



ALICE MARY ROBERTSON WAS MANY THINGS: A CRUSADER FOR THE RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLE, A FOUNDER OF THE UNIVERSITY OF TULSA, AND THE SECOND WOMAN TO SERVE IN THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS. TODAY, SHE STANDS AS AN INSPIRATION TO OKLAHOMA WOMEN.

FIERY FIGHTER

HER WORLD WAS ablaze when Mary Alice Robertson made her grand debut on January 2, 1854. Just before her birth, everyone—save baby and mother—within shouting distance of the Tullahassee Mission in the Creek Nation wielded buckets and gunnysacks to stop the grass fire raging less than a mile away.

“When weary and dirty, the victorious firefighters returned, they heard my very lusty objection to the world to which I came out of the nowhere, into the here,” Robertson wrote in the first chapter of her unfinished autobiography.

Exhausted and exhilarated, her parents, Ann

Eliza and William Schenck Robertson, looked into their infant’s eyes. What dreams did they have for her? As scholars, teachers, and missionaries, they valued education and service. But given the limitations on women at the time, it seems impossible that the couple could have dreamed big enough to imagine how their daughter would change the state and the country.

As for Alice—she decided to swap her first and middle names as soon as she was able—she never dawdled long on idle fantasy.

“The name, dreamer, has ever been a reproach since it was given to Joseph

by his jealous brethren,” she wrote in an 1871 essay titled “Dreams.” “And how many there are to whom it may be justly applied, who dream of future greatness, usefulness, or happiness, and yet have not sufficient energy to press forward and obtain the prize their fancy has pictured.”

As the seventeen-year-old who wrote those words gazed out her window and watched a fiery sunset give way to sparkling twilight, did she fathom that one day she might grow up to found multiple schools, offer comfort to thousands of soldiers, stand up for the rights of Indigenous people,

ILLUSTRATION BY STEVEN WALKER

BY KARLIE YBARRA



Alice Mary Robertson met and adopted her daughter Susanne Barnett when she was a student at the Minerva Home in Muskogee, a boarding school for young Native women, where Robertson was headmaster.

preside over the U.S. House of Representatives, and become one of the most influential figures in America? No woman had ever done it, but Alice Mary Robertson was unlike any woman who'd come before. She had the courage to break free of the expectations placed on her, and she had the burning drive to do whatever she needed to do to make the world a brighter place.

"She was born in a prairie fire, and she caused a fire-

storm all her life, wherever she went," says historian Jonita Mullins of Muskogee.



AT THE TULLAHASSEE Mission, about ten miles northeast of Muskogee, the Robertson family worked tirelessly to feed the spirits—and, in hard times, the bodies—of local Muscogees. Ann spent her down time translating the Bible into the

Muscogee language. William's hands would have been rough from his work, much of which took place outside of the classroom; when the Robertsons first arrived at Tullahassee, he realized the better part of his role would be building the mission himself. Among other chores, Alice took to cooking, though she never could find the patience for sewing.

The family's evenings were warmed by the hearth of companionship and

sweetened by the dulcet tones of Ann's melodeon and seraphine. This pleasant rhythm of life was interrupted by a sudden caesura: the Civil War. Though the family favored neither side of the national conflict, locals couldn't forget that William was born in New York. Alice was devastated to hear her father called *traitor, spy, and Yankee abolitionist*. In their book *Alice Robertson: Congresswoman from Oklahoma*, historians

Reba Neighbors Collins and Bob Burke noted that the Robertsons were given just twenty-four hours to leave the mission.

The family spent the next few years moving from one state to another, seeking safety and opportunities to be useful. How terrified must seven-year-old Alice have been as she watched the only home she'd known disappear as her family's overloaded wagons carried them away? How would her beloved Muscogees fare when faced with the monstrous behemoth of war? How would her own family survive?

Sadly, the Robertsons weren't spared the sorrow strangling the nation. While in exile in Kansas, Ann gave birth to a girl named Dora, who died before she could see a sunrise over Indian Territory. But as the war drew to a close, Muscogee officials begged William to return, and they headed home. The home to which they returned, however, resembled what Alice called a "gaunt skeleton." The mission had been torn apart by both Confederate and Union soldiers. Rebuilding would consume William's remaining years. Alice, however, soon began to look eastward toward her destiny.



IN 1871, ALICE left for her father's home state of New York, where for two years, she studied history, English, and civics at Elmira College. Though she never earned a degree—she eventually would receive an honorary one—the most significant event during her college years was a field



trip to Washington, D.C. She was fascinated by the inner workings of government, so when she had to get a job to help pay for her sister Grace's education—something all the Robertson kids did for their younger siblings—she took a position at the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

"She was one of the first women, if not the first woman, to work there. I say 'the first woman' a lot in relation to Alice," says Mullins. "She helped write policy for the BIA and the Secretary of the Interior, even though she was a clerk. But she knew the Indians, she knew the chiefs, and she was aware of the issues and the problems."



Robertson circa 1871, the year she left Indian Territory to study at Elmira College in New York.

HOW

terrified must
seven-year-old
Alice have been
as she watched
the only home
she'd known
disappear as
her family's
overloaded
wagons carried
them away?

Robertson presented flowers to Winnifred Mason Huck—the third woman elected to the U.S. Congress—upon her arrival to the Capitol in November 1922.



U.S. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Following a few years at the BIA, Robertson was assigned to work at the notorious Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania. But when her parents telegrammed to say the Tullahassee school had burned down, she immediately returned to Indian Territory.

“She tried to help her father raise the funds to rebuild,” Mullins says. “But they weren’t able to before he passed away. The stress of it took a real toll on him.”

After William’s death in 1881, Ann and Alice continued the restoration efforts, but they were unsuccessful, and the Muskogee Nation decided to convert the school into one for Black Freedmen.

So Alice and her older sister Ann Augusta headed to Okmulgee. There, with the help of the Creek Nation Council, they founded the Nuyaka Mission. Ann Augusta acted as superintendent, and Alice almost single-handedly raised the money to build the school. In 1885, she raised funds for and established a school for girls in Muskogee called the Minerva Home, which would eventually become Henry

Kendall College—and then, in 1920, the University of Tulsa.

Between her newspaper reports in the *Muskogee Phoenix* and her skillful networking with Washington elites, Miss Alice—as everyone called her—developed a reputation as one of the most respected women in America. In 1891, she shared the stage with future president Theodore Roosevelt at the Lake Mohonk Conference of Friends of the American Indian. Roosevelt was impressed by the only woman at the conference at the time, and the pair became friends. Ten years later, Robertson wrote a letter to then-President Roosevelt asking for the position of supervisor of schools in Indian Territory.

“I want that appointment, because I believe that I am better fitted by training and experience to perform its duties than anyone else,” she wrote in no uncertain terms.

How could Roosevelt not acquiesce? After all, just a couple of years earlier, Miss Alice had helped recruit Rough Riders to fight the Spanish-American War. She even provided field kits for every man, each stocked with sewing necessities and a small Bible. In 1905, when she requested an appointment as the first female postmaster in the United States, President Roosevelt once again helped her make history by selecting her to head the post office in Muskogee.



DOMESTIC LIFE KEPT Miss Alice busy as well. Around 1910, she built a farm on the outskirts of Muskogee

and called it Sawokla, meaning *gathering place* in Muskogee. She never married, but she adopted a Muskogee girl named Susanne, and there often were many more people on the farm.

“She would have students over from Henry Kendall College, when she called Sawokla a ‘courting house,’” Mullins says. “She’d have taffy pulls and pair the students off. And every Indian chief who came through town always had to call on her.”

Miss Alice also operated the Sawokla cafeteria in downtown Muskogee. It was this experience that helped make her invaluable during yet another conflict.

In 1917, America plunged into World War I. As thousands of young men stopped in Muskogee on their way south for training, Miss Alice and her Red Cross outfit provided them with sandwiches, coffee, candy, and postcards.

“We will long remember your kindness and wish you many, many years of happiness that will surely come to one with such a big heart,” wrote Colonel Franklin Dennison in a letter dated March 25, 1918.

Aside from the hundreds of thankful letters they sent, some of those soldiers would soon have another opportunity to thank Miss Alice. As the election of 1920 loomed, only one woman in the history of the United States, Jeanette Rankin of Montana, had served in the U.S. House of Representatives. In fact, women had only won the right to vote in Oklahoma in 1919—and nationally the following year. This didn’t sit well at first with Miss Alice,

who believed in traditional feminine roles despite rarely adhering to them herself. She also thought women were already working harder than males in many ways, so adding the role of politically informed citizen was just too much. Despite her initial opposition to the Nineteenth Amendment, once it passed, Miss Alice encouraged women to take their newfound responsibility seriously and engage in political life. And that’s just what she did: Despite being a Republican in a sea of Democrats, she ran against incumbent William W. Hastings.

“I am a Christian, I am an American, I am a Republican,” was her pugnacious campaign cry. “I cannot be bought, I cannot be sold, I cannot be intimidated.”

Rather than engage in traditional campaigning, Miss Alice used her newspaper advertisements for the

Robertson and the Red Cross provided food and goodwill to soldiers bound for the first World War. They responded to her kindness with hundreds of letters.

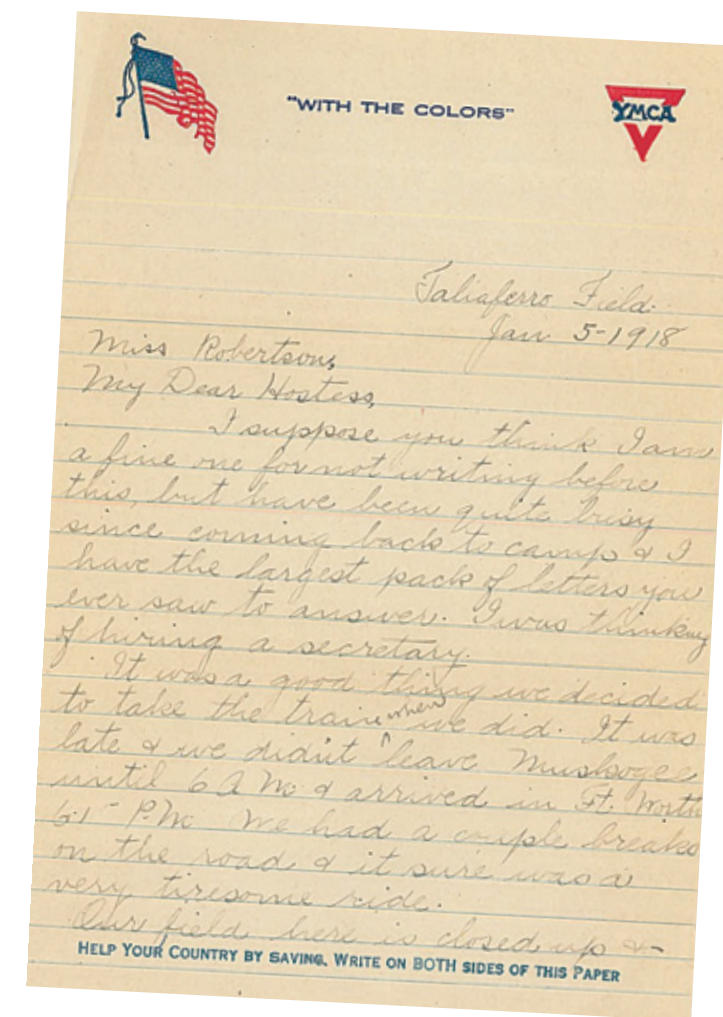
Sawokla cafeteria to reach the voters—at least the ones she couldn’t invite over for a hot meal. Between this homestyle community outreach, veteran support, and the Republican wave that swept the nation that year, she was elected to Congress on November 2, 1920.

Miss Alice’s time as a Congresswoman was short. During her single term, her biggest achievements were securing a Veterans Affairs hospital for Muskogee—to this day, the city’s largest employer—and, on June 20, 1921, being the first woman to preside over the House. She also fought for reparations for those who’d come to Indian Territory on the Trails of Tears.



U.S. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Robertson, with former Speaker of the House Joe Cannon, became the first woman to preside over a session of the U.S. House of Representatives on June 20, 1921.



OKLAHOMA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

“I WANT
that appointment,
because I believe
that I am better
fitted by training
and experience to
perform its duties
than anyone else.”



U.S. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Robertson with her sisters Ann Augusta and Grace, circa 1896

After losing to her former opponent Hastings in the next election, Miss Alice returned to her Oklahoma home. She worked at the VA for a time and then as a transcriptionist for the Oklahoma Historical Society. She had little money, so she relied mostly on the generosity of friends to get by. On July 1, 1931, she died of cancer at the same Muskogee veterans hospital she'd made possible.

NINE DECADES AFTER her death, what is Alice Robertson's legacy? There's an exhibit at the Three Rivers Museum in Muskogee. On the fourth floor of the State Capitol is a portrait by Mike Wimmer. And some seventy boxes of papers and photos are preserved at the Oklahoma History Center and Tulsa University. But her impact is more



than just the ephemera she left behind. Her legacy still is being written by Oklahoma women. "Oklahoma has many trailblazers in its history, but one that I am particularly inspired by is Alice Mary Robertson," says Stephanie Bice, U.S. Representative for the state's fifth district. "Theodore Roosevelt described her as one of 'the great women of America.' As the only woman in Congress at the time, she served on the Committee on Woman Suf-

frage, which had helped secure women the right to vote, and because of her work in the Native American community, served on the Committee of Indian Affairs. I hope that all Oklahomans, and particularly young women, will take the time to learn more about Congresswoman Robertson and be moved to serve in their communities." Donelle Harder, president of the POWHER Political Action Committee, which

helps Republican women in Oklahoma run for all levels of public office, also hopes Robertson's story of resilience encourages others to serve. "She was so different, so nontraditional for her time," Harder says. "It's a reminder for women that we do not have to live in a perfect box. We're all unique and have different skills, different callings. You don't have to be picture-perfect to run for office. You just need to be someone who

operates with conviction and offer experience that can help lead the community." Alice Mary Robertson was born in a blaze, and not even death could extinguish her flame. Her compassion, her courage, and her spirit of service burn on. ■



OKIE HERITAGE TOURS

- › Jonita Mullins of Okie Heritage Tours will lead an Alice Mary Robertson Caravan Tour beginning at 10 a.m. November 13 in Muskogee. Tickets are \$20.
- › (918) 348-6648
- › okieheritage.com

THREE RIVERS MUSEUM

- › 220 Elgin Street in Muskogee
- › (918) 686-6624
- › 3riversmuseum.com

OKLAHOMA STATE CAPITOL

- › 2300 North Lincoln Boulevard
- › (405) 521-3356
- › arts.ok.gov

GREENHILL CEMETERY

- › 1500 North York Street in Muskogee
- › (918) 684-6215

OKLAHOMA HISTORY CENTER

- › Visitors must have an appointment to view the Alice Mary Robertson collection at the Oklahoma History Center.
- › 800 Nazih Zuhdi Drive in Oklahoma City
- › (405) 522-0765
- › okhistory.org/historycenter

UNIVERSITY OF TULSA

- › Visitors must have an appointment to view the Alice Mary Robertson collection at the McFarlin Library at the University of Tulsa.
- › 2933 East Sixth Street in Tulsa
- › (918) 631-2871
- › libraries.utulsa.edu