

This Land: Okemah and North Canadian Bridge

Okemah, the birthplace of Woody Guthrie, is a pleasant Oklahoman town typical with its square brick buildings of one or two stories lining the wide main street, Broadway. J. D. Cosby, a docent volunteer at the local historical museum next door to the town's movie theatre, made a point of escorting me about the two rooms. There's a photograph of the town's namesake, a Kickapoo Indian who was hired as a guide to select where the town would be built along the new railway. First we built our towns along the waterways. Then the railways. Now the highways and byways. I wonder what will be next?

Okemah means "High Man." Over on the left there's a saddle and spurs. There's memorabilia from the wars Okemah men fought.

In between explaining the items in the collection, J.D. Cosby talked about how he was raised on farm, how they relied on horses and mules, how he never had time when a boy to play because of the work. J.D. Cosby seemed proudest that he knew most of the faces in the photographs that covered the museum walls. The adjoining room featured a version of a one room schoolhouse as well as the shack where Woody Guthrie lived. One whole display cabinet housed Woody's record albums, scrapbooks signed by Arlo Guthrie and Peter Seeger, one of his guitars, and several articles of his clothing.

J.D. Cosby asked if I were coming back to Okemah for the annual Woody Guthrie Folk Festival in July. I said I would love to but couldn't.

A block down Broadway you can visit the pretty park dedicated to Woody's memory. Enjoy the murals, the flowers, the statue of a singing Woody. A man named Perry, who was sitting on a bench, welcomed me and we chatted awhile. His facial features suggested Cherokee heritage.

Still, during his lifetime, Woody surely wasn't regarded as the town's favorite son. Let's be honest, Woody wasn't always a nice guy. He had a loose sense of boundaries and personal space, he could be lecherous, adulterous, drunken, petulant, insulting, reckless with other person's feelings. He was a man chaffing against authority and discipline. The indulgent ones might call this the curse of the creative, the immoderation of those whose passions get stirred over things most human.

Yes, his songs could even romanticize outlaws, even turning Pretty Boy Floyd into a Robin Hood, which had some truth. Anyway, the purpose of the song was the punchline:

*Yes, as through this world I've wandered
I've seen lots of funny men;
Some will rob you with a six-gun,
And some with a fountain pen.*

*And as through your life you travel,
Yes, as through your life you roam,
You won't never see an outlaw
Drive a family from their home.*

Woody wasn't a journalist or historian but a balladeer. He had point he wanted to make, a view to be heard, and music always has been effective in stirring passions and commitments. He wasn't timid about telling the truth about the way things were, such as in his song, "Don't Kill My Baby and My Son."

There once was a bridge over the North Canadian River six miles west of Okemah town. You can see the newer concrete bridge there now if you exit off Interstate 40 onto 48 south and drive 1.6 miles. The newspapers report (when Woody was an infant) that a mob entered the jail where Laura Nelson and her 13 year old son had been arrested for murdering a Sheriff. The mob took them to the bridge because that area was a 'Negro Settlement' and lynched mother and son. Woody wrote a song about it. Rumors report that his father participated in the lynching. Every town has an ugly side that should never be ignored nor whitewashed.

A photograph confirms the account, the men standing on the old bridge and two bodies dangling above the river. It was a time when a lynching was cause for a family picnic and photographs.

*O, don't kill my baby and my son,
O, don't kill my baby and my son.
You can stretch my neck on that old river bridge,
But don't kill my baby and my son.*

How exactly you do feel when a mob is about to hang you along with your young son: do you feel fear, horror, disgust, frustration, resignation?

Only Woody could sing another ballad about lynching, this one called "Slipknot," in which the most terrifying line is: "*But the bones of many a men are whistling in the wind, Just because they tied their laws with a hangknot.*" Law that is no law carried out by a mob with a noose.

Our country has suffered greatly from the enthusiasm of those who elect themselves our moral and civic regulators. Those who want, either by law or by law of slipknot, to regulate how they think others should behave.

Why do we think we have the luxury of hatred?

Woody grew up prejudiced – most of us do -- until called out by a radio listener, a young black man who wrote him and called him out on his coarse, casual, and ignorant language, especially when using a particularly ugly term.

“I am a Negro, a young Negro in college and I certainly resented your remark. No person or person of any intelligence uses that word over the radio today...I don't know just how many Negroes listened to your program tonight, but I, for one, am letting you know that it was deeply resented.” [-- p. 109, Ramblin' Man].

Woody tried to never use that word again.

Coda: Old Man Trump

Skin trouble. That's how Guthrie learned to name this trouble of racism. He describes this lesson his autobiography, “Bound for Glory.”

Is this the worst of our peculiar American ‘diseases?

One winter, after spending the full day shoveling my driveway clear of twenty-one inches of snow, I retreated inside and watched through my library window the snow falling in white sweeps, swirls, gusts. I noticed birds flitting from branch to branch, sometimes swooping toward the street in hopes of finding worm or seed to nibble. How many birds, I wondered, would survive this brutal storm? All birds can do is react by instinct, stuck as they are in their nature.

I accept how sometimes life requires an either-or
Letting yourself get trapped into the corner
For the binary choice conveys a failure to me
Better than win/lose are clever paths to explore
When forced to choose between an A or B
I tell my kids they should always choose C or D

They, unlike us humans, cannot adjust their ways. Now, the interesting question implicit in that statement is how willing are we to change our ways let alone mend our ways? We are able to rise above our nature, should we so desire.

Older folks around my small town will recall when it was considered scandalous for a Protestant to marry a Roman Catholic. Such hostilities have long eroded, thank God. Hard to imagine now.

Once upon a time we were pretty casual with how we disparaged persons who were not like us, calling them Micks or Hebs or Hunkies or Huns or Wops or Nips. Thank God our speech has

evolved and such epithets today are very rare. Political correctness? I call it courtesy, manners, decency. Although, even church members have used some ugly names.

In my first congregation a young church member befriended the only black student at High school. Her father tossed her out of the house because she refused to comply with his demand that she never see him again. What came next? She and the young man became intimate.

When it comes to talking about the nature of the human race, we bandy accusatory words about in lazy ignorance. Which of these words apply to you? Which can you rise above? Are you biased? Prejudiced? A bigot? Racist? Guaranteed you are at least one of these.

Bit by bit, song by song, you can see Woody Guthrie taking on more and more the cause of the underdog, taking the side of the oppressed, the forgotten and "hard-hit people," and there were plenty of them of all races.

Leadbelly himself became a good friend of Woody, sharing radio time.

Guess what? In December of 1950 when Woody moved his family from Mermaid Avenue, Coney Island, and signed a lease for this Beach Haven apartment with more bedrooms – 49 Murdock Court, Brighton Beach -- he probably was behind on paying rent money. Despite the new nice apartment, Woody was still restless. He'd take off for days. Despite some royalties coming in, it wasn't always easy for them. Or happy. Too many arguments.

Folks now look back and see the signs of his Huntington's Chorea taking over. Sad.

Woody got evicted. Money was one of the reasons. But money also was a good excuse to those familiar with the landlord's dislike for anyone not white, for his landlord's skin disease and objection to the color of Leadbelly's skin..

Woody of course turned it into a song:

Beech Haven Ain't My Home
Words by Woody Guthrie, Music by Johnny Irion

*I suppose that Old Man Trump knows just how much racial hate
He stirred up in that bloodpot of human hearts
When he drew that color line
Here at his Beach Haven family project*

*Beach Haven ain't my home!
No, I just can't pay this rent!
My money's down the drain,
And my soul is badly bent!*

*Beach Haven is Trump's Tower
Where no black folks come to roam,
No, no, Old Man Trump!
Old Beach Haven ain't my home!*

*I'm calling out my welcome to you and your man both
Welcoming you here to Beach Haven
To love in any way you please and to have some kind of a decent place
To have your kids raised up in.*

*Beach Haven ain't my home!
No, I just can't pay this rent!
My money's down the drain,
And my soul is badly bent!
Beach Haven is Trump's Tower
Where no black folks come to roam,
No, no, Old Man Trump!
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