

**ROBERTA E.
CAMPBELL
LAWSON
1878-1940**



**PRESERVED
DELAWARE
INDIAN
HISTORY**

Roberta Lawson was a Lenape-Scots-Irish activist, community organizer and musician. She sought to achieve a “spiritual balance” between her Native American heritage and the modern world. This was one motivation for her tireless activities for the benefit of education and the arts.

The Lenape were an indigenous people in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, and Delaware. The British colonists called them Delaware Indians because of where they lived. In the 1860s, they were relocated to Indian Territory. In 1979, the U. S. Bureau of Indian Affairs revoked the tribal status of the Lenape living among Cherokee. This decision was overturned in 1996, when they were recognized as a separate tribal nation.

Roberta E. Campbell was born in October 1878 in Alluwe, near Nowata. She was the daughter of Emeline Journeycake, a Lenape and daughter of Charles Journeycake, the last Lenape chief, and John Edward Campbell of Scots-Irish descent from Virginia. Her father had migrated to Indian Territory after the Civil War to establish a mercantile business at the Alluwe trading post as well as a successful cattle business.

Since there were no public schools in the Territory, Roberta received her early education from a private tutor before studying music and literature at a girls’ seminary and Hardin College in Missouri. However, the most dramatic force in her education was from her grandfather, who taught her Lenape legends, chants and music, which later inspired her compositions, as well as an appreciation for nature.

Roberta married Eugene Lawson on October 31, 1901. His lucrative law practice and banking interests were superseded by the oil industry boom that hit Nowata. The family moved to Tulsa where he founded the Lawson Petroleum Company. After his death in 1931, their son Edward became president of the company.

The women’s club movement was important during the first half of the 20th century for women to address social and political issues. Lawson dedicated 35 years to club work. In 1903, she became president of Nowata’s Women’s Club and fifth president of the Oklahoma Federation of Women’s Clubs in 1917. While serving as the General Federation’s music chairman, she wrote “Indian Music Programs for Clubs” and “Special Music Days” in 1926. She also became a popular interpreter of Indian songs, using her musical skills to preserve some of the old Delaware songs that might otherwise have been lost.

Lawson was elected president of the two-million-member General Federation in 1935. During her three-year presidency, the organization worked on uniform marriage and divorce laws, birth control and civil service. Her leadership was not without controversy. In 1937 Oklahoma City resident Maimie Lee Browne wrote a letter to Governor E. W. Marland suggesting that the Eastern Redbud become the state official tree. The bill, sponsored by the local Daughters of the American Revolution and passed by the legislature, was on the governor’s desk for signing when a telegram arrived from Lawson suggesting that the redbud was the tree Judas Iscariot used to hang himself about betraying Christ.

The controversy set off a national firestorm with stories appearing in newspapers and magazines across the country including Time and Newsweek. The issue was eventually resolved when, after a five-day delay, church hierarchy declared that the Bible never mentioned a redbud and forestry expert George Phillips declared that the redbud and the Judas tree were of the same genus but not the same species. The bill was signed.

Ironically, Lawson was also a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution, and served as the director of the Oklahoma Historical Society. She also served on the Board of Regents for Oklahoma College for Women in Chickasha and the University Tulsa. In 1935, she was inducted into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame. She was also inducted into the American Indian Hall of Fame, and her bronze bust is included among the 41 displayed at Anadarko. Lawson died in December 1940 at age 62 at her Tulsa home of monocytic leukemia.