



Essay on Marquis James (1891-1955)

By Dr. Paul S. Vickery

Although Marquis James was born in Springfield, MO, he made Enid, Oklahoma, and the old Cherokee Strip, famous. His parents were Rachel Marquis and Houstin (the name was misspelled in the family Bible and never changed) James, a “Fifth or six cousin of Jesse James.” His father, a Civil War veteran and attorney who represented many desperate characters on the edge of the law, participated in the Land Run of 1893, staking a claim near what would become Enid. Rachel Marquis was of French stock and grew up in Virginia. Because his two sisters, Zoe and Nan, were married and living in Chicago, Marquis grew up basically as an only child with two experienced parents who were neither alarmed at, nor surprised by, any of his antics.

Growing up in a frontier town and meeting the characters who were his father’s clients, was a young boy’s dream. Along with lesser known outlaws such as Bill Doolin and Arkansas Tom, was the man responsible for “the greatest manhunt Oklahoma ever saw,” and the man about whom legends were born - Dick Yeager. For years Marquis kept the casing of the shell that had ended Yeager’s career. Days before his death, Dick shook hands with the four year old Marquis and told him never to forget that he had just shaken hands with “the biggest criminal Oklahoma ever had.” Among his father’s other friends was Sam Houston’s youngest son. Temple Houston had left Texas for Indian Territory after killing a man. In those days in Indian Territory, it was neither polite nor healthy to ask very much about a person’s past. One of James’ earliest recollections, however, was sitting on Temple’s knee and hearing the story of the Alamo and the Battle of San Jacinto from his own lips. These early experiences formed the basis for his autobiographical, and perhaps most famous book, *The Cherokee Strip*, and would later spark a desire to do further biographical research into the lives of his heroes.

Rachel James taught Marquis to read at the age of four. As a child he spent hours reading the books in his own large family library and later devoured the collection at the Enid Public Library. History was his favorite subject; math and grammar were beyond him. In 1940, “Markey,” as he was known, wrote, “When I add a column of figures and get the correct answer it is purely by accident and I am sure I could not name the eight parts of speech, let alone define them.”

Perhaps his least favorite instruction, however, was in the realm of dancing and music. He considered these pursuits effeminate and much preferred his marksmanship lessons from the old buffalo hunter Mr. Howell. While educating himself on the streets and allies of the county seat town of Enid, James became involved in the newspaper business. Although most interested in the area of printing, his eye for a story and the ability to tell it concisely was apparent at a very early age. By the age of fourteen, he was a full fledged reporter for the *Enid Events*. Despite his uneven scholarly pursuits, James graduated in 1909 from Enid High school where he helped found the school publication *The Quill*. The next year he began college at Oklahoma Christian (later Phillips) University. The unexpected death of his father, and subsequent need to work to help his mother, cut short his college studies, but launched his most remarkable writing career.



Houston James, James's father

At the advice of one of his newspaper employers, James set out at the age of twenty, as an itinerant reporter. He soon found jobs working on papers in cities such as Kansas City, St. Louis, and Chicago. This was great training. James not only honed his newspaper skills, but also supplemented his income by turning out detective stories for pulp magazines. In 1914, while working on the *New Orleans Item*, he met and married the blonde Bessie Rowland. Soon the couple were both working on different newspapers in New York. In 1924, their daughter, Cynthia, was born. Bessie was a big help to James and worked with him as a researcher, editor, and friend.

With the US entry into World War I, James enlisted and fought in France. His early weapons training on the prairie help him become an instructor of both rifle and pistol. After receiving a slight wound at the front, James left the Army as a Captain of Infantry and returned to New York. Soon he landed a job as the National Director of Publicity for the American Legion and writing for their monthly publication. It was in this position that James began writing a series of biographical sketches that were both historically accurate and entertaining to read. In 1923, he published his first book *A History of the American Legion*.



Rachel Marquis, James's mother

Wanting to pursue other offers, James left the American Legion, and, with Harold Ross began the *New Yorker Magazine*. While covering the 1925 Scopes Monkey Trial in Dayton, Tennessee for this publication, James renewed his interest in Sam Houston. During a lull in the trial, James went to the library to read what they had concerning Sam Houston. The seed that Temple had planted in the young Markey's memory now began to sprout. Following some undefined "whim," James decided to take about four months and write a biography of Houston. His research, which took him as far away as England, corroborated the stories he had heard while at the knee of his childhood hero. In 1929, after four years of research, he published his study of Houston, entitled *The Raven*. This work won him his first Pulitzer Prize in 1930. Literary success encouraged him to tackle

a more substantial work, the life of Andrew Jackson. The two volume work, *The Border Captain and Portrait of a President*, was completed after seven years and in 1938 he again won the Pulitzer Prize. This work remains one of the most popular studies of the life of Andrew Jackson.

James desired to write good history with interesting, exciting and readable prose. He disliked the fact that so much of history was written in a pedantic and stilted manner and failed to interest the non-scholar. In a forward to his book *The Raven*, historian Robert Utley wrote that, "James' strength lies in getting inside his subject and presenting him in an engrossing style that holds both lay reader and scholar alike." His distinctive was that he not only wrote good, well-documented history, but also good literature. One of the most well-known Jacksonian scholars, Robert V. Remini, described James's style: "It is a pulsating, full-blooded, vivid, and durable account of a heroic life written with imagination, enormous narrative power, and distinctive and absorbing style."

Yet Remini also believed James treated both Houston and Jackson in a one-dimensional manner. He wrote, "The biographies of Houston and Jackson succeeded because they were splendid action pieces and little more."

James was aware of his shortcomings. Because of his youthful experiences in the Old West, the intense nature of newspaper stories, coupled with his writing of bloodcurdling mystery stories, James was a man who admittedly loved action and wrote to grab the attention of the reader. He wrote that, "all my subjects so far have been men of action. When I feel capable of doing a man of thought . . . I want to tackle Jefferson and possibly Franklin." He never would write that book. To keep himself going financially, he wrote many magazine articles and radio scripts.

In 1940, he began to write the histories of businesses. Perhaps he remembered the lean years after his father's death and wanted financial security. These companies paid him well and over the next twelve years he wrote: *Biography of a Business, 1791-1942: A History of the Insurance Company of North America* (1942); *The Metropolitan Life Insurance Company* (1947); *The Texaco Story* (1953); and *Biography of a Bank: A History of the Bank of America*, with B.R. James (1954). Although James has been criticized for becoming a "pen for hire," he always stipulated in his contracts that he would write honestly and consistent with the revealed research and would have the final say in what was printed under his authorship. He was not simply writing a favorable review of the business or personality, but rather serious history and he would not kowtow to those who paid him.

We are not sure exactly when James began writing what would be his autobiography – *The Cherokee Strip*. Apparently one day his daughter, Cynthia, asked why he did not write down the stories he told her about "the old days" in the Cherokee Strip. She found this material much more interesting than his usual subject matter. She wanted the stories of the hired hand Ad Poak, who had shot the most famous outlaw in the Strip, Dick Yeager; the yarns spun by the old buffalo hunter, Mr. Howell, who probably awakened the story-telling part of James's makeup; and the adventures and misadventures of her grandfather's attempts at business. Also fascinating was the "railroad war" between North and South Enid, and the adolescent happenings of the "Gang at Waumpie Washburn's" pool hall. According to the forward by William W. Savage, Jr., James had a detailed manuscript already written by 1934, but continued to revise and document his stories; Cynthia would have to wait to see these stories in print.

James' experience with historical research had made him a stickler for detail and accuracy. In 1944, while editing the *Cherokee Strip*, he exchanged a series of letters with his Enid friend Mary Cromwell, the daughter of Judge W.O. Cromwell. In this correspondence, James asks Mary to check on, "just how dark it is in Enid at 8 o'clock on the 26th of June?" He also wanted her to check on if there was a full moon on that night in 1895. It was on that date that a shooting had taken place and the historian wanted to check on how well a man could be seen at fifty feet on that particular night. Further correspondence dealt with if and how quarter sections were marked prior to the Land Run of 1893. The Survey of 1870 had marked only sections. Although this attention to detail may have held up publication, we can be sure what was written was verified.

In 1952, James and his first wife, Bessie, divorced. Subsequently, in January, 1954, he married Jacqueline Parsons in Rye, NY. During his last years, he became interested in race relations and perhaps was coupling that with his desire to write more about ideas and less about action. He was working on a biography of Booker T. Washington, with his wife Jacqueline, when he suddenly died of a cerebral hemorrhage in 1955 at the age of sixty-four.

James will be remembered because of his ability to interest the lay reader in history. He accomplished his task of not only providing well written literature but also accurate history. He also helped change our ideas about what constitutes history. In stead of simply covering events occurring on a national level, James emphasized and popularized the significance of local history – the everyday occurrences of those who made up the multitudes. In doing so, he is linked with historians such as Bruce Catton, Allan Nevins, and Carl Sandburg. These historians strove to make history come alive, to emphasize the humanity of "great" figures of history, and to give us an appreciation for all who preceded us – that is our own ancestors, and to do so in a entertaining and interesting manner. For this we must thank Enid's Markey.



James in Enid in the early 1940's researching for his book "Cherokee Strip" published in 1944.

More About Marquis James:

- ?? [Biographical Outline](#)
- ?? [James' boyhood in Enid.](#)
- ?? [About James, written by his second wife Jacqueline Parsons James \(1964\)](#)

Annotated Bibliography for Marquis James

Primary Sources:

Marquis James has written and published millions of words as he wrote for magazines, newspapers, and radio programs. His major books, and those that are most appropriate for students are:

James, Marquis. *The Cherokee Strip: A Tale of an Oklahoma Boyhood*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993. First published in 1945. This is a book that every child in Oklahoma ought to read. It is not only great history about the early days in Enid, Oklahoma, but also great stories of outlaws, cowboys, and youthful adventures.

_____. *The Life of Andrew Jackson*. New York: Bobbs - Merrill, 1938. This book is composed of two books. The first entitled *The Border Captain*, covers the early life of Andrew Jackson up to the election of 1824. The second volume, subtitled *Portrait of a President*, was published in 1937. It won James's second Pulitzer Prize for biography in 1938. He and his wife Bessie Rowland James published *The Courageous Heart*, a book about Jackson written for juveniles.

_____. *The Raven: The Life of Sam Houston*. New York: Bobbs - Merrill, 1929. This work won James the first Pulitzer Prize for biography in 1930. He and his wife Bessie Rowland James collaborated on a children's book about Houston, entitled *Six Feet Six*, published in 1931.

_____. *They Had Their Hour*. New York: Bobbs - Merrill, 1934. This is a series of short stories about famous and not-so-famous people and the historical events that happened to them. It too is a great book for high school aged students and makes for great reading.

Secondary Sources:

There are no books or articles written about Marquis James, other than the entries in Encyclopedias or Biographies. Following are a few examples:

Dictionary of American Biography - Supplement 5. New York: Scribners, 1977 (p. 363).

The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography. Vol. 44, New York: White and Co., 1962 (p. 167).

Twentieth Century Authors. New York: Wilson and Co. 1942 (p. 714)

About Paul S. Vickery

Dr. Paul Vickery researched and presented the character "Marquis James" at Enid's 2001 Winter Chautauqua. Dr. Vickery is a veteran of Chautauqua, appearing in many of the recent Enid Chautauquas, portraying characters including H.L. Mencken, Bishop Francis Asbury, and Senator Joseph McCarthy. His research in developing the Marquis James character included a trip to Washington, D.C. to review the considerable material on Marquis James located at the Library of Congress. He teaches history at Oral Roberts University and humanities at Tulsa Community College. Fluent in both Spanish and German, Dr. Vickery earned his Ph.D in history from Oklahoma State University. He also possesses a Masters Degree in Divinity from Oral Roberts University Seminary, as well as a Masters in International Relations from Florida State University.