

Jessie Perry Stratford

1885 - 1980



Jessie Clara Cleveland Perry was born Feb. 12, 1885. This was kept a secret from most acquaintances, as she never told her age. Even her tombstone has no dates on it. She was one of three daughters born to James Cleveland Perry and Clara Frances Brumback Perry in Florence, KS. When their parents died during their childhood, the girls moved to Brainerd to live with their grandparents.

Jessie Perry married Oscar Edward Stratford on June 30, 1913. Mr. Stratford, born Oct. 9, 1885, worked as an auto mechanic and later as a post office clerk. He died in 1937. They had one daughter, Mercedes Ruth Stratford, born around 1915, who later married Lawrence Willard Covert in 1938.

Prior to her marriage, she was for some time editor of the El Dorado Republican and later a writer on staff to the Wichita Eagle. She later was owner-editor of the Burns News, the Western Butler County Times of Towanda, and the Butler Free-Lance.

Early in their marriage, the Stratfords lived in several rented locations in El Dorado, including 1000 W. Central. Mr. Stratford later purchased the Victorian home at 523 W. Central, on the SE corner of Central and Denver. This house was built about 1884 by Miller M. VanDenberg.

Mrs. Stratford was well known as a newspaperwoman of unusual ability. She worked for R. A. Clymer, publisher of the El Dorado Times for many years, at one time sharing an office with him. She remained loyal to him even when William Allen White, famed editor of the Emporia Gazette, tried to buy her talents for his own newspaper.

Mrs. Stratford never drove a car; her husband had tried to teach her but finally gave up. Her daughter would drive her wherever she wanted to go.

She was very interested in history, and took a special interest in the history and families of Butler County.

Her memberships included the First United Presbyterian Church of El Dorado, the Daughters of the American Revolution, the Butler County Historical Society, and the Kansas Historical Society.

After selling the Towanda newspaper, she mostly gave up daily writing, except for specials for the Wichita Eagle and free-lance writing. Mrs. Stratford died March 16, 1980.

CONNECTION TO BUTLER COUNTY

Jessie Perry Stratford never graduated from high school but she did attend the Brumback Academy in 1903, the year it was founded by Mrs. Nora Brown Brumback. This school met on the second floor of the old El Dorado City Building; at one time about half of Butler County's teachers were former students of this academy.

After schooling, Jessie began her newspaper career with the Walnut Valley Times. Later owner-editor of several publications, her Butler Free-Lance eventually merged with the Butler County News, owned by James W. Greenbank.

COMING TO THE AREA

Jessie came to Butler County following the death of her parents to live with her grandparents, Mr. and Mrs. Oliver Hazard Perry, in Brainerd. This township was located near present-day Whitewater. She moved to El Dorado in 1901, to attend school.

ACHIEVEMENTS

One of El Dorado's most accomplished writers, Jessie Perry Stratford grew up in the golden age of journalism. Known for her flawless use of the English language, her many articles were eagerly anticipated and much enjoyed by her devoted readers. She began her career, which spanned over 70 years, with the Walnut Valley Times. Her columns were "personal, very kindly, boasting . . . clever, well-written prose about unusual things people did and said", said Lawrence T. Klintworth, news editor of the El Dorado Times during the period in which Mrs. Stratford was society editor there.

Mrs. Stratford was a leading figure in Butler County's newspaper world in the day when the local item was the big story of the day, and little tidbits of information about family and business affairs in the community were of primary interest to the readers. She was a master of this trade, knowing more personal history of nearly every family in town than any other. This accuracy of detail set her apart.

In the early days of her career, prior to 1915, she was associated with the Wichita Eagle. She worked from 2:00 in the afternoon to 2:00 in the morning. Assigned to cover a murder story, she would hop on a street car to arrive at the scene.

Next she became owner of several local newspapers. Her devotion to the Butler Free-Lance won her the greatest recognition. This paper was sent far and wide during World War II, with news of all the local young men and women in the service. It was truly the letter from home for service men and women of those days, keeping them in touch with family and friends, with Jessie the inspiration and guiding hand.

Her history of the county, "Butler County's Eighty Years – 1855-1935", was published in 1935. Among other books written was a small but popular volume of literary sketches of the children of Butler County, "When They Were Very Young". She co-authored "The Kingdom of Butler" with Lawrence P. Klintworth, today the standard text on the history of Butler County.

Mrs. Stratford was the driving force in producing The Women's Pictorial Edition of the El Dorado Times in 1931. This publication featured the lives and accomplishments of Butler County women.

Always a familiar sight on the streets of El Dorado or covering a meeting, Jessie was never empty-handed; she always had her writing materials tucked under her arm. Many local families have treasured articles about their families written by this fluent writer. Her style of writing and her knack for collecting personal vignettes made her columns "the first thing everybody read", friends said about her.