

**LAURA ELIZABETH  
NEWCOMB  
HARSHA  
1855-1940**



**WCTU  
LEADER,  
SCHOOL  
VISIONARY**

Laura Harsha began her career as a teacher. After moving to Muskogee, she became a temperance leader, but she also used her influence to build a school for her boys to attend.

Laura Elizabeth Newcomb was born in August 1855 in Portville, New York. At the close of the Civil War, her father was sent to Kansas as a missionary. They settled in Pomona, a little town near Ottawa, where Laura finished high school and began teaching there for four years.

In 1877 Laura visited school friends who taught in Okmulgee. When Pleasant Porter found out that Laura was a Kansas teacher, he asked her to stay and teach in the Creek schools. Since the pay was better than she was receiving in Kansas, she resigned her position and moved to Okmulgee for the next school term. She went to Eufaula to take a test to get her teaching certificate. To get there, it required her to swim across the Canadian River on her horse, making the trip in three days.

Superintendent William McCombs would visit her school frequently to take notes about her work to pass it on to other teachers. A little black boy kept showing up for school, but McCombs would send him home because he wasn't allowed to attend a Creek school. Laura intervened and said she needed him as an interpreter because she didn't speak Creek. She taught there one year until her marriage.

William Harsha was also from Ottawa, Kansas but Laura didn't meet him until she lived in Okmulgee. He had come to Okmulgee in 1876, to work for Clarence Turner at the Turner Mercantile. Laura and William were married in 1878, spending a year in Wetumka before returning to Okmulgee before finally settling in Muskogee in 1880. There William went to work for Clarence's father John at J. E. Turner and Company.

Harsha worked with Turner, until Turner's health failed and he sold his interest to Homer Spaulding, who had come to Muskogee in 1884 to work at the Patterson Mercantile. They also had an extensive business in livestock and cotton, including the ownership of the Harsha and Spaulding cotton gin, the largest in America. In 1901, Harsha sold his interest and in 1902 acquired an interest with Clarence Turner in Choska Trading Company, a Wagoner County general mercantile business, which sold everything from dry goods to coffins.

In 1882, the Women's Christian Temperance Union's (WCTU) national president Frances Willard came to Muskogee to organize. Two years later, Laura became its first president, regularly going from store to store to make sure nothing stronger than beer was being sold. The women's suffrage movement began in 1890 when prohibitionist women wanted the vote in order to be more effective in their temperance work.

In 1880 Muskogee, there were few schools. Harrell Institute was a school for girls, though boys up to age twelve were admitted. Bacone College taught older boys, but its location far from town made it difficult for many students to get there. One of Harrell's male students was Will Rogers, who attended with his sister Mary, but wasn't a very dedicated student. He eventually quit school and moved to Texas.

After her sons aged out of Harrell, Laura decided to build a school. She got funding from her friend Almon Bacone and lumber from Clarence Turner. The WCTU school for boys and girls opened at North C Street near Okmulgee Avenue. No student was turned away due to financial hardship. Laura would travel around town in her buggy, collecting monthly pledges from her WCTU members and other contributors.

Harsha was instrumental part of the early life of Muskogee through her educational activities with the WCTU. "I feel the work was truly worth all the difficulties and obstacles with which we had to contend." She died in January 1940 at age 84 in Seattle, and is buried at Greenhill Cemetery in Muskogee.