

**HARRIET EVELYN
PARKER
CAMDEN
1876-1972**



**WROTE
FIRST
OKLAHOMA
STATE SONG**

In 1904, Kingfisher teacher Harriet Camden decided her soon-to-be new state needed a song so she wrote “Oklahoma! – A Toast”. The song described a land full of promise and opportunity with a beautiful landscape to match. The song would be as colorful as the state.

Harriet Evelyn Parker was born in Bay City, Michigan in April 1878. Her father John Homer Parker founded Kingfisher College in 1895 to introduce the academically rigorous tradition of a liberal arts education. After Harriet graduated and became a teacher, she married Guy Camden, the land office’s chief clerk. The college would close its doors in 1922 but not before producing three Rhodes Scholars and an atomic scientist working on the Manhattan Project.

In 1905, Camden published the song “Oklahoma! – A Toast”. The Oklahoman wrote the song “is being introduced into the public schools of our territory, for which it is especially appropriate. It well deserves to become our territorial song.” When Oklahoma entered the Union as a dry state, the song wasn’t officially recognized because it mentioned “toast by alcohol”!

When prohibition was repealed, there was a lively competition between “Toast” and “Oklahoma, Sweet Land of My Dreams”. Rep. Dave Roberts of Rush Springs presented “Sweet” and Rep. John Hankla of Geary argued for “Toast”. Winning by 40-13 vote, “Toast” became the official state song on March 26, 1935, even though schools had been singing it for years.

In 1943, the Rodgers-Hammerstein musical “Oklahoma!” premiered on Broadway. The youngest Oklahoma legislator at 23, George Nigh, believed the title song captured the spirit of the state better than the old-fashioned, somber “Oklahoma – A Toast”. In 1953, he introduced a bill to officially change the state song to “Oklahoma!” An opponent of the bill didn’t believe the state song should be written by a non-Oklahoman. The chamber was so moved when the legislator emotionally sang “Oklahoma – A Toast” that Representative Nigh had to act fast to save his bill.

He tabled the measure for one legislative day and asked the Oklahoma College for Women chorus, who had just finished a production of the musical, to come sing. Nigh also asked Ridge Bond, the only Oklahoman to perform the character Curly on Broadway, to visit the Legislature to perform songs from the show – with no rehearsal!

The next day the women’s choir began singing a couple of songs when Bond burst through the door singing “Oklahoma!”, and everyone stood to cheer. Nigh’s bill passed and the state song was officially changed. Governor Johnston Murray approved the bill on September 5, 1953, with Camden’s blessing because she thought the new song was much better and did represent Oklahoma.

The debate continues about which song is better. Rachel Baker learned “Toast” at Muskogee’s Irving School, calling it “zipper” and more beautiful than the Broadway hit. Guy Cocannouer remembered: “We always sang it at the start of the school day at a little country school outside of Pawnee called Sagerville.” How many school rooms open the day with “Oklahoma!”?

Harriet Camden spent her retirement years on an orange and olive ranch in Fair Oaks, California, still proud of her song. Oklahoma still has the unique distinction of being the only state with an official song based on a Broadway musical.