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Provided to Ken Richardson by Carol (Carlberg) Hewitt...April, 2006.

## PERFECT LOVE

### Growing up in Enid, Oklahoma, a music critic finds his muses.

--By Richard Dyer (music critic for the Globe)

**WHEN I WAS A CHILD**, I supposed Enid, Oklahoma, had always been there, and I would always be in it. That was a sure thing, as sure as Maine Street was a block over from Broadway, and Market Street was a block over from Cherokee. Everything fit onto the grid, and the grid made perfect sense out of a lot of other things.

Matters turned out differently. In 1941, when I was born, Enid was younger than I am now. One day in September 1893, Enid was merely some plots laid out on a surveyor's map, a stopping place on the Chisholm Trail because of the mineral springs there. The next day, after the biggest land rush in American history, Boomers were building a new city named after a character in Tennyson's *The Idylls of the King* — although a homelier story says someone just turned around a sign that said "Dine."

And as it happened, I didn't wind up staying in Enid more than a few months past my 15th birthday. In 1956, my father was offered a job in Ohio that doubled his salary, so my parents, my two brothers and I, and our dog, Sooner, left home in a long yellow Pontiac station wagon that I thought was taking us to the end of the world - although soon enough I was thinking Cleveland was Paris. ("This isn't the end of the world," remarks a prairie character in the musical *Quilters*, recently presented by the Gaslight Theater of Enid, "but you sure can see it from here.") After my grandparents retired and moved to Missouri, in 1959, there never seemed much reason to go back to Oklahoma, and so I never did.

In 1893, and several times since, there have been rushes into Oklahoma — and rushes out, connected to cycles of boom and bust and the shifting fortunes of oil, gas, and wheat. There are about the same number of people in Enid (40,000) as there were back then, when I was a kid, but not many of them are the same people. Time moved on, and so did most everyone my age. Home, for most Americans, has become a place you leave.

Enid was a great place to grow up in the '40s and '50s. Family values prevailed. Oklahoma was one of the last two Prohibition states, and there were no drugs around; there was little divorce and, until I was 13, no television; in the summer you could fry an egg on the sidewalk. It was also a terrible place to grow up, especially for a kid who was more interested in Mozart and Dickens than in football, but one of the things you finally figure out is that everywhere is a terrible place to grow up, because growing up is a terrible process to go through.

Last fall I did return to Enid, for the first time in 34 years. There was a historical reason to go back. The city would be celebrating its Centennial in the Oklahoma way, with barbecue, a parade, a turtle race (no snapping turtles allowed), horse-shoe pitching, boot-throwing, roping, nail-driving, and pie-eating, and all of that sounded good to me.

And there were good personal reasons to go. Two teachers who informed my life still live in Enid in their retirement; I wanted to see them again, to say thank you.

Maurine Morrow Priebe sang "O Perfect Love" at my parents' wedding. My father's tenor was the sweetest sound I ever heard, but it was Mrs. Priebe's soaring soprano that awakened me to the power of music. She also did her best to teach me how to play the piano, every Saturday

morning, at \$1 a lesson, in her studio up the steep stairs from the Oxford Cleaners, just off the square.

For 40 years, Marie Luikart taught eighth-grade English at Longfellow Junior High School with a fierce, concentrated energy she hasn't lost today at 87, when she still regularly drives out to a retirement community to read the newspaper to the "old people". She was among the first to show me how much fun it is to listen to words and how it is even more fun to move them around on a page. She handed me the tools you need to do it, showed me the rudiments of how to use them, and make me practice handling them, drilling me in sentences the way Mrs. Priebe drilled me in scales and chords.

And maybe most of all I wanted to see what I could find of myself in this place that remains so familiar, despite the distances of time, geography and culture that have made it seem so strange. Here in Boston you can hardly say anything true about Oklahoma that doesn't come out sounding like a joke, whether you mean it to or not. Yes, I did spend several weeks of several summers at Camp Christian, in Boiling Springs, Oklahoma, and it was no joke.

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**ON THE 19<sup>TH</sup> OF AUGUST**, 1893, President Grover Cleveland signed the proclamation that would open more than 8 million acres of the Cherokee Outlet to settlement; the Cherokee Nation was paid \$8.5 million for ceding its tribal lands to the government. On Sept. 15, 1893, more than 100,000 people lined up on the borders of the Outlet. They came on foot, on horseback, in covered wagons and buggies, and on trains of cattle cars. And at noon on Sept. 16, the run to stake claims began.

This was one of the most colorful episodes in American history; a photograph of flying horses taken by W. S. Prettyman 10 seconds after the gun has become a mythic image of thundering hope. Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman made the run all over again in *Far and Away* in 1992, although that was filmed up north in a place that doesn't look anything like Oklahoma. In Government Springs Park in 1993, during the centennial celebrations, kids turned their *Louisville Flyers* into covered wagons, and ran up the hill like a shot at the sound of a gun.

The annual Cherokee Strip parade and celebration were always the big municipal events of the fall, just as the Tri-State Band Festival was the principal rite of spring. Enid, like most small towns, sets great store by rituals, sports, parades, dedications, marching bands, public prayers and speeches; these reinforce the connections made by family, friends, church, school, football team, and business--which collectively create community. When I was growing up, people who had made the run rode in the place of honor in the parade (the last survivor, Laura Crews, died in 1976, at the age of 105). There were always celebrations of the run all over town; at one of them, my friend Tammy Mason and I were dressed up as Uncle Sam and his wife, and there is a picture of us conducting the rhythm band in Convention Hall.

We learned about the run all the way through school. In ninth grade we had to take a semester of Oklahoma history, and at Longfellow Junior High, that meant a semester with fearsome Dewey Bickel, who would recline in his revolving leather-back chair, wave his unlit cigar, and strike terror into everyone's heart. He said he had trouble with names, so all of us bore numbers - I was 7-9, which meant I took the course in seventh period and sat in seat nine. My mother still recalls the occasion on parents' night when Dewey Bickel said, "I'm very glad to meet you, Mrs. Nine".

My Oklahoma history notebook, the product of a compulsive childhood, runs to several hundred pages, typewritten, single-spaced, elite type, questions in black, answers in red.

For the notebook, I "interviewed" Maud Lang about what the early settlers ate; Mrs. Lang lived a few doors down from my grandmother, but as a young woman she had lived on the northwest quarter of section 34 of township 24 in the Outlet. "The first years were plagued by drought.", she told me. "We couldn't grow hardly anything except a little punkin and the like; we fed the livestock corn. After five years or so, the trees began to bear fruit. Some of the peaches were as big as teacups; the smaller ones we fed to the hogs...Salt was the main seasoning we had for everything, but nutmeg was very popular because it was only 5 cents a pint."

Many observations in the notebook belong to the 1950s and sound dated now. The rebellious war chief Osceola, captured when he rode under a white flag of truce, was "treated with justice," I wrote in my notebook, "because he was a ruthless killer who endangered the lives of law-abiding citizens," meaning white people.

In 1993, Native Americans again peacefully marched in the Cherokee Strip parade in Enid, taking their places in the lineup with Miss Enid in her convertible, marching bands, floats from the major schools and businesses, prominent citizens driving miniature automobiles, Model T Fords, a longhorned limousine bucking like a bull, and corps of little twirlers, tumbling cartwheels, throwing their batons into the air on the way down and catching them on the way up, most of the time.

But there was an outcry in nearby Ponca City, which had commissioned a new sculpture of a pioneer staking his claim that bore an unfortunate title, "This Land Is Mine." There were protests at the unveiling, and I heard a native American woman speak passionately on the radio: "We were here first. We know your language; you do not know ours. We know your religion; you do not know ours. We know your culture; you do not know ours. Just who is the ignorant savage?"

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**MY OWN FAMILY** didn't make the run into Oklahoma, although the grandparents of my lifelong friend Joe Brisben did. Joe and his brother Quinn, the Socialist Party candidate for president in 1992, have erected a granite marker on the old homestead near Pond Creek, where Joe and I learned to milk cows. "This farm was homesteaded September 16, 1893, by Joseph W. and Lettie M. Quinn and held in their family for more than 100 years. Erected in celebration of the centennial of the run for the Cherokee Strip by their grandsons."

My maternal grandparents, G. Edwin and Alma Osborn, arrived in the summer of 1924, and my Uncle Ronald remembers they came into town in a Model T riding three tires and a rim. More than a dozen years later, my father, Edward Dyer, was on his way from Oregon to go to school at Texas Christian University when he got off at the Rock Island depot in Enid to visit friends. Because he also met Prudence Osborn, my mother-to-be, he wound up staying for most of the next 18 years - World War II took him away to Europe and later to the Pacific theater. Because of Pearl Harbor, I was born near a military base in Texas instead of in Oklahoma, but it wasn't long before my mother and I were back in Enid, living in an apartment upstairs from my grandparents, at 1609-1/2 East Broadway.

It was in the study at the back of the first floor that I heard my first opera (an owl lived in the tree outside the window). On my 10th birthday, my grandfather told me, as one bestowing a favor, that I was old enough to listen with him to the Saturday-afternoon radio broadcast from the Metropolitan Opera in New York City, brought to us by Texaco. It was *Lucia di Lammermoor*, with Lily Pons and Ferruccio Tagliavini, and I didn't miss another broadcast for something like 20 years.

A few years later, my grandparents took me to Oklahoma City to see the Met on tour. We sat in the top-price \$8 seats and saw *Le Boheme* with Nadine Conner and Eugene Conley.

The company played in the same auditorium where I went to see Roy Rogers and Dale Evans give Oklahoma City a traffic-safety award. Four or five young boys made the trip to Oklahoma City in a state of high excitement that was dashed pretty quickly when it became clear that Roy and Dale were only going to sing, and nobody was going to shoot anybody else or even punch him out. Despite that disappointment, Oklahoma City was an exciting place. We always had dinner at the YMCA cafeteria, and you could *choose* what you were going to have for supper and even look at it beforehand, and you didn't have to have anything you didn't want. They also had escalators in Oklahoma City. We didn't have anything like that in Enid, although Johnson's Shoe Store did have an X-ray machine that let you see your toes inside your shoes, and in one of the department stores your change shot back to you, like magic, in a pneumatic tube.

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**IT IS AFTER DARK** when I arrive in the Oklahoma City airport and pick up a rental car. There are fast ways to drive to Enid now, but I take the slow, dark way we used to come home from Oklahoma City. I want to drive through Okarche and Kingfisher and Hennessey and Waukomis, crossing the Canadian and the Cimarron rivers.

The older highways of Oklahoma are sectioned concrete, with ribbons of tar between the sections to absorb the expansions and contractions that come with changes of temperature and weather; at twilight the roads glow pink, not just with the sunset but with the red earth pounded into the concrete by generations of farm trucks. When you drive over these roads the tires create a tattoo, *ker-thump, ker-thump*, which brings back a whole rhythmic resonance of memory.

The roads run plumb, but it isn't true that Oklahoma is flat and boring. What is true is that most of the times you can see the horizon unobstructed, ringing you round in every direction; you are surrounded by the sky and, at night, the stars. This puts you at the center of the universe and reduces you to an infinitesimal speck. The big new highways bypass all the little towns, but you can always see them over there, four or five miles away. At night they glow in reassuring squares of light; by day the grain elevators, the cathedrals of the prairie, stick up from the red earth, spell out what's there, and tell you where you are.

In Enid, Market Street is still a block over from Cherokee, but it isn't Market Street anymore; they've renamed it after the astronaut from Enid, Owen Garriott Jr. Going part of the way on Garriott, I drive straight to the familiar gray structure on Broadway where I used to live upstairs from my grandparents. I sit in my car in the dark, remembering that when you wanted to call my grandmother, you asked Central to connect you with 5630-J. My brother Dan and I are probably the only two people in the world who remember that number. I want to go inside and be comforted by my grandmother, listen to her read aloud, and hear her laugh again; today I would even eat turnips if she wanted me to, although I never went that far when she was still alive.

I figure the best way to reconnect to Enid is to go to University Place Christian Church first thing Sunday morning, and I am right. I grew up attending the Tabernacle at University Place, a plain frame temporary structure carpentered by the men of the congregation to serve until there was enough money to build a proper church, which didn't happen until I was in junior high school. When I was little, my grandfather was the minister of the church.

As I take my place in a familiar blond wood pew, and contemplate the unfamiliar prospect of a woman preacher, a distinguished looking older gentleman comes over to greet the new comer. "Welcome to University Place," he says. "My name is Kenneth Lewis." I peer at him closely.

"Well, who else would you be?" I ask, and moments later the congregation is being told that Dickie Dyer is back. Nobody had called me that in 30 years, but Kenneth Lewis used to address me by that name, sometimes in a rather stern tone of voice, back when his son Roger and some of the rest of us threatened to get out of hand.

After church, Evelyn Powell, a friend of the family for 70 years, tells me a wonderful story about my grandfather I had never heard before. He was strolling through the garden of a seminary colleague, who was showing off his Naked Ladies with pride. "Don't you think," my grandfather asked, "you should plant some Jacob's Coats around your Naked Ladies?"

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**BY DAY, ENID SPRINGS SOME SURPRISES**, particularly on the west side. The most recent oil and gas boom, which lasted from 1976 until 1983, altered the fashionable side of town out of all recognition; beyond the fancy homes in the developments, there is a WalMart and a mall; miles of highway Americana lead out to Lahoma. This expansion inevitably led to the decline of downtown Enid, which deteriorated like most of downtown America. Shutdown stores bear empty witness to the government buildings that remain the center of the city and a focus of civic pride.

The south side of the square is now a conference center, anchored by the building that once housed a dimestore. It remains a handsome structure, a souvenir of an era when even a dimestore, like a quilt, needed to be both functional and beautiful; it is unlikely anyone 75 years from now will consider the recent structures on the west side beautiful, because they were never intended to be. Up north, the world's largest grain elevators remain Enid's most conspicuous architectural feature; they are still imposing and evocative, although there is no longer any wheat stored in many of them.

Some of Enid has a lean and hungry look, and the mall seems far bigger than it needs to be; it isn't thronged. The town has had a tough time, but it has slowly been picking itself up by the bootstraps. Government Springs Park had been derelict since a flood in 1973; citizens banded together to spruce it up in time for the centennial. The old zoo at the top of the hill, once home to smelly monkeys and one very lonely looking buffalo, has been replaced by the Museum of the Cherokee Strip.

In the basement of the museum, I discover how careless I have been of my heritage; I have discarded museum-quality objects--they have Hopalong Cassidy carmuffs in a glass case, but mine are long gone. I never owned a tin Double R Bar Ranch, but if I had known about it, I would have wanted one, and I want one now. There was no such thing as a day-care center in Enid in the '50s, but there was the Mecca Theater, where children could be deposited on Saturday afternoons for a newsreel, cartoons, a serial, and a Western double feature.

On the east side, Enid looks pretty much the way it looked 40 years ago. Kiwanis park is still a playground for neighborhood children, and red-dirt streets I remember from 1956 remain unpaved in 1994. There is verdigris on the metal plaques on the bridge at Phillips University that pay tribute to those sons of the university who fought in World War II. My father's name is still legible, and I take a picture of it for him.

In a conversation I hear someone say "no siree-bob" for the first time in more than 40 years, and before the week is out, I slip it into a conversation myself. A sign about bad checks in a store reads, "To err is human; to forgive is \$50." I drink a cherry limeade made with two real limes, and a clerk in a bookstore rings up my purchase and tells me to "Hurry on back."

In Jars Restaurant, in Pond Creek, I order a chicken-fried steak and drink Coke out of a mason jar; the cream gravy is so thick it could levitate the steak if it had a mind to. The old Carnegie Library has been torn down, but a portrait of the librarian, Jean Harrington, hangs in the entranceway of the new building, and it reminds me to go out and visit her, and tell about the time she made me get a note from my mother before she would let me check out Mickey Spillane's *Kiss Me, Deadly*.

Over in Ponca City, in the civic center behind the still-sheathed pioneer statue, the Ponca Playhouse is putting on a production of Rogers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* It's good, and it's the only production of *Oklahoma!* I've ever seen that gets the accents right. There's a snappy 12-piece orchestra, and at the piano is Tamara Gibson, Tammy Mason from my childhood, Maurine Priebe's most talented student, who still plays with a snazzy rhythm I would recognize anywhere. I have known Tammy so long I was able to tell her husband I had taken a bath with his wife. The most famous photo of the two of us pictures us in matching sunsuits sewn by our mothers; our mood is not sunny, and out on the front porch we are screaming our heads off.

In 1993, we come across this photo; we don't need to say anything, we just look at each other and head for the front porch, handing our cameras to her husband, Gary. We recreate the image, close to 50 years later. Before I leave, she leads me into another room and says, "I want to show you something." It is a pair of glass vases. "They were a present from your grandmother," she says. "I like to keep them out where I can look at them."

Over the years, Tammy has kept up with Mrs. Priebe; she shows me an opal ring glowing on her finger. "Remember this?" she asks. It is the ring Miss Morrow used to wear on the hand that held the music open on the piano rack, back in the days before she married Marcellus Priebe - the last wedding ceremony my grandfather performed.

Neither Tammy nor I can ever remember hearing Mrs. Priebe play the piano, but she did have a great voice, of that I am certain. Back in the '30s she had gone from Enid to New York to study with Metropolitan Opera soprano Dorothee Manski, but then her father died suddenly, and she came back to Enid to take care of her mother. She taught piano lessons and became head of music in the Enid public schools; she was the choir director and soloist at University Place Church. Out of her chorus at Enid High came Don Yule, who sang at the New York City Opera; Rich Taylor, manager of talent resources for Disney World; and Leona Mitchell, the Metropolitan Opera soprano.

Leona Mitchell is a little bit younger than I am. I couldn't possibly have known her back in Enid in the years before the schools were integrated; black people seldom ventured south of Market Street except to go to work in white homes. Now one of the principal government buildings in Enid is named after Martin Luther King Jr., who was hardly a municipal hero during his lifetime. This paradox amuses a friend and former Enidian I run into, a veteran of most of the major civil rights marches of the '60s. "I'd sure like to show the Reverend King around his building," says this friend, who knew him. "He would have enjoyed that. The only thing I'd like better," my friend adds, "would be the chance to show Jesus around the Vatican."

Now there's a Leona Mitchell Boulevard in Enid, and it goes right past the house where she grew up. Mrs. Priebe heard the potential in young Leona's voice, and soon she was repeating Madame Manski's maxims to the talented teenager; she drove her to Oklahoma City for her first important audition.

Mrs. Priebe would have known potential when she heard it because she was such an extraordinary singer herself. On Palm Sunday, in the Tabernacle, she always sang "The Palms";

on Easter she would sing "The Holy City." When she sang Gounod's "O Divine Redeemer," her voice flooded the Tabernacle with sound and light; I felt that the gates of heaven had been flung open wide ("Methought the voice of angels / From heav'n in answer rang"). Up until a few years ago, I had forgotten what the piece actually was, remembering only the glory of it. But then Dame Janet Baker came out with a record called "Songs for a Sunday." I put it on one day while I was in another room, doing something else. Then she began to sing "O Divine Redeemer," and I sat down and started to cry.

My memory of Mrs. Priebe was of someone rather tailored and severe, as she most probably was; music is unforgiving of human error, and I was good at that - I was no Tammy Mason. For 50 years and more, Mrs. Priebe has represented standards in Enid, and she still does. Now somewhere in her 80s - no one in his right mind would dare to ask how old she is - she is one of the town's most colorful and beloved characters, the diva of the city, imperious, glamorous, generous, and outspoken. She remembers hearing Galli-Curci and Madame Schumann-Heink sing in Convention Hall, and she knows better than most people in New York City what is wrong with the Metropolitan Opera today and how they had better fix it. She takes me to lunch at the Country Club, and then she insists on going by Rich Taylor's house so that she can introduce two other former students to each other.

The night before, Taylor had been emcee of the centennial concert in Government Springs Park, where he out-sang Gordon MacCrae in "O What a Beautiful Mornin'." Today he is doing chores for his mother. "Last night, a star." he quips. "Today, the yard man."

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**MISS MARIE LUIKART** taught English at Longfellow from 1932 until 1972, Her sister Jo taught there, too - history - and today in the Longfellow Library there is a plaque in Jo's memory, "A faith to live by, a self to live with, and a purpose to live for."

To generations of eighth graders, Marie Luikart taught English as if it were Latin. There were rules, you learned them, and you followed them. On the mimeograph machine she ran off pages of sentences from literature, and we had to put them onto grammatical diagrams, but we were not permitted to do so until we had analyzed the structure of every sentence, written down the part of speech of every word, and drawn arrows to pin down its syntactical function. We also had to construct our own sentences to fit diagrams that looked like football plays or blue-prints for a fortification.

After all this useful drill and drudgery, which handed me tools I use every day of my life, Marie Luikart turned us loose in the realms of imagination. We read *Ivanhoe*, *Evangeline*, and Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. For the play we listened to the recording by Orson Welles and the Mercury Theater on 78s the school used they wore out. For Longfellow's *Evangeline*, we listened to Marie Luikart herself; she read every word of it out loud, every school period of the day, year after year, for decades, and she cried every time when she got to the end.

"I had to read *Evangeline* aloud," Marie Luikart said recently. "Some of you didn't need to listen to me, but I had to look out for the majority, and they might never have gotten it if I hadn't read it out for them." Even tough kids would cry along with Miss Luikart when *Evangeline* cradled the dying Gabriel in her arms. Marie Luikart didn't traffic much with theories of how to interpret literature. One of her teachers in college had said to her, "Look for the life aspects." That's what she did, and made the rest of us to, too, and there are more aspects to life because of what she taught us.

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**ENID, OKLAHOMA**, has stood there for a century, and dear hearts and gentle people, and a colorful crook or two, have filled it up with "life aspects" for everyone who has passed through there.

In Enid I learned about family values, the importance of friendship, religious values, community values. Over the years you "outgrow" some things; you try to discard what is false from your life. But the only way to know that something is false is by referring it to the truth, which is usually something you learned in the same place. Like most hometowns, Enid was a place to learn things that stick with you and things to leave behind, and the things that stick with you are the ones that matter.

Going back to Enid, I expected to be astonished at how different it would be, how strange I would feel, how far removed from my life today everything there would seem. Instead, people made me feel right at home. I learned one thing for sure: The grid still holds. Although I moved away from Enid a long time ago, I found out that I have also lived there all the rest of my life.

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