

**LOUISE
DAVIS
McMAHON**
1873-1966



**PHILANTHROPY
IN THE
GREAT
PLAINS**

Like a modern-day version of Frank Capra's "It's a Wonderful Life", Lawton residents often wonder what the city would be like if Louise McMahon hadn't been born. Thoughts of bringing culture to a rough-and-tumble tent city were not on her mind when she arrived with her husband and young son at the turn of the century. Today, the McMahon Foundation is worth \$48 million, with annual donations of \$2.8 million.

Louise Davis was born in January 1873 in Missouri. She studied music as a child and later attended boarding school to prepare for a teaching career. She returned home to continue high school upon the arrival of a teacher who was hired to teach the upper grades. The teacher was Eugene (E. P.) McMahon and they married in Clyde, Kansas in August 1892 after she graduated. She was 19 and he was 29. Their son Eugene Jr. was born in January 1895.

At the turn of the century, Lawton was in the middle of its transfiguration from tents and dirt roads to permanent structures. E. P. was enthusiastic about the opportunities that a new homestead in Lawton could bring. They had arrived from Topeka a few days before the auction that opened the frontier town to settlement on August 6, 1901. Louise, charming and sociable, became Lawton's first piano teacher while E. P., a former lawyer, sold insurance and real estate.

At fifteen, young Eugene began selling advertising at the Lawton Constitution newspaper. After graduating from the University of Oklahoma in 1915 with a degree in journalism, he became a newspaper manager and served in the Army Air Corps during World War I. After the war, Eugene found great success with oil royalties in East and Central Texas, becoming a successful businessman.

In 1926, the family moved to San Antonio, where Eugene ran the McMahon Royalties Company and invested his parents' money wisely. Due to health problems, E. P. returned to Lawton three or four months of the year to maintain the family farm. He died in May 1936 at age 73. In 1940, Louise and Eugene Jr. donated \$50,000 each to honor E. P.'s memory by forming the McMahon Foundation in Lawton. Within five years, the foundation's assets had grown to one million dollars.

When Eugene Jr. died in 1945 at age 50, Louise moved back to Lawton. She was voted Oklahoma Mother of the Year in 1949 and inducted in the Oklahoma Hall of Fame in 1954. As a memorial to her son, the McMahon Memorial Auditorium was dedicated in March 1955 for the advancement of the music, arts and other cultural endeavors. Louise donated a Steinway Concert Grand Piano and played Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata" for the audience. The auditorium also hosted Elvis Presley and first lady Eleanor Roosevelt but primarily was a showcase for local events, including the Lawton Philharmonic.

In 1957, with a \$300,000 grant from the foundation, the Museum of the Great Plains was built, dedicated to the collection, preservation, research, and exhibition of artifacts pertaining to the cultural and natural history of the Great Plains dating back the arrival of Paleo-Indians in 11,500 BCE. Opened in 1961, it is one of five partner museums in the Oklahoma Museum Network and became the first in Oklahoma to receive accreditation from the American Alliance of Museums.

Louise McMahon died in February 1966 at age 93 with flags flying at half-mast to honor the philanthropist who made lasting contributions to the civic, cultural and educational enrichment of Lawton and Oklahoma. Upon her death, the foundation erected a three-million-dollar Fine Arts Building on the Cameron University campus dedicated to her. Over the years, the McMahon Foundation has granted over \$75 million for the benefit of others.