

**VINITA
MARY GILES
CRAVENS
1909-1994**



**OKLAHOMA
CITY
THEATRICAL
PROMOTER**

Vinita Cravens earned her reputation by bringing top musicals to Oklahoma City's Municipal Auditorium. In 1966 she made national headlines when she brought Carol Channing's national tour of "Hello, Dolly!" to town. The show, already a popular and critical success, achieved further acclaim when over 60,000 people saw it during its ten-day run, setting a national record for an indoor theater performance.

Vinita Mary Giles was born in Shawnee in June 1909. Her mother was part Cherokee and her father was an engineer for the Rock Island Railroad for fifty years, writing poetry in his spare time. Vinita was excited as a little girl when the circus would come to town and pitch its tent near her home. She would often find money in the grass after the circus had moved on. Perhaps it was a sign to come.

She married businessman Delbert Franklin Cravens in November 1929. They moved to Oklahoma City three years later when he took a job at Southwestern Bell Telephone, where he worked for 43 years training and developing marketing personnel. He was also president of the Chamber of Commerce.

In the late 1940s, Cravens started selling ads for wrestling programs. Later she sold theater playbill advertisements for a man who brought shows to town. When he left the business, he urged her to take over. While in New York, she convinced famed producer Jimmy Schubert to bring his shows to Oklahoma. Before long, Cravens had moved on to the intricacies of negotiating contracts with some of the biggest Broadway producers of the day.

Big-time talent soon came to Oklahoma City. When singer Harry Belafonte developed a sore throat while being shown blacks-only accommodations, Cravens invited Belafonte to her home, where he quickly recovered in order to sing that night. She met Tallulah Bankhead, Marge and Gower Champion, Lena Horne, Duke Ellington, and Angela Lansbury and presented A Chorus Line, Annie, Cats, Annie, Arsenic and Old Lace, 42nd Street, Evita, Sugar Babies, Camelot with Richard Harris, and South Pacific with Robert Goulet.

Cravens was a one-woman show. Every detail, from contract negotiations with producers and promotion budgets to security and transportation for the cast, was in her hands. Her response to her stressful work was to keep going and saying her prayers. One time she had to obtain last-minute insurance for a production from a Tulsa company when she was unable to obtain coverage locally. By the time the company wired Cravens to confirm coverage, the show's trucks had arrived and the stage crew was waiting to unload.

During a career which spanned more than forty years, Cravens brought the best of Broadway to Oklahoma City, earned the title of master impresario. She was inducted into the Oklahoma Women's Hall of Fame in 1986. Two years later, the Civic Center Music Hall's Green Room was renamed in her honor, an area backstage where actors relax while waiting to go on stage. The attention she focused on Oklahoma City as a theater-loving community enhanced the city's economy through the years and brought enjoyment to thousands.

Cravens died in September 1994. Oklahoma City Mayor Ron Norick called her "a person of dynamic vision with single-minded determination who brought the joy and excitement of America's greatest shows to Oklahoma". David Boren said, "she has proved that one person can make a difference in the cultural life of an entire city and state". She felt that fate and the confidence of Oklahoma City made her success possible. "I concern it a service. I hope I have done it well. It was a bunch of fun."