

Echoes From the Past

VINNIE REAMVINITA'S NAME-SAKE

Most of Oklahoma's towns and cities were named for railroad lawyers or their relatives, Indians tribes and on occasion Oklahoma pioneers, but rarely has an "outsider" been so honored. Why then did Elias C. Boudinot determine that Downingville, Indian Territory would become "Vinita?" The story somewhat complicated by both fact and conjecture fits well with the fascinating history of northeastern Oklahoma. It involves one more broken promise to the Cherokee tribe and Vinnie Ream a youthful Washington DC sculptress.

The original agreement between the Cherokee Tribe and the Federal Government granted virtual sovereignty to the Tribe for the territory that eventually became northeastern Oklahoma. Following the Civil War railroad construction had expanded to the extent that over 52,000 miles of rail had been laid however, none crossed Indian Territory. Moving goods by rail being a profitable venture, the prospect of including Cherokee land became too tempting so in what would be another in a series of treaty violations, Congress approved one north-south and one east-west route across the region. As a result, the eventual architect for both the location and naming of Vinita was one Colonel Elias Cornelius Boudinot, part Cherokee Indian and an attorney who, during the post Civil War period, was involved in Indian affairs in Washington. History also records that he enjoyed the social life of the Capitol city.

Vinnie Ream, Vinita's future namesake, came to the attention of Washington society in a rather circuitous way. Born in Madison, Wisconsin in 1847 daughter of a government map maker, her parents first moved to Washington when she was seven, then left when her father accepted an assignment in the west but returned to Washington shortly after the onset of the Civil War. Vinnie, now 15 and who had acquired only one year of formal education evidenced a talent for molding clay and gained acclaim as a vocalist and harpist. Employed by the United States Postal Service she became well known for volunteering her services in local hospitals to entertain and assist injured soldiers.

During this time, she was accepted as an apprentice to Clark Mills, a renown sculptor of that era, but her future was firmly established when she prepared a bust in the likeness of Representative Thaddeus Stevens from Illinois. Vinnie's other virtues of beauty and feminine wiles may have become more evident when an enthralled Stevens attempted to recruit Abraham Lincoln to sit for her in 1864. Lincoln rejected the idea of being sculpted by an unknown teenager until Steven's convinced him to interview her personally, after which he consented to sit for the young artist who was then allocated space in the Capitol for the project. Unfortunately, before it was completed, Lincoln was assassinated.

Vinnie's popularity among the Washington elite continued to grow both artistically and socially and among others who were apparently mesmerized was Elias C. Boudinot who became a constant correspondent. Her increasing influence over the prominent and political citizens of the day can be illustrated in two instances. In 1866 at age 18, she was, escorted by none other than General William T. Sherman, to the Senate Chambers and was introduced as the choice to sculpt a 6' 4" likeness of Abraham Lincoln which remains today in the Capitol Rotunda. However, like most Washington events not all was "smooth sailing." Her technique of sculpting subjects nude, then clothing them was controversial among some and drew a caustic review of her efforts from Mark Twain who railed about

“the awful apparition of Mr. Lincoln, naked as mud could make him.” The second and distinctively more political influence was her opposition to the impeachment of then President Andrew Johnson and her rumored sway over Kansas Senator Edmund Ross who cast the deciding vote against impeachment in 1868.

By 1871, Vinnie’s place in history was assured both in Washington at the unveiling of the Lincoln statue and in Oklahoma for the naming of Vinita in her honor by Boudinot, her perennial suitor who had even visited her in Rome in 1870 while she sculpted Lincoln in marble. Unfortunately, neither his salute nor rapt attention scored enough romantic points. In 1878 she married Lieutenant Richard Hoxie and gradually dropped from the Washington social scene. She died in 1914 and is buried with Hoxie, who retired as a Brigadier General, in Arlington Cemetery just across the river from her social and artistic triumphs. A disappointed Boudinot eventually married in 1885 but died of dysentery in 1890 after a short illness.