

**MAIMEE LEE  
ROBINSON  
BROWNE  
1881-1963**



**OKLAHOMA  
REDBUD  
WAR**

Oklahoma has a colorful history of selecting state symbols. Credit for the infamous “Oklahoma Redbud War” of the 1930s goes to Maimee Lee Browne, an Oklahoma City resident who wrote the governor a persuasive letter suggesting the Eastern Redbud become the official state tree.

Maimee Lee Robinson was born in Pittsburg, Texas in March 1881, and married soft-drink pioneer Virgil Browne in 1901. While living in New Orleans, she organized the first formal Citizenship Ceremony in 1922, which remains the model for our naturalization ceremonies.

In 1923, the family moved to Oklahoma City, after Virgil purchased the Coca-Cola bottling plant. Virgil, a 1961 Oklahoma Hall of Fame inductee, joined Paul Braniff in starting Braniff Airlines, financed Carl Magee in inventing the parking meter, and created the six-pack style carton for Coca-Cola.

The redbud tree inspired Maimee’s poetry – and her determination for its recognition. Senator Nate Taylor of Strong City introduced legislation and the governor was about to sign the bill when he was interrupted by a telegraph from Roberta Lawson of Tulsa, who was no fan of the redbud.

She suggested the Eastern Redbud was actually the infamous ‘Judas Tree’, which Judas Iscariot used to hang himself after betraying Jesus! This quickly sidetracked the bill and set off a firestorm that went national with stories appearing in newspapers and magazines around the country, including Time and Newsweek.

It also created quite a dilemma for Governor E. W. Marland. He needed cover before signing the bill. The chairman of the Daughters of American Revolution committee said it best in a letter to Lawson, “I’ve heard of people hanging themselves from lots of things, including chandeliers. But I think if anybody should really want to kill himself, he’d pick out something studier than our pretty little redbud.”

Luckily, John Iskian, Oklahoma resident and Jerusalem native, insisted the Judas Tree and Eastern Redbud were two different species – *cercis siliquastrum* versus *cercis canadensis*. The issue was finally resolved when the head of the Episcopal Church boldly announced the redbud was never mentioned in the Bible.

The governor finally signed the bill commenting, “This resolution is signed at the earnest request of the good women of Oklahoma, and I hope they plant enough redbud to hang every Judas in the state!” It was designated a state emblem in 1937, and officially designated the state tree in 1971.

Afterwards, Browne led a campaign to plant redbuds, including in Platt National Park near Sulphur. Within two years redbud passion had spread throughout the state. In 1939, the Legislature made it illegal to harm redbuds growing along Oklahoma’s highways.

Maimee Browne was a lady who truly lived her life to the fullest. With a positive attitude and contagious enthusiasm, she dreamed of doing things that had not been done – and did them. In 1938, she was inducted into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame. After her death in 1963 at age 82, her family published her book of redbud poetry, and established an endowment in her name.