days in the community, menus, and in Red Cross work, such as knitting.

By the time the war was over, Mr. Rule's health had begun to fail and he spent the last ten years of his life more in supervising the farm, rather than doing the actual work. He did spend part of 1923 and 1924 in California recuperating from a most severe case of bronchial pneumonia, but he and his wife returned to the farm in 1924, where they lived until his death, September 15, 1929, and at the age of 73. Mrs. Rule died at age 90, October 29, 1962. They are buried in the Shiloh Cemetery.

The daughters, Agnes Rule Liner and Marjorie Rule Allen, reside in Norman. The son, Johnie R. Rule, lives in Holdenville, Oklahoma. The grandchildren are: Viola Rule Hartman of Miami, Oklahoma, Dorothy Allen Nichols of Casper, Wyoming, Floyd Liner of Phoenix, Arizona, and E. Blaine Liner, of Lexington, Kentucky. There are eight great-grandchildren.