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The Performance of Self: The Story of Cora Youngblood Corson

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By James P. Gregory Jr.

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The Performance of Self: The Story of Cora Youngblood Corson

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

BY THE COMMITTEE CONSISTING OF

Dr. Warren Metcalf, Chair

Dr. Cori Simon

Dr. Jennifer Holland

Dr. Matt Stock

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ABSTRACT

In the early twentieth century, the name Cora Youngblood Corson regularly appeared in newspapers and magazines around the world. She was a fixture on the concert stage and vaudeville circuits. As a euphonium and tuba player, she was praised as being one of the greats of her time. She was a woman of high class who became independently wealthy, moved in the rarified world of celebrities, and her endorsements drove sales of musical instruments. Performing in full tribal regalia as a Native American she subverted cultural stereotypes by portraying Natives as modern entertainers rather than people of the past. Crowds flocked to theaters to see this Native woman who grew up on the plains of Oklahoma perform Indian songs, opera, and jazz with skill unmatched by any other. However, Cora had no Native heritage. Cora Youngblood Corson's life exemplifies another form of defrauding Native Americans in Oklahoma. Her ability to continually reinvented herself by manipulating racial, national, and class representations to remain unique in vaudeville highlights a seldom discussed form of representation of self.

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INTRODUCTION:

I was born in Ada, Oklahoma which sits in the Chickasaw Nation. At the age of three, I attended school as a part of the Chickasaw Nation Preschool and Head Start Program. A few years later, in elementary school in Collinsville, Oklahoma, which sits north of Tulsa in the Cherokee Nation, I attended Cherokee Language and Culture courses after school. Now in graduate school, I have reflected on my early education and wondered why I took part in these programs since I am not an enrolled citizen of any tribe. I never questioned it growing up. My family always told me that I was part Native American and that was enough for me to proudly announce this fact throughout my early years. Now with the advances in DNA testing and my ability to research genealogy, I discovered that I have no Native heritage at all. I wondered why family had been so comfortable in perpetuating this incorrect assertion of our familial identity. This question led me on a journey through my family tree gathering oral histories, scrapbooks, photo albums, and trunks of material to discover where this misconception came from.

When asking my parents, I received a typical Oklahoma answer: “Your great grandmother was a Cherokee princess!” Further prodding revealed that my father believed we were native because his grandmother’s last name was Youngblood, she came from Anadarko, Oklahoma which had been Kiowa, Comanche, and Apache lands, and she received “oil checks” for the entirety of her life. This gave me a jump-off point to begin my research and eventually led me to a portrait of “Princess Youngblood” in full Native regalia taken in New York City in 1928. My family’s princess was Cora Youngblood Corson, the sister of my great, great grandfather. This opened a world of questions for me. Who was she? Why was she being portrayed as “Princess Youngblood”? Was she Native American? When I began to dig into the research, I found a woman who took the country by storm in the 1910s as one of the greatest

musicians of her time. She sold out hundreds of theaters, broke major performance records, led union strikes, braved submarines and air raids during World War I, performed for four Presidents, and did this all as a woman impersonating of a Native American. What could her life tell us about my family's acceptance of a Native heritage, and could it explain how a woman managed to remain at the top of a field dominated by men?

For several decades in the early twentieth century, nobody had to ask, "Who is Cora Youngblood Corson?" Her name regularly appeared in newspapers and magazines around the world, and she was a fixture on the concert stage and vaudeville circuits. As a euphonium and tuba player, she was praised as being one of the greats of her time. She was a woman of high class who became independently wealthy, moved in the rarified world of celebrities, and her endorsements drove sales of musical instruments. Performing in full tribal regalia as a Native American she subverted cultural stereotypes by portraying Natives as modern entertainers rather than people of the past. Her musical ability astounded her contemporaries who were shocked to see a Native *and* a woman outperform white men on the tuba and euphonium. Crowds flocked to theaters to see this Native woman who grew up on the plains of Oklahoma perform Indian songs, opera, and jazz with skill unmatched by any other. Later in her career, she joined the all-native Indian Reservation Band and performed for Presidents Herbert Hoover, Calvin Coolidge, and Franklin D. Roosevelt becoming a symbol of America's Indianness.

Surprisingly, however, I discovered that my ancestor had no actual Native heritage. This realization raises many questions. How did this 6ft tall white woman become a world famous Native American? Did she believe she was an Indian? Why did no one else – tribal or non-Indian – challenge these assumptions? Perhaps the most crucial question is: What does her story tell us about the fluidity of self-identification, especially a Native persona in the early twentieth

century? I argue that Cora Youngblood Corson's life exemplifies another form of defrauding Native Americans in Oklahoma. Her ability to continually reinvented herself by manipulating racial, national, and class representations to remain unique in vaudeville highlights a seldom discussed form of representation of self. In Oklahoma, as non-Indians poured into the territory at the turn of the century creating a perfect environment for the exploitation of "Indianness." Ethnic impersonators, such as Cora Youngblood Corson used their observational knowledge of Native Americans to create an Indian persona on stage. By misrepresenting herself on the national stage, Cora Youngblood Corson also helped to establish the modern confusion that plagues many Oklahomans who believe they have Native heritage.

Indianness, is "the fact, quality, or state of being an Indigenous person of the Americas."[1] In the context of Cora's career, she is operating in the public eye during the period in which Native performers are becoming more common in popular culture. Therefore, they are presenting what a Native American is, looks like, and acts like in the flesh to a large audience who had only understood "Indianness" through books and stories. Today, a term to describe using another culture as representation of yourself is called "passing". Cora's ability to use "passing" allowed her to weave through a male-dominated world and draw support for her career and personal causes through identification with larger constituencies or groups. She continually looked for a way to connect herself to a cultural trend or cause to better market herself to the public. Marcia Alesan Dawkins states in *Clearly Invisible: Racial Passing and the Color of Cultural Identity*,

> Passing is a strange thing…it is a way for us to be seen and not to be seen…Passing shifts our social positions amidst social limitations. Constant movement is what makes passing so easy for us to wonder about and so difficult to understand. Translation: passing demands that we think hard about issues of identity and rhetoric, of the public and the private, in ways that most of us are

[1] *Oxford English Dictionary*.

> privileged enough to ignore if we so choose…Passing forces us to think and rethink what exactly makes a person black, white, or "other," and why we care.[2]

While primarily used as a discussion for passing between black and white identities, it is an apt term to discuss Cora's career.

Dawkins also points to the story of Ellen and William Craft, both slaves who escaped by having Ellen pass as a master while he pretended to be her slave. Ellen's mixed-race background resulted in her skin being light enough not to raise any questions while they made their escape north. Dawkins points out that "racial identifications that pass as episteme are really cultural habits developed through frequent use." Generations of interracial mixing means that the vague definition of blackness resulted in audiences realizing that they could not tell the difference between black and white. Ellen's racial representation was "ambiguous and changeable" offering her the ability to present one persona while "another one lay behind it, and behind it another one." This example of passing, "introduces a different concept of depth in which identities exist simultaneously and contingently."[3] Likewise, generations of Native American removal to Indian Territory and hundreds of years of interracial mixing meant that many Americans could not tell what an "authentic" Native should look, talk, sing, or act like. Therefore, it was not difficult for Cora to convince the American public that she had Native heritage.

Cora's ability came from her time spent in Oklahoma which allowed her to draw upon her knowledge of Native people she lived alongside and imitate it for her audiences when needed. Oklahoma is, and has been, a mixing pot of many cultures. Oklahoma is home to many blended communities of various ethnic backgrounds. In the early twentieth century, Oklahoma

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[2] Marcia Alesan Dawkins, *Clearly Invisible: Racial Passing and the Color of Cultural Identity*, (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), xi.
[3] Marcia Alesan Dawkins, *Clearly Invisible: Racial Passing and the Color of Cultural Identity*, (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), 36-37.

formed as a state and celebrities from the state created the cultural image of those who claim to be Oklahoman., such as Cora Youngblood Corson. Their reputations and representations reflected the reputation of the state and created the image and culture of Oklahoma to a national audience.

To this idea, Steven Brent Sexton argued that this idea of territories such as Oklahoma are bastions and examples of settler colonialism wherein the removal of the indigenous populations allows the settler to "imagine the colonized land as their home, thus establishing their own roots to the land."[4] At the heart of this conquest is the constant need for territory. The settlers would claim access to territory is the specific element, but Patrick Wolfe argues that other motives are used to eliminate the Indigenous communities such as "race, religion, ethnicity, grade of civilization, etc." These become excuses to continually push out the native. To Wolfe, "the logic of elimination not only refers to the summary liquidation of Indigenous people…It strives for the dissolution of native societies."[5] The Native must be removed completely for settler colonialism to succeed.

Similarly, Lorenzo Veracini argues that settler colonialism is a constant process. The settler society is always a society "to come." His representation of the process is:

> the line separating settler and indigenous must be approached but is never finally crossed, and the same foes for neo-European imitation, where sameness should be emphasized but difference is a necessary prerequisite of the absolute need to at once distinguish between settler self and indigenous and exogenus others.[6]

With the removal process, both groups must remain separate with distinguishing demarcations.

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[4] Steven Brent Sexton, *Imagining Choctaw: Self-Imagination and Settler Colonialism*, (Dissertation: University of Oklahoma, 2017), 7.
[5] Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research*, (2006, Vol 8, No. 4, December) 388. (387-409)
[6] Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview*, (Palgrave Macmillon, 2010), 23.

One form of this process comes in controlling how Indigenous people are imagined. The settler throws the Native "into whatever role that would help perpetuate settlement."[7] By controlling the perception of Native Americans, the settler states is able to displace the indigenous "both literally and figuratively and claim indigeneity for themselves."[8] This is seen in early ethnic impersonators who claim Native identities without having any actual heritage. Their knowledge of Native gained by proximity allows them to replicate enough indigenous culture to fool audiences. By showing Natives as bloodthirsty savages, the American government were able to conduct military operations that often-attacked peaceful settlements. In portraying the Native as drunk and childlike, the Bureau of Indian Affairs was able to push for Indian schools and allotment that pushed the agenda of assimilation. Ideas from the settler government are used as justifications to remove the indigenous

However, Oklahoma history provides a variant of settler colonialism wherein the indigenous inhabitants of the territory could not be removed, killed, or easily assimilated due to their sheer numbers, influence, and peaceful existence within the confines created by the United States government. Therefore, settlers had to live side by side with the Indigenous populations. With such issues to settler colonialism, Oklahoma becomes a unique region that can be described as a "contact zone" as defined by Mary Louis Pratt in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. She states these are "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination."[9] This left plenty of room for a settler narrative that needed to be adjusted to absorb the Native American culture.

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[7] Sexton, 8.
[8] Sexton, 15.
[9] Mary Luis Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Second Edition, (New York: Routledge, 2008) 7.

Oklahoma served as a *frontier* as defined by Louis Owens in *Mixedblood Messages: Literature, Film, Family, Place*. Owens describes *frontier* as a place "wherein discourse in multidirectional and hybridized." It becomes an "always changing zone of multifaceted contact within which every utterance is challenged and interrogated." Although the term does bear the implication of Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis of a "discourse grounded in genocide, ethnocide, and half a millennium of determined efforts to erase indigenous peoples from the Americas," Owens argues that it "is a particularly apt term for the transcultural zone of contact."[10] Instead, many Oklahomans began to claim ownership of indigenous culture as a part of their heritage, a practice which continues to this day. The reasons for this are subjective to the individual. Some claim a Native persona for fame, such as Cora Youngblood Corson as it makes them unique in their field. Some do it to claim ownership of mineral rights or land that belongs to a tribe. Still, some do it because they believe they are truly Native without doing any research into their own heritage.

Prior to 1890, the area that became the state of Oklahoma was known simply as Indian Territory. It served as the home of the various tribes pushed out of their ancestral homes by the American government and western expansion. The Native tribes that settled in Indian Territory retained their own governmental power and authority with some oversight from the federal government. The tribes held all rights to govern their territory as they saw fit. For this dissertation, the most notable features of tribal governance are the power of a tribe to determine its membership, regulate domestic relations, and exclude nonmembers from jurisdiction. In determining their memberships, the tribes could "define the conditions of membership within the tribe, to prescribe rules for adoption, [and] to classify the members of the tribe." This extended

[10] Louis Owens, *Mixedblood Messages: Literature, Film, Family, Place*, (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 26.

into domestic relations wherein a tribe could prescribe "rules and regulations concerning marriage, divorce, legitimacy, adoption…" On top of regulating who belonged to the nation, the tribe could also "remove or to exclude from the limits of the tribal jurisdiction nonmembers of the tribe."[11] Therefore, the argument over who could claim to be a tribal member in the Indian Territory relied solely upon the jurisdiction of the tribe. This meant that white settlers could not simply claim membership of a tribal nation. However, this soon became muddied with the allotment process in 1887.

Approved on February 8, 1887, the Dawes Act, or the General Allotment Act, named for its author, Senator Henry Dawes of Massachusetts, authorized the President of the United States to parcel out reservation land into allotments for individual tribal members. The act emphasized the transition of Native Americans from a tribal member to an individual in its relationship to the rest of the country as a method of assimilation. To assist in this, all Natives who received their allotment were registered on a roll which came to be known as the Dawes Roll.

However, the Act specified that "the provisions of this act shall not extend to the territory occupied by the Cherokees, Creeks, Choctaws, Chickasaws, Seminoles, and Osage, Miamies and Peorias, and Sacs and Foxes, in the Indian Territory, nor to any of the reservations of the Seneca Nation of New York Indians in the State of New York, nor to that strip of territory in the State of Nebraska adjoining the Sioux Nation on the south."[12] Therefore, this initial act only impacted those tribes in the western portion of Indian Territory. While it did not reduce the power of tribal governments it did reduce the amount of territory they could govern.

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[11] G. William Rice, "The Mythology of the Oklahoma Indians: A Survey of the Legal Status of Indian Tribes in Oklahoma," (1979), 267-268.

[12] An Act to Provide for the Allotment of Lands in Severalty to Indians on the Various Reservations (General Allotment Act or Dawes Act), Statutes at Large 24, 388-91, NADP Document A1887.

The allotment process also served the purpose of allowing white settlers new land onto which they could lay claim. In 1880, Secretary of the Interior Carl Schurz argued that allotment would "put relations between the Indians and their white neighbors in the western country upon a new basis, by gradually doing away with the system of large reservations, which has so frequently provoked those encroachments which in the past have led to so much cruel injustice and so many disastrous collisions."[13] The allotment process, in fact, led to a drastic increase in encroachment from white settlers with disastrous effects on the tribal nations.

The allotments meant that only certain individuals could succeed in reaping the benefits of their land as many of the portions were not suitable for farming. In addition, many of the allottees could not afford the equipment, animals, seed, or other necessary supplies to get started. On top of this, inheritance became an issue as many of the children could not use their land because they were off at a boarding school or competed with other heirs for land. White caretakers also manipulated many Native children to take the land from them. These many issues meant that allotments soon shrank, confusion grew as to who had rights to claim Native land, and those who could not afford the government requirements saw their allotments sold to non-Natives.

In 1889, the land run of the "unassigned lands" which comprised a strip of land in the central part of the state opened the territory for white settlement. This began the flood of white settlers and demands for governmental control of the non-Indians. In 1890, the United States government established the territory of Oklahoma with the Oklahoma Organic Act which encompassed the lands "except so much of the same as is actually occupied by the Five Civilized

[13] Report of the Secretary of the Interior, 1880, *House Executive Document* No. 1, part 5, 46 Congress, 3 session, serial 1959, 12.

Tribes, and except the occupied part of the Cherokee Outlet."[14] This cut the area into two separate territories with different forms of governance and provided a legal power of the white settlers. However, the 1890 Oklahoma Organic Act also created new issues for the tribes. Indian Territory now only included the "Cherokee, Creek, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Seminole, Quapaw, Seneca, Ottawa, Wyandotte, Modoc, Cayuga, Peoria, and Miami tribes." A future legislation for Indian Territory would only impact those groups. In contrast, the "Kansas (Kaw), Absentee Shawnee, Wichita, Caddo, Delaware, Kiowa, Comanche, Apache, Cheyenne, Arapaho, Citizens Band Pottawatomie, Fort Sill Apache, Kickapoo, Otoe-Missouria, Iowa, Pawnee, Ponca, Tonkawa, Sac and Fox, and the Osage" became encompassed within Oklahoma Territory and its white governance.[15] The Act stated that the Territory of Oklahoma held jurisdiction over "all controversies arising between members or citizens of one tribe or nation of Indians and the members or citizens of other tribes or nations in the Territory of Oklahoma."[16] The lines over distinct tribal autonomy now blurred as Natives and non-Natives began to live next to each other and claimed ownership of the land.

The flood of white settlers into the area began to cause many problems for all parties. In 1895, Senator Orville H. Platt of Connecticut began to argue that the amount of white people in Indian Territory presented a lawless country where they had no governance. He used the Native "plight" as an excuse for the government to extend its reach into Native territory. He stated that "white people living in the Territory are entirely without government…As a consequence of this unsettled, unorganized condition of society, the country is a resort for desperadoes and refugees,

[14] Act of May 2, 1890, ch. 182, 1, 26 Stat. 81 (1890).
[15] G. William Rice, "The Mythology of the Oklahoma Indians: A Survey of the Legal Status of Indian Tribes in Oklahoma," (1979), 280.
[16] Act of May 2, 1890, ch. 182, 1, 26 Stat. 81 (1890), 12.

and crimes and depredations are rampant."[17] He also lamented about the "three hundred thousand white people should reside there with the consent of the Indians" without the control of the federal government. He wanted "government there for whites as well as for Indians, and it must be adapted to the wants of both."[18]

Senator Platt's rant also pointed out the nature of White/Native relations under the Tribal governments stating "the white man, who has become an "Indian" merely by intermarriage, has taken the land until at the present time it may be said with approximate accuracy that less than five hundred Indian citizens, a large proportion of whom have not a drop of Indian blood in their veins, have secured and occupy nine-tenths of the agricultural and grazing land of the country." These "white Indians" as Platt calls them are a unique piece of the tribal governance. Since the tribes determine who belongs to the tribe, they can allow people without a direct tie to their heritage to claim membership. This idea of white settlers who are members of a tribal nation plays into the confusion around who is considered Native American in Oklahoma which continues to this day. It also caused the next moment of governmental reach into Native territory with the Curtis Act.

Enacted on June 28, 1898, the "Act for the Protection of the People of Indian Territory," or Curtis Act aided in weakening and ultimately dissolving the tribal governments within Indian Territory and brought the tribes in Indian Territory under allotment. Named after Kansas Senator Charles Curtis, a member of the Kaw nation, the Act abolished tribal courts and subjected all Native Americans to federal law which rendered all tribal laws unenforceable.[19] It also meant that the tribes no longer had sole authority over their requirements for citizenship. This important

[17] Orville H. Platt, "Problems in the Indian Territory," *The North American Review*, Vol. 160, No. 459, (February 1895), 201.
[18] Orville H. Platt, "Problems in the Indian Territory," 198.
[19] G. William Rice, "The Mythology of the Oklahoma Indians," 296.

feature allowed individuals to be enrolled as members without tribal consent which led to an even more confusing environment within Oklahoma regarding identities and tribal affiliation.[20] This confusing period is exactly the time Cora, and her family settled in Oklahoma and began to associate with their Native neighbors. Oklahoma became a place where ethnic colonization began to develop as non-Native settlers began to associate themselves with the tribes and the land. This environment helped in creating the new perspective of Native Americans through the performance of non-natives who claimed indigeneity.

In 1978, Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr. wrote in *The White Man's Indian* that "white interest in the American Indian surges and ebbs with the tides of history."[21] At the beginning of the twentieth century, this became apparent thanks to the myth of the "vanishing Indian." Berkhofer points out that "the *Indian* was a White invention and still remains largely a White image, if not stereotype." This stereotype "denies or misrepresents the social, linguistic, cultural, and other differences among the peoples so labeled."[22] The larger issue of performing as Indian is the projection of the stereotype. By boiling down Native existence into an amalgamation of what is "Indian" thereby removed the individuality of the tribes and created, to white Americans, the idea of a singular people. The image of these peoples, as Berkhofer points out, comes from the "Western formula" produced after the Civil War as American civilization pushed west.

In the late 1800s, the image produced by the popularity of westerns and dime novels created a certain image of Native Americans based around the Plains tribes. Novels achieved new levels of fame such as Karl May's *Winnetou* which became a best seller that told of wondrous adventures in the American west. Alongside the novels, Wild West shows and circuses

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[20] M. Kaye Tatro, "Curtis Act," *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=CU006.
[21] Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *The White Man's Indian*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), xiii.
[22] Berkhofer, 3.

like Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show capitalized on the popularity and drew heavily on a stereotyped plains tribal image. They thrilled audiences with living representations of their favorite novels. Native performers would dress in the stereotypical headdresses and buckskin and ride around on horseback to thrill audiences. Artists such as Frederic Remington also instilled this image with his popular sculptures, engravings, and paintings.[23] The American public became set that authentic Native culture included eagle feather headbands, beads, and war whoops.

This new perception of what a Native American and the popularity of Native imagery in the early 1900s led to a rapid increase in White Americans donning a costume and presenting themselves as Native. The reasoning for this varies from fame, popularity, land possession, or an escape from social constraints of the time. Playing Indian is, as Philip Deloria argues, "a persistent tradition in American culture, stretching from the very instant of the nation big band into and ever-expanding present and future."[24] The act of misrepresenting Native identity became surrounded with the idea of power. Deloria discusses the societal pattern that simultaneously mimics "Indianness" in a quest for National identity while at the same time removing actual Native people. They would, in a way, don Native garb in order to overcome their European roots and decided themselves true Americans. In this, it became primarily a male pursuit until the beginning of the 20th century that women would don Indian costumes for their own personal gains. Although Deloria does not discuss performers in entertainment in his work, Cora's use of Native costume allowed her to drop the facts of her life, especially as a woman in a male-dominated field, and perform as someone new and interesting. Her performances later evolved into a representation of national identity with her time in the Indian Reservation Band.

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[23] Berkhofer, 95-101.
[24] Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian*, (Yale University Press, 1998), 7.

For most Americans in the early 1900s, except in certain regions of the West and Southwest, "living natives were visible to non-Indians mainly as performers: feathered and painted "savages" in the immensely popular Wild West shows, picturesque figures in the landscape presented to tourists by enterprising companies in the Southwest and in the Great Lakes region, "primitives" on display at world's fairs such as those in Chicago, Omaha, and St. Louis."[25] This popularity in drew crowds to vaudeville that wanted to see their imagination made manifest on stage. Native performers used this to their advantage to build careers and present a new image of Native Americans to the public. Alongside these indigenous performers, non-Indian ethnic impersonators also took advantage of the popularity of Natives to advance their own careers.

Cora Youngblood Corson followed this same path by adopting a Native persona, joining a growing number of White individuals in the early 20th century such as Archie Belaney, an Englishman who became known as Grey Owl or Sylvester Long known as Chief Buffalo Child Long Lance. This phenomenon is common. Historian Laura Browder discuss these figures in her book *Slippery Characters: Ethnic Impersonators and American Identities* by focusing on those who wrote autobiographies to sell their new identities. She argues that "ethnic passage from one identity to another is not an anomaly. Autobiography, with its valorization of individualism and its emphasis on self-fashioning, is a form peculiarly suited to American national mythologies." She also states that this trend "which creatively reconstructs identity using essential racial and ethnic categories has proved to be particularly enduring in the United States."[26] This idea of using a Native persona eventually evolved for Cora into actively announcing that she was of

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[25] Alan Trachtenberg, *Shades of Hiawatha: Staging Indians, Making Americans 1880-1930*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004), 170.
[26] Laura Browder, *Slippery Characters: Ethnic Impersonators and American Identities*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 2.

Cherokee descent. She did this to reinvent herself in a field where not evolving equates with the end of a career. She used this "profoundly American idea of self-fashioning, the notion that it is possible to reinvent oneself" to pass as a Native woman in vaudeville. As Browder puts it in chapter eight of her work, "to pass is to survive."[27]

To understand how these people accomplished impersonations on a national scale, we must look at how it came to be. According to S. Elizabeth Bird in *Dressing in Feathers: The Construction of the Indian in American Popular Culture*, "once Indians were no longer a threat, they became colorful and quaint."[28] The end of the 1800s saw the final days of the Indian Wars and the influx of tourists who wanted to view "authentic" Native American culture. Many left angrily after finding indigenous communities not dressed in feather and half naked. In the 1890s, a satirical writer named Bill Nye wrote that he was disgusted because he could not find "true Indian princesses."[29] This perception of what Native performers should look like shaped how many non-native performers looked for the perfect look for their act, the stereotypical image of an Indian became the norm.

Of course, this idea of stereotypes becoming the defining image of a monolithic "Indian" people causes a debate, especially in discussions of cultural appropriation, because there is no consensus. Modern arguments point to the stereotypes as harmful representations, while others argue that the popularity they offered provided a way to reappropriate the imagery. In vaudeville, and subsequent forms of entertainment, Native performers also graced the stage and performed stereotypical "Indian songs" in buckskin outfits adorned with beads and feathers. For instance, the Muscogee singer Tsianina Redfeather Blackstone or "Princess Tsianina" performed around

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[27] Browder, 231.
[28] S. Elizabeth Bird, *Dressing in Feathers: The Construction of the Indian in American Popular Culture*, (Westview Press, 1996), 4.
[29] Bird, 4.

the world in vaudeville in the stereotyped outfits and name. This has even become an argument between many Native Americans believe it to be "selling out" or "inauthentic" while some argue that it is "taking back power."[30] Regardless of where people fall on this argument, the reality remains that the images produced by popular culture shape people's perceptions of certain groups and places.[31]

Some historians, such as Shari M. Huhndorf, argue that the idea of "going Native" expresses the cultural desire to "adopt" Indian personas allows non-Natives to escape a "degenerate and corrupt white world."[32] To the audiences, seeing Native performers allowed them to envision Native peoples as "idealized versions of themselves, as the embodiments of virtues lost in the Western word."[33] This perspective creates part the reason why White audiences packed the theaters to witness Native and non-Native performers. This exoticism drew crowds that wanted to see something only told in stories. Crowds in the East, especially, sought to view Natives since most had been pushed out of their states a century earlier. This is particularly apparent in Cora Youngblood's time performing in Iowa when the advertisements focused on her supposed Native heritage and the virtues of her life on the plains.

In the same vein, Philip Deloria wrote about Native performers who performed alongside the ethnic impersonators in *Indians in Unexpected Places*. He argued that some "Native people engaged in the same forces of modernization that were making non-Indians reevaluate their own expectations of themselves and their society."[34] The white performers pulled from the popular genre of "Indian plays" but, as Deloria argued, Native performers "surely set and reinforced

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[30] Bird, 7.
[31] Bird, 11.
[32] Shari M. Huhndorf, *Going Native: Indians in the American Cultural Imagination*, (Ithaca, Cornell University Press: 2001), 5.
[33] Huhndorf, 6.
[34] Philip Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places*, (University Press of Kansas: 2004), 6.

white expectations concerning Indian gesture, custom, and appearance, but, by and large, their material seems to have emerged from Native cultural practice rather than the fictions of the Indian play."[35] Unfortunately, this aided in the confusion that continues to this day on who is Native as white audiences could not differentiate between the authentic and the impersonation. Since both types of performers presented themselves as authentic, audiences unfamiliar with Native American culture accepted both as an amalgamation of true Native performance.

The field of music provided an interesting path for Native American culture to grow and thrive even though other areas face opposition from the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Deloria points out that the idea of the "vanishing Indian" led to an increase in interest in Indian music "as a legitimate form of cultural expression" which drew ethnographers from around the country to record Native voices.[36] This new interest led to the production of "Indian Songs" as a popular genre of performance wherein many non-Native performers found an audience.

According to Katrina Phillips in *Staging Indigeneity*, the correlation to a Native past created a "sense of authenticity" which pushed White Americans to recreate what they, or their audience, considered to be real. The performers would "stage" performances as expressions of "honoring" the Indian past, while simultaneously reframing it in ways that justified their exploitation of it. They zeroed in on what White America saw as the spectacle of Indigenous history and highlighted exaggerated proportions of perceived "Indianness."[37] This expectation created a skewed cultural understanding of Native Americans and reinforced the stereotypes to the White audience.

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[35] Deloria, *Unexpected Places*, 57-58.
[36] Deloria, *Unexpected Places*, 203.
[37] Katrina Phillips, *Staging Indigeneity*, (University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 10-11.

On top of the cultural reasonings for performance of Native heritage, Phillips' created the idea of "salvage tourism" wherein people use "American Indian history to help rescue regional economies."[38] This is used in the same region that gave birth to Cora Youngblood's career. In 1924, Anadarko, Oklahoma created the American Indian Exposition which took advantage of the popularity of All-Indian Fairs.[39] It drew many tourists and income to the local economy and provided employment for local Native citizens. It then evolved into Indian City, USA in 1954 which operated as an outdoor museum to educate the public about the various tribes that had been moved into the region. The same economic benefits drew many non-Native performers to "play Indian" on the vaudeville stage.

The growth of this phenomenon of Native performers corresponded with the growth of vaudeville in the early 1900s as Americans flooded the theaters to see new professional and exotic acts every week. The increasing popularity brought forth a new spectacle of "Indian vaudeville" which presented Native and non-Native acts on the stage. Indigenous and "indigenous-identifying" performers "appeared at all points on the hierarchy from big- to small-time houses and on global routes from North America to Oceania, some fleetingly and others for long stretches of their careers."[40] The popularity of Native performances drove Cora Youngblood Corson to present herself as a Native on stage and drove her ever-changing performance of herself to retain her popularity.

But where does Cora Youngblood Corson fit within this history? She is, after all, a performer presenting a persona up on the stage. Her story follows the same trajectory as many

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[38] Phillips, *Staging Indigeneity*, 7.
[39] Phillips, *Staging Indigeneity*, 5.
[40] Christine Bold, "Vaudeville Indians" on Global Circuits: 1880s to 1930s, (New Haven, CT; Yale University Press, 2022), 41.

ethnic impersonators but provides a unique perspective of this typically under-discussed method of defrauding Natives by culturally appropriating their culture for the benefit of an individual. By placing her into the historiography of performance, the story of Cora Youngblood Corson represents a story of vaudeville performers were able to change the public perception through performance to gain popularity. From the establishment of a settler community, the foundation of Native Americans in the popular imagination, the upheaval of political turmoil, the societal change following the American entrance into World War I, the eventual acceptance of Native heritage, to the formation of a civic identity, Cora's story demonstrates the ease of changing representations through the performance of self. It also helps explain how ethnic-impersonators such as Cora have created a modern confusion about Native identity and explains how White Americans can see themselves with familial ties to Native culture.

Chapter 1 focuses on Cora's early years. This chapter ties in settler colonialism within Oklahoma and the creation of settler narratives of the time. Her family participated in the dispossession of Native land through the allotment of the Kiowa, Comanche, and Apache lands. Her family settled in Anadarko, Oklahoma Territory in 1901 where she grew in a mixed community of Indigenous peoples and Settlers. This period also saw her following a musical career in the territory which soon saw her budding popularity and symbol of breaking social norms.

Chapter 2 highlights Cora's rise into vaudeville. In this time, she begins to change her performances to represent herself as a variety of personas. In 1905, Cora joined Helen May Butler's Ladies Military Band. Butler gave Cora the opportunity to perform nationally on the euphonium. During her tenure in the Military Band, Cora became widely known as the best female euphonium player in the country. Her popularity quickly began to eclipse Butler's. In

1907, during the off season for the band, Cora ventured into vaudeville. In this period, her manager created a new Native persona. She performed as a Native American singing popular "Indian Songs" while dressed in traditional outfits. This began her rise in vaudeville and led to a split from Butler's band. In this period, Cora's performance helped subvert the masculine ideas of her career as a woman and as an assumed Native American.

Chapter 3 will be devoted to Cora's successful career in vaudeville. This chapter will offer the discussion of Native performance and the rise of Natives as entertainment not only in vaudeville but across Oklahoma. Performers began to capitalize on fluid perception of who is and who is not native. It will also offer a discourse in comparing Cora with other Native performers of the time in Vaudeville. Although the industry had been around for thirty years, this period saw the evolution to a family friendly medium that forced bigger productions and more variety. During this period, Cora constantly changed her show, but a Native American performance remained central for most renditions of her performance. Here, Cora's false heritage became a leading discussion in newspapers that tried to explain this talented Native from Oklahoma. Her life became sensationalized in national magazines. Her gender, heritage, and skill captured the attention of audiences and companies looking to use her fame. During this time, Cora became a national celebrity whose face was plastered across many of the popular magazines in the country.

Chapter 4 discusses the union conflicts Cora found herself in the middle of in the latter part of the 1910s. She changed the perception of herself to take advantage of public perceptions of unions. As a leading member of the White Rats Actors Union, Cora led the political battle against the Vaudeville Managers Protection Association (VMPA) due to blacklists and monopolistic tactics. Her work as a union organizer led to her being blacklisted from the major

theaters around the country and effectively ended her popularity. However, she challenged the men who led the VMPA and continued touring. She picketed theaters in Oklahoma City, Tulsa, and Chicago in response to their decision. She also opened a case against them with the Federal Trade Commission but the American entrance into World War I brought all court cases and union work to a halt.

Chapter 5 follows Cora's participation in the war effort from 1917-1919. After advocating for a larger role of Oklahoma in the war, she took her band overseas to provide entertainment for the troops and civilians devastated by the war. While in London she faced frequent air raids and other issues pertaining to the war's impact. She performed for President Woodrow Wilson in December 1918 before going to France and joining the Knights of Columbus under which the group performed for millions of soldiers, Marines, and sailors. This opportunity helped change the perspective of Cora from a rabble-rousing unionist to a patriotic American mirroring the political changes undergone by the state of Oklahoma.

Chapter 6 looks at the fall of Cora's career as a leader in vaudeville. Despite ultimately winning a victory against the VMPA, Cora remained the only act blacklisted. This decline in American fascination with vaudeville aligns itself with Cora's attempt to find a new identity as she struggled to find the status she once had. Thus, she had to find ways to perform when she returned to the United States. Paired with the death of vaudeville as a popular medium, Cora's career leading a female group ended in 1927. She retired to Tulsa, Oklahoma where she married her second husband and ran a poultry farm.

Chapter 7 looks at this period of "retirement" as Cora tried to find her place without vaudeville. Without her career within vaudeville, Cora's move to Tulsa found her searching for something to latch onto. Now firmly within the Cherokee nation, Cora took on a Cherokee

persona and now fully claimed to be native. However, her retirement did not last long as she joined the United States Indian Reservation band. This is the strangest moment of Cora's career as a Native American because she goes beyond a simple act and adopts the names Princess Youngblood and Wildflower. This band promoted itself as being made up of "full-blood" Indians, yet Cora was a 6ft tall white woman. The group performed at many theaters, the inauguration of Herbert Hoover, and the inauguration of Franklin Roosevelt. After the 1932 performance, Cora returned to her poultry farm. However, in 1942 she joined her brother-in-law in forming Hey, Rube Inc., a group that provided entertainment for soldiers in Oklahoma. Unfortunately, Cora became ill in 1943 and passed away.

The conclusion illustrates how Cora used a Native persona to further her career. Her ability to change her representation to keep her popularity also shows an example how the modern confusion around Native identity formed. As audiences could not understand the difference between real and non-Native performers they began spreading misinformation as to the true culture of Native performers. This is because people like Cora created an even deeper confusion of Native imagery which became the base for familial stories that continue to the present. Oklahoma provided an amble opportunity for Cora and others like her to assume a Native heritage and freely change their own personas. To quote Cora, "it has always been my belief that to stick to one way of doing things shows that one is not energetic or has no ambition."[41]

[41] "Vaudeville Actors' Haven." *Billboard*, Vol. 32, No. 32, (August 7, 1920), 20.

CHAPTER ONE: Humble Beginnings

The foundation of Oklahoma begins with the Natives who historically called the region home, the tribes forcibly removed to the region in the 1800s, and the eventual settlers that pushed into the territory. It is a place whose creation is defined by contention and conflict between the various groups that called the area home. Today, the state of Oklahoma is represented both as the "Sooner State" and "Native America." This seems like an oxymoron, but this dual identity is the lens through which the state and its citizens view themselves. Oklahoma is home to more American Indian tribes than any other state with around thirty-nine tribes within its borders and their presence is highlighted throughout the region. Native American culture is woven into all aspects of everyday life for the state. Festivals, art exhibitions, cultural centers, historic preservation, and an entire season of traditional powwows bring national attention to Native culture. On the other hand, the state also celebrates its Euro-American identity through commemoration of the land runs, celebration of the "boomer" and "sooner" settlers, and association with multiple nationalities that settled in the region. Despite their historically opposing goals that brought much violence to the region, the state managed to bring together the tumultuous melting-pot to set the grounds for Oklahoma's unique cultural identity defined through affiliation with Native Americans as well as a settler heritage.

Part of this continuance is understanding and repeating the stories of settlement. In the late 1800's the United States forced and coerced tribes into allotments, essentially dissolving the reservations. Land Runs then became the norm in Oklahoma Territory as the government opened more land for settlement by non-natives. To this day, Oklahoma still holds the Land Run of 1889 as its foundational myth wherein the State's capital and other major cities were established.

Upon staking their claim to the land, these settlements quickly set to establishing their governments. Bethel Saler, author of *Settler's Empire: Colonialism and State Formation in America's Old Northwest*, argues that nation-state formation first requires "the establishment or revision of state structures and policies."[42] The creation of a local government enforced the settler's claim upon the land and control of those in the surrounding area. In Oklahoma, this included the Native tribes of the region.

Shortly after the foundation of essential governance for a settler society, the communities needed to begin forming themselves into a single body through the "cultural means of education and shared knowledge."[43] Culture binds these disparate settlements together and ties them into the overarching traditions of the United States. A great deal of time for these fledgling communities is spent "focusing on cultural topics" such as legal marriage, entertainment, religion, and private property.[44] In towns such as Anadarko that have Native populations, the cultures tend to divide the community in the early periods of settlement. In cases outside of Oklahoma, as time progresses the divide leads to either assimilation or removal of the Indigenous community into reservations. Instead, the settler culture followed familiar western trajectories and tropes, but also had to evolve to include the Native population. To firmly establish the culture of Oklahoma, individuals like Cora Youngblood Corson helped to define their representative state by representing it on the local and national stage. Through defining Anadarko's cultural expression, undermining gender norms, and participating in representing Oklahoma at the World's Fair, Cora Youngblood Corson exemplified the difficulties of

[42] Bethel Saler, *The Settler's Empire: Colonialism and State Formation in America's Old Northwest*, (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 6.
[43] Saler, *The Settler's Empire,* 6.
[44] Saler, *The Settler's Empire,* 8.

subverting the social norms to create something new that redefined Anadarko's, and by extension Oklahoma's, national image.

Following the Civil War, many veterans searched for new ground to lay foundations in a new era. Many new towns popped up across the West, such as Republic, Missouri. Situated along the Frisco Railroad in thickly populated prairie with excellent local trade, the town quickly boomed.[45] Two of the early settlers, Isaac Tillman Blades and Theodorick Brigit Youngblood had both served in the Union and settled in the area after the war. Both men had fought in several battles in Arkansas and Missouri including Wilson's Creek and the Battle of Pea Ridge. They sought new land to start families of their own.

Theodorick Youngblood had fourteen children between two wives and many of them became involved in business around the town. Theodorick had musical talents with a fine voice and, besides his many positions within the community, taught singing lessons.[46] One of his sons, Jeremiah M. Youngblood, ran the general store in Republic. He quickly became the "leading merchant" of Republic though he does not appear to have been well liked by the community.[47] Isaac Blades had a daughter named Sarah Jane Blades. On May 5, 1878, Jeremiah and Sarah married.[48]

Jeremiah and Sarah had five children. Ella, Isaac, Anna, Cora, and Eula. Cora Youngblood was born on January 19, 1886. Musical talent continued in the family and from the age of five, Cora took lessons.[49] These lessons, undoubtedly shared by her sister Eula, would shape Cora's professional life. The family grew in Missouri and at the age of fifteen, Cora

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[45] Jim Smith, *Republic, Missouri: Home of 3,000 Good Neighbors*, (Western Printing Company, Republic, Missouri, 1971), 2.
[46] Dorothy Morris Quaife, *Jeremiah Youngblood: A Genealogy*, (Fountain Valley, California, American Press, 1991), 667.
[47] "A Lustful Beast," *The Sedalia Democrat*, Sedalia, Missouri, March 18, 1894, 5.
[48] *Missouri Marriage Records*. Jefferson City, MO, USA: Missouri State Archives. Microfilm.
[49] "Tulsa Woman Played for the Boys 'Over There'," *The Tulsa Tribune*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, January 3, 1942.

attended school in St. Louis to become a milliner.[50] However, Cora's father began to see the advertisements of open land opening in Oklahoma Territory. He saw an opportunity to take advantage of the needs of a growing settlement that could make a mercantile businessman rich.

Along the south bank of the Washita River in South-Western Oklahoma sat the small Wichita Agency which administered the affairs of the Wichita, Caddo, Kiowa, Comanche, and Apache tribes in the region. By August 6, 1901, the Kiowa, Comanche, and Apache lands had been allotted and the surplus land would be auctioned to White settlers that day. Homesteads were on a lottery system, while town lots were auctioned. The opening day, almost twenty thousand settlers gathered for the auction.[51] The community of Anadarko, Oklahoma Territory sprang up from the fields surrounding the agency, as settlers began to sow their own roots in the region.

Jeremiah Youngblood purchased lot 15, Block 28, for $125.[52] He quickly opened a new mercantile business in the growing town simply named "J.M. Youngblood." He sold "Dry Goods, Clothing, Shoes, and Groceries" and published his first newspaper advertisement on September 26, 1901.[53] As the town and his business grew Youngblood began to expand his stock with whatever he could get for a good price. By January of 1902, he began selling and renting-to-own sewing machines with free photo enlargements with any purchase.[54] Clothing, shoes, and sewing machines supplied his family with business and income to build a home. With the growing city, luggage became a hot selling item to facilitate the amount of travel to and from the

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[50] "Water Lilies," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 14, 1901.
[51] Carolyn Riffel and Betty Bell, "Anadarko," *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=AN002.
[52] *Town Lots Sold: August 6, 1901*, Unpublished list, Anadarko Philomathic Museum, Anadarko, Oklahoma.
[53] "J.M. Youngblood," *The Evening Tribune*, September 26, 1901.
[54] "Trade with J M Youngblood," *The Daily Democrat*, January 30, 1902; "Your Photo Enlarged Free," *The Caddo County Times*, February 6, 1902.

area which Youngblood gleefully provided.[55] Youngblood himself frequently traveled to add to his stock, including trips to St. Louis to purchase a full line of fall and winter merchandise.[56] The success of the store led Youngblood to begin selling musical instruments, including organs and pianos, which sold for $1.00 a week.[57] This decision led to a growth of musical aspirations in the family and Anadarko. Over the next few years, Youngblood expanded the selection to include pianos, organs, guitars, mandolins, violins, and more.[58]

As her father, Jeremiah Youngblood, began to expand access to music in Anadarko, Cora settled into her new life in Oklahoma. The region suffered, like many early western settlements, from a sense of lawlessness. One early settler recalled that in the early years after 1901, "Anadarko was in the grip of the lawless…and on one occasion of the convening of court twenty-five cases were on the docket for murder alone."[59] In this rough environment, Cora also interacted with the many members of the local tribes in varying degrees of familiarity. These interactions gave her an understanding of Native culture that she would later use on the vaudeville stage. From learning local songs in Caddo which she would later recite for audience to adopting the style and cultural dances, Cora's observational knowledge of Native Americans would allow her to later adopt a Native persona to propel her career forward.

With the mass of incoming settlers and local Native population, Anadarko served as a small "contact zone" as defined by Mary Louis Pratt in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. She states these are "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and

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[55] "Just Received!" *The Caddo County Times*, July 24, 1902.
[56] "Local Items," *Anadarko Evening Tribune*, August 25, 1902.
[57] "The People will go where they can do the Best," *The Week's Review*, December 13, 1902.
[58] "Oh Music Sweet Music," *The Daily Democrat*, September 11, 1905.
[59] Quoted in Robert Polito, *Savage Art: A Biography of Jim Thompson*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 29.

subordination."[60] Paired with Louis Owens' definition of *frontier* as a "term for the transcultural zone of contact," Anadarko gave rise to the perfect environment for the new settlers to expropriate Native cultural identities for personal gain whether that be popularity, land and mineral rights, or local power..[61] Cora, like many Oklahomans, learned the idiosyncrasies of the Natives around her and began to use them in order to reinvent herself and add interest into her personal and professional life. This would be seen in her early years in vaudeville and be built upon until finally creating her false performance as Princess Youngblood in the 1920s.

However, first Anadarko needed to sell itself as a bastion of progress on the plains to attract more settlers. On its one-year anniversary, the town declared itself the "Queen City of the Washita" which has grown "from nothing to a beautiful, healthy, law-abiding city of four thousand people, the peer of any community in Oklahoma."[62] A part of the refined growth required cultural institutions such as entertainment. For many towns in this era, entertainment came from the opera house, saloon, and local town bands.

In August of 1902, a sixteen-year-old Cora led "eighteen of Anadarko's brightest young ladies," including her sister Eula, Ina Cooley, Florence McAninch, and Ethel Hoaghland, in organizing a brass band. As Jill Sullivan points out in her book *Women's Bands in America*, "for

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[60] Mary Luis Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Second Edition, (New York: Routledge, 2008) 7.
[61] Louis Owens, *Mixedblood Messages: Literature, Film, Family, Place*, (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 26.
[62] "Isn't It the Biggest Baby That Your Ever Saw?" *Anadarko Daily Democrat*, Anadarko, Oklahoma, August 5, 1902, 1.



"Ladies Band, Organized 1903"
Anadarko Philomathic Museum

much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, playing in a band was a masculine pursuit."[63] Creating her own band may have provided an outlet for these young women to exercise their independence, freedom of choice, artistic expression with others, as well as be aggressively noisy, perform in public, socialize, and learn to work together in ways that aided their development.[64] These women, situated in a remote town in Oklahoma Territory sought a creative outlet that let them overcome social ideas about how they should behave.

Rural towns had little opportunity to attend concerts or travel for a performance. A brass band became a status symbol for small communities as it represented that they were economically flourishing. It enhanced the town's quality of life and brought much needed recognition to the region as the settlers attempted to establish themselves and grow. Not only did the bands provide entertainment, but they also played in parades, ceremonies, and even funerals. A band represented the best of the community and Cora's band certainly illustrated this.[65]

[63] Jill Sullivan, *Women's Bands in America*, (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 2.
[64] Sullivan, 3.
[65] Sondra Wieland Howe, "Town Bands, 1880-1920," in Jill Sullivan, *Women's Bands in America: Performing Music and Gender*, 51-53.

The *Anadarko Daily Democrat* reported that the ladies were "ready music readers" as they sought subscriptions to pay for instruments. The citizens of Anadarko gave liberally, some subscribing $10. The first day of their venture, the ladies secured over $150 of their $600 goal.[66] The girls hoped by selling these subscriptions as shares of stock in their band, they could easily buy all the necessary equipment. They planned to call themselves the Anadarko Ladies Cornet Band.[67] They were being trained by Professor John A. Sager, director of music at Mt. Carmel Institute at Minco, Oklahoma. Members of the band were: Cora Youngblood, Daisy Kane, and Eunice Cleveland who played the cornet; Florence Baird, Mrs. G.W. Keeler, and Miss Eula Youngblood on clarinet; Iona Cooley, Eunice Cleveland, and Lou Daniels as solo alto; Miss Lober, Grace Acton, and Ida Mundell on trombone; Miss Nellie Kennedy on bass drum; and Nora Johnson on snare drum.[68]

The girls also held ice cream socials to raise money for the instruments. By September 29, enough money had been raised to supply instruments to the band and enough practice undergone so that they could begin to perform shows for their town.[69] A performance by the Ladies Band garnered a lot of attention and delighted denizens of Anadarko with multi-performance programs that incorporated string, piano, and vocal solos interspersed with numbers from the whole band. Cora held the final solo position before the band closed out the program.[70] The citizens of Anadarko saw their endeavor as a something to encourage and support because "a place is a "dead number" indeed without any kind of a musical organization.[71]

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[66] "Eighteen of Anadarko's Brightest," *Anadarko Daily Democrat*, August 14, 1902.
[67] "A Paper is being Circulated," *Anadarko Evening Tribune*, August 15, 1902.
[68] "The Ladies Band," *The Caddo County Times*, January 1, 1903; "Ladies Band," Photograph, Anadarko Philomathic Museum, Anadarko, Oklahoma.
[69] "Notice," *Anadarko Evening Tribune,* September 29, 1902.
[70] "Program," *The Daily Democrat*, September 17, 1902.
[71] "Ladies' Band," *Anadarko Evening Tribune,* October 13, 1902.

Following Cora's example, in October, her father formed a male band of seventeen pieces. Like many of the stories with Cora during her life, despite her accomplishments, men would attempt to eclipse her abilities, or she would be pushed from the actual story. Today, the Anadarko Philomathic Museum displays a photo of Jeremiah Youngblood and his band with the caption "The First Band Organized in Anadarko, 1902, by J.M. Youngblood."[72] The news article announcing Youngblood's band places his band much higher on a pedestal in comparison to the article about the Ladies Band.

> It is a fact that cannot be disputed that there is more stir and progressiveness manifest in a town that has a band than one that has no musical organization. Then Anadarko should be full of it. The men of the town, not to be outdone by the ladies (God bless 'em – the ladies) … The members are practicing two or three nights weekly and will soon be able to discourse just as good music as you can hear in any old town. The have purchased nearly all the instruments needed and a little later on will purchase handsome uniforms…When they get to making music we'll put 'em up against anything in the two territories.[73]

Members of J.M. Youngblood's band included sixteen men from the community.[74] Of these men, one in particular, Charles Corson, caught the attention of Cora Youngblood.

Charles belonged to the Piegan Nation of Montana. His father, Corporal Schuler M. Corson, Company D, 7th Infantry, had served in the United States Army in Montana from 1871-1877. After his discharge, he remained in Montana and, among his other enterprises, was the editor of *The Montanian* published in Choteau, Montana. In 1880, Charles Corson was born from a relationship between Schuler and a Piegan woman. However, Schuler did not include Charles in his family and would only later reluctantly accept Charles into his life when the boy was a

[72] "The First Band Organized in Anadarko, 1902, by J.M. Youngblood," Anadarko Philomathic Museum.
[73] "Another Band," *Anadarko Evening Tribune*, October 25, 1902.
[74] "Another Band," *Anadarko Evening Tribune*, October 25, 1902.

teenager. At the age of 14, Charles was sent to the Carlisle Indian School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania where he remained for eight years.[75]

While attending the school, Corson played the 2nd Cornet in the school's orchestra sparking a love for music.[76] Formally he was trained as a tailor before graduating in 1900.[77] But music was his passion, and he remained at the school to help in the band and take a business course. In 1902, he left Carlisle for a job in Anadarko, Oklahoma Territory as Assistant Leasing Clerk at the Kiowa Agency.[78] He moved into a little cottage near his office and constantly kept busy as the agency serviced the Kiowa, Comanche, Apache, Wichita, and several small bands.[79] Charles saw J.M. Youngblood's band as a perfect opportunity to continue his passion amidst his busy work schedule. It seems that his experience in teaching music at Carlisle helped the Youngblood band. In November of 1902, Corson wrote a letter to the Carlisle Indian School stating that he "is teaching a band in town during his off hours in the evening. The band is made up of whites and is improving and they are already able to earn something as a band. He expresses great gratitude to 'dear old Carlisle' for the opportunity he had here to learn music."[80] Thus, he grew to know the Youngbloods well through music.

The Ladies' Band and Men's Band worked together on occasion to perform grand shows for the people of Anadarko and to fundraise. At the end of October 1902, Cora played a defining role in one of these shows that would set the stage for her future career. On the 27th, a full house greeted the combined efforts of the bands in a production of a 5-act comedy entitled "Tony the

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[75] "Charles Corson Student Information Card," found digitally at carlisleindian.dickinson.edu, RG 75, Series 1329, Box 1, National Archives and Records Administration.
[76] "The Following Musicians," *The Indian Helper*, December 1, 1899.
[77] "The Blacksmith – Tailor Game Tomorrow," *The Red Man and Helper*, November 22, 1901.
[78] "Charles Corson," *The Red Man and Helper*, January 17, 1902.
[79] "From Mark Penoi '98 and Charles Corson 1900, jointly, who are Employed at Anadarko, Oklahoma," *The Red Man and Helper*, March 4, 1902.
[80] "Corson and Penoi," *The Red Man and Helper*, November 21, 1902.

Convict" performed at McAninch Hall with the proceeds going to the Ladies Band. The price of admission was "25 and 35 cents; children 15 cents."[81] Wonderful reviews followed the evening's performance as "Miss Cora Youngblood, as Mrs. Van Cruger, performed her part splendidly and elicited much favorable comment from the large audience." As a whole "the performance was better than the average show that make small towns" and special request was made to have it performed again.[82] The businessmen and other who missed the Saturday showing came the next evening with another large crowd. Once more Cora took the spotlight in the newspaper: "Special mention is due Miss Cora Youngblood, who delighted the audience with a vocal selection entitled 'I'll Be There, Mary Dear." Miss Youngblood is indeed a sweet singer and was vociferously encored at the conclusion of the song." The Men's Band furnished the music for the event and the two groups contemplated taking the show to neighboring towns. [83]

With the success of their performance, a bidding war started amongst the citizens of Anadarko to have the Ladies Band play in front of their business. Col. Karl Preger began the bid at $5.[84] Rosy Fant the proprietor of the Court Bar Saloon offered $10 which the Mayor William H. Divers raised to $12 the next day to have them play in front of the Divers & Taylor firm. Divers stated that would "not stand for any second hand man or saloon man outbidding him."[85] The businessmen of "C" street combined their money to bid $25 to have the band play in the center of their block.[86] To counter, the businessmen of "B" street banded together to raise a bid of $50.[87] This spirited rivalry ended when Col. Karl Preger, the man who started the bidding, won for an unannounced amount. The Ladies Band played in front of his place of business

[81] "Tony the Convict," *Anadarko Evening Tribue,* October 18, 1902.
[82] "A Grand Success," *Anadarko Evening Tribune*, October 27, 1902.
[83] "Tony the Convict," *Anadarko Evening Tribune,* October 28, 1902.
[84] "One Dollar Better," *Anadarko Evening Tribune, October* 21, 1902.
[85] "The Band," *The Daily Democrat,* October 22, 1902.
[86] ""C" Street to the Front," *The Daily Democrat,* October 23, 1902.
[87] "Down at Anadarko," *The Anadarko Tribune,* October 31, 1902.

acquitting themselves creditably. They established themselves as a feature attraction of the city, one that *The Daily Democrat* hoped would be a permanent one.[88]

For the rest of the year, the Ladies Band performed at various events around the city, On November 3, the in neat uniforms, the band marched in a parade through the principial streets of Anadarko.[89] The received invitations to play in neighboring cities such as Bridgeport.[90] In December, they serenaded Reverend Lillie and family. Their popularity in the town continued to grow as the newspapers sang their praise: "The Ladies Band is very popular, not only for the delightful music rendered, but also on account of the charming young ladies of which it is composed."[91] To close out the year, the Ladies Band performed a holiday concert. They played four classical pieces and were assisted by some noted musicians from Minco. The performance was advertised to "eclipse any musical that has ever been given in Anadarko."[92]

The next year, the Ladies Band continued performing in Anadarko at fundraisers and events such as the Anadarko School Board meeting and Woodman Banquet.[93] The programs would include various recitations, vocal solos, mandolin trios, piano solos, and of course the entire band together. Besides selling tickets to the show, the Ladies Band would sometimes sell baked goods at an auction. On January 8, 1903, they sold a cake to the highest bidder and their total for the night amounted to $35.00. The money went toward continuing to employ Prof. Sager as their music teacher.[94] However, the Ladies and Men's bands drew criticism by *The Daily Democrat* for charging too high of an admission cost to the citizens of Anadarko. The paper

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[88] "Karl Preger the Lucky Man," *The Daily Democrat*, October 25, 1902.
[89] "The Big Rally a Success," *The Daily Democrat*, November 3, 1902.
[90] "The Anadarko Ladies," *The Anadarko Tribune,* November 14, 1902.
[91] "Minister's Family Serenaded," *Anadarko Daily Democrat*, December 6, 1902.
[92] "The Ladies Band," *The Caddo County Times*, December 11, 1902.
[93] "Enthusiasm Prevails," *The Anadarko Tribune*, January 2, 1903; "Woodman Banquet," *The Daily Democrat*, January 6, 1903.
[94] "Ladies Band Concert," *Anadarko Daily Democrat*, January 9, 1903.

cautioned that the bands "be reasonable in their charges to our citizens when playing for them, and not charge them every dollar that they will pay." Due to the town's generous donations to the bands, especially the Ladies Band, the people would "get tired of being charged exorbitant prices on all occasions." The paper warned that "the bands must at all times remember that they need the good will and cooperation of the citizens of Anadarko."[95]

On January 14, 1903, the noted orator and twice the democratic nominee for President of the United States, William Jennings Bryan, visited Anadarko during a lecture tour in the Oklahoma Territory under the auspices of the Knights of Pythias Lodge.[96] Upon his arrival, both the Ladies and Men's bands played to celebrate. Bryan toured the town and gave an impromptu speech to the crowd assembled. At the Windsor Hotel all the members of the Ladies band met with him. He congratulated them on "the excellent music furnished" and exclaimed that they "were a credit to any band and he could hardly believe that this band had only been organized a few months." Bryan then gave his speech "A Conquering Nation" for almost two hours. After his speech, he left the town to continue his tour with the pleasant recollections of "the Ladies' and Men's Band for their excellent music."[97] The Ladies Band had made quite an impression.

A visitor to Anadarko, who wrote a letter to the newspaper signed only "College Student," praised the "soon-to-be thriving western city" for its beautiful location, progressive and successful businessman, and "some of the fairest of the fair, if the members of the Ladies Band are to constitute the standard from which one is to judge." The anonymous writer then laments about the presence of "two vultures" in the form of a saloon and gambling houses and the other a "variety theater." The "man-made dens of vice" depreciated the natural beauty of Anadarko.

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[95] "As a friend…," *The Daily Democrat*, January 13, 1903.
[96] "Hon. W. J. Bryan," *Anadarko Daily Democrat,* January 12, 1903.
[97] "Hon. W. J. Bryan," *Anadarko Daily Democrat*, January 15, 1903.

Fortunately, the Ladies Band created an "organization of which the city may well be proud." Their skill influenced this writer so thoroughly that they ended their letter with "Here is a health to Anadarko and the Ladies Band."[98]

The Ladies Band continued their success with a trip to perform in various nearby towns. They visited Minco and Chickasha as they continued toward Oklahoma City.[99] With their freshened skills, the Ladies Band played at various locations, including the headquarters of *The Oklahoman* where "the fairest belles of the 'new country'" played "the finest music ever heard in the prosaic real of a newspaper office." However, the article published about the visit of the band incorrectly listed them as the Lawton Ladies Band. This led to a snide compliment by *The Daily Democrat* of Anadarko stating "it is a strange coincidence that the names of the members of Lawton Ladies Band are identically the same as those of the Anadarko Ladies Band. We congratulate Lawton upon the possession of such an array of musical talent."[100]

As the year continued the girls continued to play and hone their talents. Their success began to inspire other towns to create their own Ladies Band. After a visit to the town of Lawton, the locals underwent a "considerable revival of interest" in forming their own ladies band.[101] Cora also began to spend more time with Charles Corson and they soon became the subject of talk in the newspapers. On April 26, 1903, the two were reported together as sightseers at Chattanooga, Oklahoma.[102] However, after this mention the record is blank on Cora, Charles, or the Anadarko Ladies Band until March 26, 1904. During this lull, Cora and Eula Youngblood

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[98] "A Visit to Anadarko," *Anadarko Daily Democrat,* February 3, 1903.
[99] "Prof. Segar," *The Daily Democrat*, February 11, 1903.
[100] "Lawton Ladies Band," *The Daily Democrat*, February 13, 1903.
[101] "To Organize Ladies Band," *The Lawton News*, Lawton, Oklahoma, April 9, 1903.
[102] "Mr. Charles Carson and Miss Cora Youngblood," *Anadarko Daily Democrat*, Anadarko, Oklahoma, April 27, 1903.

traveled back to Republic, Missouri to perform vocal solos at the commencement of Republic High School.[103]

From May to December 1904, the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, informally known as the St. Louis World's Fair, was held in St. Louis, Missouri to commemorate the 1803 purchase of the Louisiana Territory from France. More than sixty different countries and forty-three of the forty-five states in the union were represented at the fair through exhibitions that drew in almost twenty million visitors. The twin territories, Oklahoma and Indian, also constructed buildings to showcase their region's accomplishments. As a whole, the exposition "glorified America's increasing control over the world's natural resources and in particular how business acumen and ingenuity, coupled with scientific and technological know-how, were pushing the United States to the forefront of the industrialized nations."[104] For the average visitor, the draw of the Fair were the hundreds of exhibitions.

The fair covered around 1,200 acres with over 1,500 buildings connected by almost seventy-five miles of roads and walkways. For the average attendee this sprawling exhibition promoted entertainment, souvenirs, and popular culture but as historians such as James Gilbert have emphasized that "matters of race and imperialism" rest at the center of the fair.[105] The exposition celebrated the seeming inevitability of the White American race's March of Progress.

But, even in an exhibition dedicated to White progress, Native America pushed back against this narrative. This is best exemplified in another Oklahoma resident, albeit against his will, the Apache chief Goyahkla, popularly known as Geronimo. William J. McGee,

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[103] Jim Smith, *Republic, Missouri: Home of 3,000 Good Neighbors*, 134.
[104] Nancy J. Parezo and Don D. Fowler, *Anthropology Goes to the Fair: The 1904 Louisiana Exposition*, (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 1.
[105] James Gilbert, *Whose Fair? Experience, Memory, and the History of the Great St. Louis Exposition*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 4.

anthropologist, and Chair of LPE Department of Anthropology, claimed that the exposition would be a failure without the presence of Apache. Their popularity and presence in the American imagination after their conflict with the United States made them the perfect example of American greatness and superiority over indigenous peoples. For this reason, he secured Apache prisoners from the White Mountain Reservation and Fort Sill which included Goyahkla.

Goyahkla's multiple wars in Mexico and the United States and evasion from authorities had made him arguably the most famous Native American in the country. After his 1886 surrender he became a prisoner of war and shipped to Florida. In 1888, he and his band of Chiricahuas were moved to Mt. Vernon Barracks, Alabama until 1894 when they were finally moved to Fort Sill, Oklahoma Territory to live as prisoners of war. As a prisoner, Goyahkla would be paraded around to events by the United States Army including fairs and parades.[106]

The 1904 World's Fair attempted to capitalize on Goyahkla's infamy by heavily promoting his presence with plenty of exaggeration and hyperbole. Visitors expected to see a man "whose presence made every white settler tremble with fear" with bloodthirst in his eyes. However, some reporters present published articles of a model native after "long years of captivity have broken his spirit, and he is docile because he has met his masters." The public did not know what to expect from seeing this infamous Native, but his attitude proved defiant in the face of prejudice.[107]

After his many public appearances, Goyahkla had learned how to manipulate a crowd and capitalize on his fame. While walking the fairgrounds, he would "cut off and sell his coat buttons" as souvenirs, then sew on another set before repeating the process. He also made and

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[106] Angie Debo, *Geronimo, The Man, His Time, His Place*, (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996).
[107] Nancy J. Parezo and Don D. Fowler, *Anthropology Goes to the Fair: The 1904 Louisiana Exposition*, (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 112.

sold bows, arrows, and canes as well as selling photographs of himself. Goyahkla would charge for his signature as well making a handsome profit from his trip to the fair. Many visitors requested "war whoops or other stereotyped behaviors" they expected from him, but he would refuse to comply. He also refused to wear stereotypical clothing, preferring to dress in Western-style clothes. When confronting upset visitors, Goyahkla would say "God bless you" then part company. His actions would cause many to complain that this feeble old Indian could not be the Goyahkla of their imagination. An uncertainty arose around Goyahkla that Native Americans "could assimilate to Euro-American culture and still remain Indian." Geronimo's refusal to participate in the ridiculous requests came from a decision "to not talk needlessly, especially to visitors who were rude or made jokes at his expense. It was not his problem that people wanted a romanticized dime-novel warrior."[108]

Like Native America, Goyahkla could not be forced to assimilate or removed. Instead, he defiantly stood against the White imagination at the heart of their celebration of racial greatness. His appearance at the World's Fair in this manner, as Philip Deloria argues in *Indians in Unexpected Places* puts "two different symbolic systems in dialogue with one another."[109] To the American public, Native Americans symbolize the America of old but Native people are not stagnant and, even if defiantly, they too progressed with American society. To see a figure like Goyahkla in a modern light fiercely competed with the nostalgic idea of Natives that people hoped to see.

Despite Goyahkla's counter to the theme of the fair, many exhibitions sought to demonstrate "the superiority of middle-class American democracy, capitalism, and culture," with

[108] Parezo and Fowler, *Anthropology Goes to the Fair*, 113-114.
[109] Philip Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places*, (University Press of Kansas, 2004), 136.

popular culture becoming a necessity for any exhibit to attract crowds.[110] In this, Oklahoma looked to create a huge splash at the fair. Oklahoma Territory became so invested in the Fair that it created the Oklahoma World's Fair Association "incorporated under the laws of the Territory of Oklahoma…to give to the people a cheap and easy way to see the great World's Fair at St. Louis."[111] The people of Oklahoma wanted to showcase their territory and make sure that its citizens would be a part of the celebrations. The official perspective of the state was published in the *Pythian Times*:

> Oklahoma will occupy her usual place in the front line at the St. Louis World's Fair, showing to the millions of people from all parts of the world, who assemble there, that this is the most progressive and prosperous community on the face of the earth.
>
> It is the hope and ambition of the Oklahoma Commission that our Territory and our people will stand in their true light before the world – a commonwealth whose resources are great, whose possibilities are unlimited, a people who do and accomplish all thing and whose energy, enterprise, and progressiveness are nowhere surpassed.[112]

Promotion of Oklahoma's success reflected the fair's promotion of White American successes on the national and international stage. Unlike the usual community boosterism of the time, this direct promotion of the "White" part of Oklahoma and its successes in comparison to Indian Territory set the distinction between the two for the international community.

A large draw for this promotion came from the presence of music. Visitors to the fair could listen to thousands of concerts "from the great John Phillips Sousa Band to operettas and the elegant ragtime music of composer Scott Joplin."[113] One of the exhibitions, the World's Press Congress, drew large state delegations from around the country that competed to draw

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[110] Nancy J. Parezo and Don D. Fowler, *Anthropology Goes to the Fair: The 1904 Louisiana Exposition*, (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 2.
[111] "The Oklahoma World's Fair Association," *Lawton News-Republican*, Lawton, Oklahoma, March 31, 1904, 8.
[112] "Oklahoma at the World's Fair," *The Pythian Times*, Perry, Oklahoma, January 1, 1904, 1.
[113] Nancy J. Parezo and Don D. Fowler, *Anthropology Goes to the Fair: The 1904 Louisiana Exposition*, (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 2.

attention to their respective state or territory. Oklahoma and Kansas were the only delegations to bring bands.[114]

The Oklahoma Press Association sought to have a Ladies Band represent and play for them at the exposition. They selected the Stillwater and Lawton Ladies Bands as well as members of the disbanded band from Edmond to form the Oklahoma Press Association Band under the direction of Prof. J.M. Jaynes.[115] Unfortunately, a "sickness and other causes" prohibited the addition of the ladies from Lawton. This opening allowed Cora Youngblood, Ida Mundell, and Florence Baird, all from Anadarko, to join the Oklahoma Press Association Band.[116]


WOMEN MUSICIANS GIVE CONCERTS AT THE FAIR.

LADIES' OKLAHOMA PRESS ASSOC IATION BAND,
Which is an interesting feature of the territory's delegation.

St. Louis Globe Democrat
May 17, 1904

[114] "How Guthrie Got There," *The Oklahoma State Capital*, May 26, 1904.
[115] "Some of the members," *Edmond Enterprise and Oklahoma County News*, April 28, 1904; "Off to St. Louis," *The Daily Democrat*, May 12, 1904.
[116] "Ladies' Band," *The Lawton Constitution*, June 2, 1904.

Cora now had the opportunity to represent the territory's exceptionality through music. The *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* told of their attendance as such:

> There is one interesting result of teaching young ladies how to play on brass band instruments. It puts dimples in their cheeks. Oklahoma has brought a brass band to the Fair, composed entirely of young women. The only man in the band is one whom it seems necessary to employ to beat the bass drum. This is where mere man still finds himself useful; and yet it is not likely that he is needed so much to beat the bass drum as it is that someone pretty stout is required to hold up that heaviest instrument of the band. It would seem that the man might be employed only to hold the drum while some fair performer thumped it in proper time. If there is going to be a ladies' cornet band, let there be not one false note in it – not even one man. He may be there, of course, to blame all the mistakes upon – if anyone were so ungallant as to pretend, he heard any mistakes. Oklahoma is a wonderful territory and deserves statehood, and if she doesn't get it soon there may be more feminine brass.[117]

This twenty-three-member band performed at the Oklahoma building to a crowd of almost 400 Oklahoma men and women.[118] On May 17, 1904, on the veranda of the Hall of Congresses the band played for thousands of visitors. The band remained at the Fair for several days giving concerts with the Oklahoma Troop A Cavalry Band of Guthrie, Oklahoma.[119] The Oklahoma Press Association Band succeeded in their national appearance. Interestingly, Cora was not alone at the Fair.

Charles Corson also performed at the fair as a member of Dennison Wheelock's Haskell Indian Band. Wheelock, an Oneida Indian from Wisconsin, had been Richard Henry Pratt's favored student at Carlisle Indian School. Wheelock excelled in music and became an accomplished American Indian composer, conductor, and cornet soloist. He "spent twenty years of his life at Carlisle, Flandreau, and Haskell Institute as a student, clerk, disciplinarian,

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[117] "Sights and Echoes at the Exposition," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, May 17, 1904.
[118] "Editors of the World," *The Chandler Publicist*, May 20, 1904; "The Oklahoma Press Association," *The Helena Herald,* May 20, 1904. "How Guthrie Got There," *The Oklahoma State Capital*, May 26, 1904.
[119] Richard I. Schwartz and Iris J. Schwartz, *Bands at the St. Louis World's Fair of 1904: Information, Photographs, and Database:* Colonial Heights, Virginia: published by the authors, 2003, 46; "How Guthrie Got There," *The Oklahoma State Capital*, May 26, 1904.

bandmaster, and professor of music."[120] Wheelock had taught music to Charles Corson during his time at Carlisle before leaving to teach at Haskell Indian School. This likely resulted in Charles joining the group for the World's Fair.

The Haskell Indian Band drew large crowds to their concerts performed twice daily from June 14 to June 25, 1904. The band held the place of the only Indian Band hired to play by the Exposition Company. They were compared to John Phillip Sousa for their skill. Dennison Wheelock's *Aboriginal Suite* introduced the native dances and war-whoop into his music making it as "interesting as a study of genuine Indian music." The skill of the musicians garnered the admiration of the Fair organizers who called their work "most creditable and gives them a right to the place as the one artistic band of the red race."[121] After their engagement at the fair, they began a tour of the country. They planned to play at Philadelphia, Cleveland, Indianapolis, Chicago, and others then return later in the season for another World's Fair engagement performance.[122]

Before their June engagement ended, Charles and Cora married on June 22, 1904, in St. Louis. The couple declined to say if their marriage was the climax of a World's Fair romance.[123] Symbolically, the marriage of settler and Native would be repeated in three years during the celebration of Oklahoma's statehood. In that time, interracial marriage with Native Americans, especially with a white woman, was viewed as an affront to many cultural norms. However, Oklahoma's mixed populations, especially in the communities in Indian Territory, allowed for a more socially liberal in regard to Native and White marriage. Cora simply added Charles' last

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[120] Laurence M. Hauptman and L. Gordon McLester III, *The Oneida Indians in the Age of Allotment, 1860*-1920, (University of Oklahoma Press, 2006), 112-113.
[121] *Daily Official Program*, June 17, 1904, 13; Richard Schwartz and Iris Schwartz, *Bands at the St. Louis World's Fair of 1904: Information, Photographs, and Database*, 7.
[122] *Daily Official Program*, June 17, 1904, 13.
[123] "Married at the Fair," *The Anaconda Standard*, June 29, 1904.

name becoming Cora Youngblood Corson, the name that would stay with her throughout her career. Undoubtedly, this close personal connection with a Native husband allowed Cora to learn more intimate details of Native culture from his stories of growing up on the Blackfeet Reservation. His role in the Wheelock band would have also shaped her understanding of performance in Native regalia and how to intrigue the audience with Native settings.

After the fair, there is no record of Cora's whereabouts in 1904 until August 1905. It appears she may have traveled with the band or settled back in Republic, Missouri for a time awaiting Charles' circuit to end. In August, Cora visited her father in Anadarko, but the article does not say from where she came.[124] In a letter from Schuler Corson to Charles dated November 24, 1904, Schuler mentions that the circuit should end soon. He inquired about Charles' plan stating, "I suppose you will go to Republic where I suppose Cora is waiting for you, judging from her last letter."[125] Cora and Charles' marriage started with touring in separate bands and would continue this way moving forward. However, Cora's work establishing her reputation set the stage for her career to blossom.

After the settlement of Anadarko, the foundations of culture formed around Cora Youngblood Corson. With the mass of incoming settlers and local Native population, Anadarko served as a small "contact zone" wherein it served as the perfect environment for the new settlers to adopt Native cultural identities.[126] The successful comingling of Natives and Euro-American settlers in this fledgling community created unique cultural understandings of legal marriage, entertainment, religion, and private property.[127] While the settler culture followed familiar

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[124] "Mrs. Cora Carson," *The Plain Dealer,* August 4, 1904.
[125] Letter from Schuler Corson to Charles Corson, November 24, 1904, In Author's Possession.
[126] Louis Owens, *Mixedblood Messages: Literature, Film, Family, Place*, (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 26.
[127] Saler, 8.

western trajectories and tropes, it evolved to include the Native population. Through defining Anadarko's cultural expression, undermining gender norms, and participating in representing Oklahoma at the World's Fair, Cora Youngblood Corson exemplified the difficulties of subverting the social norms to create something new that redefined Anadarko, and by extension, Oklahoma's national image as many in the state adapted to a comingled life alongside Native Americans.

CHAPTER TWO: The Rise

From 1905 to 1907, Cora Youngblood's career pushed her onto the national stage. Cora became a national star as a Native American, musical prodigy from the plains of Oklahoma. Cora represented the state of Oklahoma on a national stage, thus providing a glimpse into Oklahoman culture. To the masses that came to see her perform or read about her life in the newspapers, she was their image of the fledgling state. She not only enforced stereotypes but also overcame them providing the idea of a rugged, independent territory whose people are a mix of Native and settler ideals. Her growth and career trajectory formed through her presentation of a Native American performance, musicianship, and breaking of gender norms.

With her growing fame, Cora became one of the first national stars to represent Oklahoma. Therefore, her false image as both a rugged, western woman and Native American became what many assumed Oklahomans to be even before statehood. Cora's growth can even be directly compared to her home of Anadarko's perception of their community growth. The city announced that:

> should the "Queen City of the Washita" continue to grow at this rate, even for one short decade, look out for your laurels, Guthrie and Oklahoma City – you have a rival in the field, a child born on the banks of the Washita, in the land of Caddo, that was a wonder in its conception, a prodigy at its birth, a marvel in its development, and promises to be a modern miracle, in the near future.[128]

While the city boosters promoted Anadarko as a prospering community Cora's managers also promoted her growing reputation as Oklahoma's prodigy whose professional development dazzled audiences around the country.

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[128] "Our Beautiful Dark-Eyed Anna," *Anadarko Evening Tribune*, Anadarko, Oklahoma, August 12, 1902, 2.

Cora's career embodies the image of Oklahoma through the trope of the "Oklahoma Adventurer" defined by anthropologist Charles W. Nuckolls as "two closely linked but ultimately conflicting elements…(1) pursuit of a social cause, and (2) formation of a social group."[129] Nuckolls argues that Americans, and in particular Oklahomans, are "drawn to the self-expression of independence" but also the "self-effacement and competitiveness of the corporate world," both highly contradictory ideals.[130] To Nuckolls, Oklahoma became a place of a "compromise identity" wherein the contradictory ideals synthesized "in such a way that they no longer appear contradictory" which can be seen in Cora's use of both settler and Native representations as well as in her professional career.[131]

Early on, she became a social cynosure; a person that is the center of attention or admiration. Through this, Nuckolls argued that people like Cora represented "in extreme form values and attitudes strongly "selected for" in a culture. Serving as a benchmark against which people judge their conformity to accepted ideals, it stands out and attracts attention." Studying these popular celebrities "reveals the values that are most salient to the formation of cultural identity."[132] Weston La Barre, the anthropologist that suggested the idea of social cynosure, argued that during the era of a frontier society, women "achieved high status through an economically useful contribution that was enhanced by her scarcity value."[133] America had a fascination with the usurping of positions of power and as Nuckolls points out, many stories of popular Oklahomans follow this trope creating an identity for fellow Oklahomans.[134] Using these same ideas, Cora Youngblood Corson inspired thousands of people with vision of Oklahoma as a

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[129] Charles W. Nuckolls, "The Cultural History of an Oklahoma identity," in *The Culture of Oklahoma* by Howard F. Stein and Robert F. Hill, (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), 105.
[130] Nuckolls, 103.
[131] Nuckolls, 103.
[132] Nuckolls, 106.
[133] Weston La Barre, *Culture in Context*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1980), 203.
[134] La Barre, 208; Nuckolls, 103-106.

golden land that created powerful and independent people. A state that offered a fair deal. She helped to establish the idea of social solidarity within the society of Oklahoma thus creating a representation of Oklahoman culture on the national stage.[135]

The early 1900's fell under the proverbial "Golden Age of Bands" with several well-known bands touring the country with the most prominent being led by John Phillip Sousa. However, another popular bandleader of the time, Helen May Butler, led an all-women band originating in Providence, Rhode Island. Her accomplishments as a director quickly earned her the title of "Miss Sousa."[136] Beginning her leadership career in the early 1890s, Butler slowly expanded her group to follow the popular "military band" style. By 1900, Butler added a manager named John Leslie Spahn who quickly worked to sell the band as "America's Foremost Attraction" devoid of men. In fact, his name would appear as J. Leslie Spahn, hiding his gender.[137]

The band quickly garnered fame from its composition of accomplished soloists. Butler's band rose in popularity as they performed at the 1901 Pan-American Exposition and the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition (St. Louis World's Fair). In this time, Helen May Butler's name became synonymous with a musical master who directed one of the best bands in the country. Butler also married Spahn on November 5, 1902. On top of this, Butler's composition "Cosmopolitan America" became the Republican Party's official march in 1904 for Theodore Roosevelt's presidential campaign. Thus, the future of the band and her relationship looked promising.[138]

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[135] Nuckolls, 102.
[136] "Sign a Ladies' Band," *Iola Daily Record*, Iola, Kansas, June 4, 1906, 2.
[137] Brian D. Meyers, "Helen May Butler and her Ladies' Military Band: Being Professional during the Golden Age of Bands," in Jill Sullivan, *Women's Bands in America: Performing Music and Gender*, 15-20.
[138] Brian Meyers, 20-25.

However, in 1905 things began to change for Butler. On August 7, 1905, Cora Youngblood Corson joined the Helen May Butler Band at the age of nineteen.[139] It is unclear how she joined the band, as several interviews provide contradictory information. One origin story declares:

> Spahn, manager of the Helen May Butler band, is due the credit for her discovery. Mr. Spahn was traveling through Oklahoma and at Anadarko he heard of this new musical prodigy…He was polite with the Anadarko enthusiasts, and more out of courtesy than for anything else he consented to go and see her. Only the fact that she was an Indian maiden, and the daughter of a prominent Indian agent interested him.
>
> The result was that he asked her to play for him. Graciously she granted the request. Her work was a revelation to him. Not only did he find her to be an accomplished mistress of the euphonium, but also a splendid vocalist. He was so delighted with her that he told Miss butler of her. The band's mistress laughed at him. Her girls twitted him unmercifully about the rustic prodigy who had "taken him in" and made him believe she was a musician.
>
> Then came a time when the regular euphonium soloist of the band was married. This severed her connection with the organization and created a vacancy which Miss Butler found exceedingly hard to fill. The thought struck her that this might be a good time to try Mr. Spahn's find. Correspondence with the girl resulted in her taking a trip east. There she joined the band, and she can remain with it just as long as she cares to stay. She is one of the most valued as well as one of the most popular members of the band. Not only is she popular with the public, but with her colleagues as well.[140]

This story reveals a few things about Cora's early career. She is heralded as a "musical prodigy" as well as an "Indian maiden." This is one of the earliest accounts that describe Cora as being a Native American. It also shows part of the cultural downfalls of western performers by the girls in the band insinuating Cora was a "rustic prodigy" who did not possess true talent. This would provide the competitiveness upon which Cora strived as an "Oklahoma Adventurer." Most importantly, this story reveals Spahn's first tale of Cora's supposed Native heritage.

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[139] "An Oklahoma Musician," *The Daily Oklahoman*, October 3, 1905.
[140] "Another Indian Musician," *Wichita Eagle*, July 13, 1906.

This origin, told by Spahn, sets up Cora's Native heritage which became the foundation for her career. As an ethnic impersonator, Spahn and Cora would convince the world that being Native set her apart from the other acts in vaudeville. As Charles Nuckolls argued, this "stands out and attracts attention" to Cora as a celebrity.[141] The idea that Spahn believed Cora was an "Indian maiden and the daughter of a prominent Indian agent" is easily disproven and not something that they could get away with in Anadarko or Oklahoma.[142] However, the American public outside of Oklahoma, this story made Cora an interesting act worth seeing.

Despite having played the cornet in Anadarko and the Oklahoma Press Association Band, Cora joined Butler playing the baritone. She quickly took to the new instrument and became quite a proficient player. After her first concert, Cora received solo parts on an instrument she had hardly ever played. In only one week, Butler appointed Cora to be assistant director. In explaining her opinion of Cora, Helen May Butler stated "I consider Mrs. Cora Youngblood Corson a phenomenal find. With proper care she will no doubt accomplish great things. I prophesy that she will become one of the greatest, if not the peer, of all lady baritone players. She also has a sweet sympathetic voice that will help her rise above her sister musicians."[143]

Cora's soprano voice quickly brought her vocal solos in concerts. On October 23, 1905, Cora performed both euphonium and vocal solos during the band's performance at the Olympia theater in Chattanooga, Tennessee.[144] The talents of the girls, and especially Cora, continued to bring high acclaim from reporters. The remarkable skill of the band currently rests in the accolades by the local news. During a performance at the local Chattanooga armory, the paper

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[141] Nuckolls, 106.
[142] "Another Indian Musician," *Wichita Eagle*, July 13, 1906.
[143] "An Oklahoma Musician," *The Daily Oklahoman*, October 3, 1905.
[144] "The Ladies Band," *The Gadsden Daily Times-News,* October 20, 1905; "Ladies' Band Well Received," *The Chattanooga News*, October 23, 1905.

announced that all fans of music should attend to have "the unusual privilege of hearing lady soloists of ability on brass instruments."[145] Due to a continued illness of Helen May Butler, her husband and manager, J. Leslie Spahn closed their tour in Cedartown, Georgia on December 14.[146] Fortunately, this closure provided an life-changing opportunity for Cora Youngblood Corson.

Spahn convinced Cora to venture into the world of vaudeville. Her only foray into theater constituted the play "Tony the Convict" she and her band had performed in Anadarko. This step would take her to an entirely new level of fame. After her stunning performances following joining the band, Helen May Butler signed Cora to a 5-year contract, from 1906 to 1911, "at a salary far exceeding that received by any other lady musician."[147] Although, it may have been a contract with the manager Leslie J. Spahn as later articles point that he is the one she is contracted to.[148] With her position secured, Cora took her first step into vaudeville with an extension of her role in the Helen May Butler band by performing vocal solos and playing the euphonium.[149] She debuted in Atlanta, Georgia in January of 1906. She quickly found herself discussed in newspapers across the country. The Boston Herald stated of Cora "she not only plays her instrumental solos well, but she sings most charmingly." The Philadelphia Record declared that the "beautiful and accomplished Cora Youngblood Corson did herself proud at yesterday's performance. She sings like a bird and plays as we have seldom heard The Old Kentucky Home and other popular songs."[150] She quickly garnered fame and the admiration of

[145] "For Gahagan Rifles," *Chattanooga Daily Times*, November 29, 1905.
[146] "Ladies' Band Closes," *The Billboard*, December 30, 1905, 2.
[147] "Ladies' Military Band," *The Birmingham News,* April 28, 1906.
[148] "Vaudeville," *The Billboard*, September 8, 1906, 28.
[149] "Star Theater," *The Atlanta Constitution,* January 26, 1906.
[150] "Star Theater," *The Atlanta Constitution,* January 28, 1906.

her hometown through her talented performances.[151] Since beginning her career with Helen May Butler, she quickly took to the competitiveness of the profession.

In vaudeville, she learned that to continue to top her peers, she must constantly adapt. Her novelties changed every few years to keep her act fresh. Her first step into creating a public image saw her donning a decorative buckskin dress while singing popular "Indian Songs" of the time. Christine Bold, author of "*Vaudeville Indians" on Global Circuits: 1880s to 1930s* that the popularity of Native Americans in Vaudeville "attracted large numbers of performers whose claimed Indigenous identities were less clearly grounded."[152] Unfortunately, the context of the times makes it difficult to fully determine if some of these performers had a true native heritage or if they simply found it a convenient path to popularity. Bold acknowledges that some cases are "an uncomfortable truth that the "Indian Princess" caricature that so endangered Indigenous women in the sexualized binaries it set in motion was sought as a refuge by some non-Indigenous women living closer to the social and economic edge, and sometimes to violence."[153] For Cora, as Joanna Ross Hersey points out, women musicians in vaudeville faced "an economy where jobs were scarce, and pay was low."[154] Therefore, due to her life in Oklahoma Territory and gender, Cora likely saw the popularity of Indian Songs as a way to use her connections to Native culture for her benefit. She dressed in the stereotypical outfit that appeared in popular culture, but she had an advantage that others of her time did not. She had observational details of native culture which she observed in Oklahoma and a backstory of growing up on an Indian reservation which could fuel the public's imagination.

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[151] "Mrs. Carson's Wonderful Success," *The Daily Democrat,* February 22, 1906.
[152] Christine Bold, "*Vaudeville Indians" on Global Circuits: 1880s to 1930s*, (New Haven, CT; Yale University Press, 2022), 50.
[153] Bold, "*Vaudeville Indians*", 50.
[154] Joanna Ross Hersey, "An Attraction of Unusual Merit," in Jill Sullivan's *Women's Bands in America,* 74

The novelty of a Native woman singing and playing the euphonium took her popularity to a new level even within the Helen May Butler band. An advertisement in Billboard magazine dated March 17, 1906, promotes Butler and Cora together. Cora is situated as the "feature soloist" of the band but she is also endorsed as a "Helen May Butler attraction." The ad markets her as the "most versatile lady musician" whose show in composed of "a refined vaudeville specialty requiring eighteen minutes; opening full stage, closing in one. Introducing quick changes, latest songs, euphonium solos. The only lady known to use this large instrument as a feature. Wardrobe A-1. Booked solid to September 7th, 1906. All time open after that." Finally, the rest of the band was promoted at the bottom of the page. They would start performing on September 8. This reveals Cora's new level of popularity not only with her position of equal weight in the advertisement, but also in her shows being completely booked for the next seven months.[155]

After performing in Georgia for a couple months, Cora moved on to Texas for her next vaudeville appearance. The *San Antonio Sunday Light* wrote of her act:

> Miss Corson has the distinction of being the vocal and instrumental soloist of the Helen May Butler band, one of the strongest of the great number of women bands now appearing before the public, particularly in the east. Both of her qualifications to entertain will be displayed at the Majestic. She invests her performance with pleasing costumes indicative of what she is singing. When she appears to sing "Silverheels" it is in the robes of an Indian maiden. Miss Corson closes her act with two solos on the euphonium.[156]

This article reveals an interesting detail that follows Cora throughout her career. Is she native or is she just wearing a costume? This plays into the idea that Cora is using what we now define as "passing" which allowed her to weave through a male-dominated world and draw support for her

[155] "Helen May Butler," *The Billboard*, March 17, 1906, 63.
[156] "Cora Youngblood Corson," *San Antonio Sunday Light*, April 1, 1906.

career and personal causes through identification with larger constituencies or groups. She continually looked for a way to connect herself to a cultural trend or cause to better market herself to the public. Marcia Alesan Dawkins states in *Clearly Invisible: Racial Passing and the Color of Cultural Identity* that "passing shifts our social positions amidst social limitations."[157] In Cora's context this could give a partial explanation to how she used her new Native identity to establish herself in the male-dominated field of brass musicians. By becoming a Native performer, Cora set herself above the rest by intriguing audience interested in seeing a "real-life" Native American on stage and coupled this persona with an amazing natural talent on her instruments. After decades of Native American removal to Indian Territory and hundreds of years of interracial mixing, many White Americans could not tell what an "authentic" Native should look, talk, sing, or act like. Therefore, it was not difficult for Cora to convince the American public that she had Native heritage.

The Helen May Butler band soon left Texas and returned to Atlanta, Georgia to play a fundraising show to raise money for the victims of the San Francisco earthquake on April 22, 1906. The sheer destruction and size of the earthquake made it one of the most significant earthquakes in recorded history. The devastation called many groups to perform fundraisers to help those in San Francisco rebuild. The band hoped to raise around $1,000 for those left homeless.[158] After their performance, the band continued their tour of the principal southern cities.[159]

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[157] Marcia Alesan Dawkins, *Clearly Invisible: Racial Passing and the Color of Cultural Identity*, (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), xi.
[158] "Two Concerts Given Today for San Francisco Victims," *The Atlanta Constitution,* April 22, 1906.
[159] "Sacred Concert to be Given at East Lake," *The Birmingham News*, April 27, 1906.

As the band traveled, Cora's popularity brought her more attention in the newspapers. Heralded securely as "the most versatile lady musician, vocal and euphonium soloist" papers began to elaborate on her background. *The Birmingham News* presented Cora as "a native of Oklahoma Territory, and although but 19 years of age, has been the Feature Vocal and Baritone Soloist in the Helen May Butler band during the past year." Simply stated, some of the papers present her background is simply a native of Oklahoma Territory meaning her performances of "Silverleaf" in which she dressed as a Native American are just acts. She is using the Native heritage as a part of her performance.[160] While in Alabama, Cora began to take up the newspaper advertisements. Instead of Helen May Butler's image, Cora became the star attached to the advertisement.[161] She soon became "a favorite on the vaudeville circuit." In fact, the *Arkansas Democrat*'s advertisement for the Forest Park Theater included Cora Youngblood Corson as the second headliner while including the Helen May Butler Military Brass Band in small font at the bottom of the ad.[162]

This trend continued into the band's tour. Cora became the prima donna, headlining while the rest of the band were cast to playing before and after her shows.[163] Cora continued to add new acts to her performances beyond the euphonium. She gained "friends at every performance by her sweet singing of ballads and the illustrated songs and moving pictures are fully up to the standard."[164] Cora's willingness to include the latest technology in her performances such as the illustrated songs, a performance that combines music with projected images, illustrates her ability to adapt and remain competitive.

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[160] "Ladies' Military Band," *The Birmingham News*, April 28, 1906.
[161] "Helen Butler's Band," *The Age-Herald*, April 29, 1906.
[162] "Next Week at Forest Park," *Arkansas Democrat*, May 27, 1906.
[163] "Amusements," *Daily Arkansas Gazette*, May 31, 1906.
[164] "Amusements," *Daily Arkansas Gazette*, May 31, 1906.

During this adapting of acts, Cora ventured into playwriting and appears to have written her own play entitled "The Red Girl." While it is not clear what this act constituted, the *Iola Daily Register and Evening News* referred to her as "Cora Youngblood Corson, the Red girl, will be at Electric Park the week of June 24th." It seems that Cora had begun incorporating a more direct connection with a Native American heritage into her shows through this play. Due to Cora's newly found fame, an amusement park in Iola, Kansas, Electric Park, paid $1,000 for the women to perform fourteen concerts.[165] This inordinate amount was hoped to be recovered or at least break even as this performance had not been planned beforehand. It worked as the nightly attendance continued to break records with the seats "facing the band shell" being filled to capacity.[166]

In July, the Helen May Butler band performed at Wonderland Park in Wichita, Kansas. This new amusement park in Wichita, Kansas sought to be the "most popular playground in Kansas and Oklahoma."[167] The park hired them to perform two concerts a day for two weeks at no cost to the public. The novelty of an all-ladies band "composed of twenty talented women" became the highlight of the news articles. The news heralded the band as "one of the most unique and at the same time one of the most popular concert organizations in the country" who had previously "played almost exclusively in the east, but this season it has been touring the larger cities of the West with marked success."[168] On their first night, they played to a crowd of over 2,000 attendees.[169]

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[165] "Bring $1,000 Feature," *Iola Daily Register and Evening News*, June 4, 1906; "Sign A Ladies' Band," *The Iola Daily Record,* June 4, 1906.
[166] "Electric Park Features," *Fort Smith Times*, June 10, 1906.
[167] "Fourth of July," *The Wichita Beacon*, July 3, 1906, 6.
[168] "Helen May Butler's Band, *The Wichita Daily Eagle*, July 1, 1906.
[169] "At Wonderland Park," *The Wichita Daily Eagle*, July 4, 1906.

On the Fourth of July, the park went all out decorating in red, white, and blue flags and bunting in profusion. The park reassured the public that their firework display would not disappoint as they had spent over one thousand dollars to include "bombs, rockets, roman candles, and "the most expensive set pieces galore."[170] To match the performances with the fireworks display, extra solos were scheduled to entertain the guests. The overall performance of the band at Wonderland Park garnered praise from the local papers who remarked that the women were "remarkably good artists in their line."[171]

Once they were finished at Wonderland Park, the band performed in Oklahoma City at the Delmar Garden. Created by John Sinopoulo, a Greek immigrant, this amusement park opened in 1902 along the banks of the North Canadian River. Designed in an elaborate Art Nouveau styling, it beautifully blended into the surrounding woods. It offered a zoo filled with exotic animals, an arcade, thrilling rides, restaurants, a floating wedding chapel, horse racing track, ballroom, beer garden, dance hall, and a 3,000-seat theater.[172] Unbeknownst to either Cora or John Sinopoulo, this would not be their only interaction as their paths would clash intensely in just a few years.

But for the time, the papers praised "the Celebrated Soloist" Cora Youngblood Corson as a local girl hailing from Anadarko.[173] Interestingly, it did not mention her supposed Native heritage which continued to be a trend during her performances in Oklahoma for the duration of her career. Perhaps she could not pull off being a Native woman in a state where the truth could easily be ascertained from looking at her appearance and heritage. However, this did not

[170] "Fourth of July at Wonderland Park," *The Wichita Beacon*, July 3, 1906.
[171] "At Wonderland Park," *The Wichita Daily Eagle*, July 4, 1906.
[172] Jeff Chapman, "Delmar Garden Theater," http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/16488.
[173] "Season of 1906," *Daily Oklahoman*, May 6, 1906.

denigrate her popularity within the state. After a week-long engagement, the band moved toward St. Joseph, Missouri for a short time. Reflecting Cora's popularity, the advertisement in the local paper featured a photograph of Cora with the headline "Miss Cora Youngblood Carson, Euphonium Soloist, with Helen May Butler's Ladies' Military Band." They performed at Krug Park for a few days before continuing their tour.[174]

Later in the month, the Helen May Butler band found themselves in Dubuque, Iowa for daily performances at Union Park. The band performed from July 29 to August 5, 1906. While there, Cora's assumed Native heritage found its way into several newspapers in Kansas and Iowa becoming the main attraction of her story. She once again eclipsed Helen May Butler and the other women. In fact, Cora seems to have become the sole interest from the band. One of the local Dubuque newspapers, *The Daily Times*, reported on July 8, 1906, heralded their upcoming visit with speculation and stories of an Indian maiden accompanying the band. They announced the "Helen Mae Butler Band" with the incorrect spelling stating:

> Of Helen Mae Butler's band, which will be here July 29 to August 5, little need be said. They filled an engagement at Union Park a year ago and made such a hit that the management decided to re-engage them at great expense. The organization has been greatly improved, and there are many new artists among the young ladies. First among the soloists is Miss Cora Youngblood Corson, an Indian girl, who was discovered in Oklahoma last year by Miss Butler's manager. She is a fine musician and a singer of note, possessing a sweet contralto voice.
>
> A feature of her work is that she appears in her native "Ogalla" singing native songs, which are illustrated with stereopticon views. For the coming engagement at Union Park, management has gone to considerable expense and have engaged Professor Charles Kirner to reproduce the stereopticon views necessary during Miss Corson's performance. A deep interest has been manifested in the Indian girl and indications are that the crowd will be large at all the concerts, two of which will be given daily, one in the afternoon and the other in the evening.[175]

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[174] "Miss Cora Youngblood Carson," *St. Joseph News-Press/Gazette*, July 13, 1906.
[175] "Secure More Bands," *The Daily Times*, Davenport, Iowa, July 8, 1906.

Cora, as a novelty "Indian Maiden" attracted much of the attention. However, the fact that she was a woman made her even more unique.



Dubuque Telegraph Herald
July 22, 1906

The *Wichita Eagle* reported on July 13th and article titled "Another Indian Musician" that detailed Cora's arrival in the Helen May Butler band with an incorrect last name of Clark.

> Not all the Indian musicians are men, though some of the best men artists in the country are Indians, as was shown by the Chilocco Indian band which appeared at Wonderland a few weeks ago. Now comes Helen May Butler and introduces to the public an Indian player of the gentler sex. She is Miss Cora Youngblood Clark, a young Indian girl who has attracted much attention wherever this organization has appeared. She is a soloist of much more than ordinary ability. She is possessed of a voice that has unusual range and sweetness, and besides she is a talented euphonium player. Miss Clark is a native of Anadarko.[176]

This article firmly places Cora as a Native American of Anadarko, Oklahoma. There is no distinction of whether she is performing an act. Instead, she is fully a Native woman whose skill is extraordinary. She had successfully "passed" as a Native American woman to the public to garner more attention to her act.

The *Dubuque Telegraph-Herald* dedicated several columns over the period of a week toward Cora and her heritage following an Indian maiden trope. She is regarded as "a typical

[176] "Another Indian Musician," *Wichita Eagle*, July 13, 1906.

Indian beauty" who is "enjoying her novel experiences with the band to the fullest extent."[177] The newspaper also provided a new creation story for Cora's career with Helen May Butler that emphasized her native heritage. The tone of the interview suggested a deep affection for Cora from J. Leslie Spahn as he is the source of the interview and "can talk of nothing else but Cora Youngblood Corson, the young Indian girl whom he is featuring with the band."[178]

The article contains many stereotypical tropes in discussing Natives. For instance, Cora is a "young Indian Princess" who had to be won "away from the land of her fathers." It also repeated the idea that she was the daughter of an Indian agent and claimed, "she had never made a public appearance." The article also described Cora as a young "Silverheels" referencing the popular Indian Song of the time which she performed on stage and included an image of Cora in her native garb. They stated that "she is dark of skin, and has a perfectly amazing wealth of raven tresses, which form an enchanting setting for her shapely features, of which her sparkling black eyes are by far the most noticeable."[179] Cora likely surprised many visitors who bought tickets expecting to see such a dark individual on stage rather than a tall, white woman.

The interviewer also asked Spahn why Cora did not "do her Indian costume act in full during the band concerts" to which he replied, "What would I save, then, for her act in vaudeville?" This is an interesting dichotomy as it states Cora is herself an Indian but also that it is an act. It appears that to the reporters Cora was in fact a native woman performing a musical act. Cora's horsemanship also comes into the discussion. Moving forward, her ability to ride would be commonly mentioned in articles perhaps adding to her allure of a Native woman who grew up on the rugged plains of Oklahoma. Spahn claimed that "in the little town in Oklahoma

[177] "Young Indian Girl with Butler's Band," *Dubuque Telegraph-Herald,* July 22, 1906.
[178] "Young Indian Girl with Butler's Band," *Dubuque Telegraph-Herald,* July 22, 1906.
[179] "Young Indian Girl With Butler's Band," *Dubuque Telegraph-Herald,* July 22, 1906.

where he found her, her equestrian feats were the talk of the town, and if there was a piece of horseflesh anywhere in the country that had a bad reputation, she was up and determined to conquer it." In the end, the reporter asked how this "young princess who came out of the west" fared when compared to her eastern associates. His response shone kindly on Cora's association with Oklahoma stating, "while she does not ask anyone to pander to her, or to wait on her, still she has always been so used to pleasant surroundings, that she simply must have a kind word from everyone."[180] This interview securely established Cora's association with the fledgling territory of Oklahoma and her Native image. It spoke to the idea of her representation of a rugged pioneer woman and an elegant Native woman. She became the epitome of Oklahoma's national image in the press even as an ethnic impersonator.

While much of the information in article is incorrect, the attraction of the "young Indian girl" would draw a large crowd. She assumed the role of Silver Heels and presented the citizens of Iowa a remarkable sight; a female Native American from Oklahoma whose performance and appearance would dazzle any crowd. Another Dubuque paper *The Daily Times* also announced Cora's performance as:

> **An Indian a Soloist.** A pleasure feature of the reappearance of the Ladies' band will be Miss Cora Youngblood Corson, an American Indian. She was discovered by the manager of the band in Oklahoma and plays an instrument with the ability of an artist. She performs in her native costume and possesses a rich contralto voice, which she uses in connection with her solo work. That she is worth seeing and hearing is manifested in the fact that she is much sought by vaudeville managers over the country.[181]

[180] "Young Indian Girl With Butler's Band," *Dubuque Telegraph-Herald,* July 22, 1906.
[181] "Famous Band Coming," *The Daily Times,* Dubuque, Iowa, July 1, 1906.

Cora became officially labeled as a Native American. It is unknown whether her manager created this identity, if Cora promoted it, or if the journalist assumed it. But the fact is that as far as the public understood, Cora was a Native American from Oklahoma.

The obsession of White Americans "to consume performances of racial and ethnic differences rendered in musical terms" provided a perfect opportunity for Native musicians.[182] Music became a way to sell the "expectations about Indianness" and Native people "were involved in recording, contesting, affirming, transforming, controlling, and performing those expectations in critical ways."[183] The American public's obsession with Native Americans in the early twentieth century came from the "Myth of the Vanishing Indian" which is defined as a self-fulfilling prophecy that paralleled "Manifest Destiny." As territorial expansion by white settlers and violent conflict pushed Native Americans further west, an influential cultural myth took root that Indigenous peoples would likely disappear through conflict, disease, or assimilation. The "growing sentimentalism for the apparently dominated and disappearing wilderness turned Native peoples and places into commodities."[184] This idea not only sparked the interest in Native performers in the 1900s which Cora had used to her advantage when she performed in Native costume.

Whether by design or connection to her acts, she became even more of a novelty. Not only was she an accomplished female musician, but she was also a Native musician. Cora's attempt at passing illustrated Marcia Dawkins' idea that passing, "introduces a different concept

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[182] John W. Troutman, "Joe Shunatona and the United States Indian Reservation Orchestra," in *Indigenous Pop: Native American Music from Jazz to Hip Hop*, ed. Jeff Berglund, Jan Johnson, and Kimberli Lee, (Tucson, Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 2016), 17.
[183] Phillip Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places*, (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 2004), 188.
[184] Phillips, *Staging Indigeneity*, 12.

of depth in which identities exist simultaneously and contingently."[185] Perhaps the attention to her Native heritage while in Iowa is due to the lack of knowledge of Natives by the public. By the eighteenth century, Iowa had seen multiple tribes enter the territory such as the Sauk and Mesquakie who came from eastern Wisconsin. The Sauk were later forcefully removed from Iowa into Mississippi which sparked the Black Hawk War of 1832. In 1837, some Potawatomi from Illinois and in 1840 some Winnebago from Wisconsin were moved into Iowa by the United States Army. However, by the late 1840's all tribes were removed from Iowa and relocated into Oklahoma and Kansas.[186] Thus, by the time of Cora's arrival, the presence of a Native American was a novel sight. This likely sparked the intense curiosity and obsession of the papers to discuss her false Native heritage. Then, the popularity reinforced the reason to perform as a Native seeing that it continued to keep Cora Youngblood Corson in the news and draw crowds.

Cora's influence with the public helped the Helen May Butler band be a rousing success for Union Park. On July 29, 1906, the papers predicted that between 7,000 and 8,000 people visited the park for the musical entertainment. The crowds adored the ladies band giving them more of an "enthusiastic and vociferous applause" than any other performance that summer. The uniqueness of an all women band showed as the paper stated "It has always been thought that girls could not properly manipulate wind instruments, but the you women appearing at the park this week seem to put this theory entirely to rout."[187] It also continued the praise for Cora's exceptional heritage claiming "Naturally, there was much interest manifested in Miss Corson, the young Indian girl…A curtain has been erected for the pictures which will accompany Miss

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[185] Marcia Alesan Dawkins, *Clearly Invisible: Racial Passing and the Color of Cultural Identity*, (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), 36-37.
[186] "The People, The Place: Native Americans in Iowa," (February-March 1991), https://www.lib.uiowa.edu/exhibits/previous/native/
[187] "Ladies' Band is Given an Ovation," *Dubuque Telegraph-Herald*, July 30, 1906.

Corson's Indian song "Paxinosa" during the remainder of the week." It is also of note that on the same page of the paper as the article just mentioned, there are four other advertisements for Cora.[188]

As the week continued, Cora and the girls continued to bring in praise for their performances. They began to tailor their musical selections to the tastes of the visitors and the park continued to fill every night. Cora continued to thrill the crowds:

> Miss Youngblood was again heard in vocal selections and was just as well received by the audience as usual. The young Indian's voice seems to improve as the week grows older, and for singing in the open air, and with a band accompaniment she does remarkably well, as her songs can be heard clearly for a considerable distance. One of the very best features in connection with her singing is that she is gifted with a remarkably distinct enunciation, which helps her out a great deal.
>
> In connection with the young Indian girl, Cora Youngblood Corson, it might be interesting to remark that she is getting very lonesome for a horseback ride, and if an animal sufficiently spirited can be found, she is going to take a turn at her favorite pastime. The wilder they are the better, and there is very little in the horse line which she cannot handle, at least that is the reputation she has won for herself.[189]

While she was an accomplished rider, the attention drawn to this part of her life likely acted to connect her to a more Native or rugged past. Cora's abilities both on and off the stage added to her mystical story and thrilled the public imagination of her roots in a rugged territory.

During one performance that week, Cora faced an unfortunate incident amid singing her favorite tune "Back Among the Clover and the Bees." When it is her time to sing, all the lights were turned off except for a single one over her music. During the summer, an abundance of bugs flocked to any faint illumination. When Cora opened her mouth "in the delivery of a round, full note, one of the bugs flew in and she swallowed

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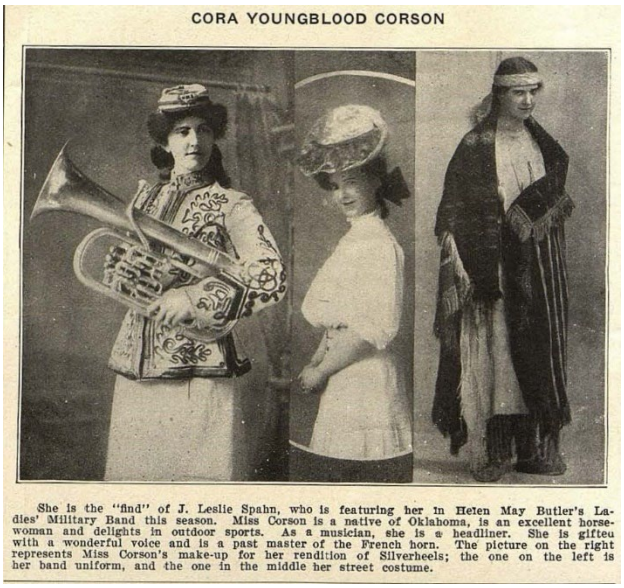
[188] "Ladies' Band is Given an Ovation," *Dubuque Telegraph-Herald*, July 30, 1906.
[189] "Banner Night at Union Park," *Dubuque Telegraph-Herald*, August 2, 1906.

it." She quickly began to cough incessantly to the point of choking. After this, Cora performed a different song title "By the Old Mill Stream" due to being "so scared every time she starts to sing, that she is kept almost too busy watching the bugs to remember much about the music."[190] Fortunately, Union Park visitors continued to adore her every performance after this embarrassing moment.

Once they finished their engagement at Union Park on August 11, the band moved to White City in Denver, Colorado to finish up their summer season.[191] After the Helen May Butler band wrapped up their summer tours, Cora returned to the vaudeville stage. Unlike the local Kansas and Iowa newspapers, *The Billboard*, the magazine that reported on her vaudeville work, did not claim Cora was Native American. Instead, one article claims, "Miss Corson is a native of Oklahoma." The article also shows three photos of Cora, one in "her band uniform," one in "her street costume," and one in her "make-up for her rendition of Silverheels."[192] The photo of her in Native American garb is described as "make-up" which contrasts the Dubuque *Daily Times* that claimed that "she appears in her native 'Ogalla'" for her performance.[193] This made-up term highlights that newspapers outside of Oklahoma simply reached for whatever Indian connection they could come up with. Since Cora did


CORA YOUNGBLOOD CORSON

She is the "find" of J. Leslie Spahn, who is featuring her in Helen May Butler's Ladies' Military Band this season. Miss Corson is a native of Oklahoma, is an excellent horsewoman and delights in outdoor sports. As a musician, she is a headliner. She is gifted with a wonderful voice and is a past master of the French horn. The picture on the right represents Miss Corson's make-up for her rendition of Silverheels; the one on the left is her band uniform, and the one in the middle her street costume.

[190] "Good One on the Indian Girl," *Dubuque Telegraph-Herald*, August 3, 1906.
[191] "Performer Dates," *The Billboard*, August 11, 1906, 20.
[192] "Cora Youngblood Corson," *The Billboard*, August 4, 1906, 8.
[193] "Secure More Bands," *The Daily Times*, July 8, 1906.

not have an actual heritage, she could not provide actual information to the press. This is an interesting note in that publications written by vaudeville professionals do not consider her as a Native American. Instead, she is promoted as an act that she dressed up for with no connection to Oklahoma.

The professionals see her as just a performer using the stereotyped acts of the times. J. Leslie Spahn sought to build upon this popularity of a Native American act as he quickly secured a new act for Cora also entitled "The Red Girl" written by Bob Watt, of Philadelphia. The act was "an Indian melodrama condense to twenty minutes." "The Red Girl" came replete with novel situations and exciting climaxes through three different scenes.[194]

"The Red Girl" became a success as the feature along the circuit. Cora performed in the act but also continued her vocal and euphonium solos.[195] *The Billboard* magazine took notice claiming that "vaudeville needs more sketches like The Red Girl, in which J. Leslie Spahn is presenting Cora Youngblood Corson…The western papers are lending it their hearty support."[196] Its continued success brought even more girls to the act, bringing the number to ten by the end of November, 1906.[197] Even with these successes, Cora did not headline during the vaudeville season. Her announcements were listed as simply "the noted soprano and euphonium player" while The Red Girl got billed as "one of the finest seen on any of the vaudeville stages."[198] Cora needed another change to stay on top.

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[194] "Vaudeville," *The Billboard*, September 8, 1906, 28.
[195] "The chief feature…," *The Des Moines Register*, October 7, 1906; "Playhouses and Players," *The Des Moines Register*, October 9, 1906.
[196] "Vaudeville," *The Billboard*, November 3, 1906, 11.
[197] "Vaudeville," *The Billboard*, November 24, 1906, 46.
[198] "New Elite Theater Ready to Open," *The Rock Island Argus,* December 22, 1906; "Elite's Seats Have Arrived," *The Rock Island Argus,* December 28, 1906.

In the next few months Cora began to evolve her performance through the addition of something big. To accomplish this, she added the mammoth BB-flat tuba to her repertoire, an instrument larger than most considered for women. The addition of the tuba, as well as her performance on the euphonium, are even more remarkable when compared to some of the prevailing thoughts of the time. Reviewers of the time typically saw strength, energy, and dignity as masculine virtues and were surprised to see a woman display such characteristics.[199] For instance, a reviewer named W.J. Henderson wrote in the *New York Sun* "Does anyone wish to see a woman playing the bass drum or an E flat tuba…?"[200] Another example comes from a New York conductor who commented in an interview that "women cannot possibly play brass instruments and look pretty, and why should they spoil their look?"[201] Cora's career seems to overcome these stereotypes and modes of thinking.

By March of 1907, her breaking of gender norms seems to have made her work a novelty once again. The *Logansport Journal* urged its readers to see Cora's show at the local Dowling theater. They promised that she "is beyond doubt the most unique and out of the ordinary musical artist on the stage today…Although only 20 years old she has accomplished more in the musical world that most of the star male musicians at 30 years of age." Her use of the BB-flat tuba became a fascinating focal point as she not only used it at a solo instrument but its reported weight of forty-eight pounds played into the novelty of a woman tuba soloist.[202]

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[199] Beth Abelson Maclead, "Whence Comes the Lady Timpanist? Gender and Instrumental Musicians in America, 1853-1990," *Journal of Social History*, 27 (Winter 1993): 294.
[200] W. J. Henderson, "Music and Musicians," *New York Sun,* November 16, 1935, 9.
[201] *Musical Standard*, April 2, 1904, cited in Lucy Green, *Music, Gender, Education*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997): 67.
[202] "Miss Cora Youngblood Corson," *Logansport Journal*, March 24, 1907.

Following this change in her vaudeville acts came an even larger shift in her career. Instead of returning to the Helen May Butler band after her vaudeville season ended, Cora formed her own ladies military band. Her split from Helen May Butler is a surprise given her reported five-year contract. However, it seems that her contract tied her to J. Leslie Spahn as he left Butler's band to become Cora's manager. The Butler family's oral history believes that Cora and Spahn likely had a relationship, as he divorced Helen May Butler after leaving with Cora.



As Charles W. Nuckolls argued, Cora seems to be following the idea of independence and competitiveness that defined the Oklahoma spirit. She even brought in many ladies from Oklahoma to perform alongside her. In May of 1907, Cora began contacting her friends from Anadarko to join her new U.S. Ladies Military Band. Grace Acton, who had been a part of Cora's Anadarko Ladies Cornet Band and played the trombone, left her job at a phone company in Chickasha, Oklahoma to join Cora in Cincinnati. Once she joined, the band moved to perform at the Jamestown Exposition.[203]

[203] "Miss Grace Acton," *The Chickasha Daily Express*, May 10, 1907.

By June, the U.S. Ladies Military Band had grown to include 35 women and found themselves at the White City amusement park in Louisville, Kentucky.[204]

The paper advertised the arrival of "Cora Youngblood Corson's band of thirty-five women. It is one of the most celebrated musical organizations in the country."[205] The band quickly become "one of the biggest musical attractions of the season" and performed twice daily free to the public for a week.[206] Their popularity paired with better weather for the White City management to re-engage the women for another week of performances. They performed "popular selections, vocal solos and instrumental numbers." Cora's heritage once again became part of the novelty as the paper reported "Miss Carson is a woman of unique personality, being a full-blooded Indian girl of pronounced beauty, marked talent as a director, unusual power as a singer, and the mistress of a wide range of musical instruments."[207] The success of Cora's band and the other performers brought nearly 20,000 visitors to the park on June 16, 1907.[208] Once their second week of performances were up, the band moved on to Cincinnati, Ohio.

It is of note that these articles announce that Helen May Butler is once again the director of the band claiming that she had "been directing the United States Ladies' Military Band for three seasons…" however, Butler was not a part of this organization. Cora now became described as a "full-blood Cherokee girl" who "until two years ago was never away from her home on an Oklahoma reservation, where her father holds a position as agent for Uncle Sam." The paper also claimed that Cora was the only woman

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[204] "White City," *Kentucky Irish American,* June 8, 1907.
[205] "Cora Youngblood Corson's Women's Band White City's Star Attraction," *The Courier-Journal*, June 9, 1907.
[206] "Revolutionary Changes Noted at the White City," *The Courier-Journal*, June 12, 1907.
[207] "Cora Youngblood Carson's Women's Band at White City This Week Again, *The Courier-Journal*, June 16, 1907.
[208] "Big Crowds," *The Courier-Journal*, June 17, 1907.

soloist who sings and plays two instruments.[209] These false statements show an obvious story for public interest in Cora's Indian persona. Her supposed Native heritage and home on an Oklahoma reservation meant that the American public identified her as an example of a Native and Oklahoman.

In August, the U.S. Ladies Military Band traveled to Scranton, Pennsylvania to perform at Luna Park for a week's engagement. The band had been secured to play in Scranton "at a tremendous expense and at the cancellation of other bookings" due to them being "premier ladies' band in the world." Cora's ability to play the tuba was highlighted in the paper columns as "the largest solo instrument in the world."[210] Once again, the band is listed as headed by Cora rather than Helen May Butler and a woman named Florence B. Mogle is listed as the director for the band during their time in Scranton.[211]

This time, the novelty of the band being composed of women became the large attraction in the newspapers. J. Leslie Spahn claimed to have "insisted that all applicants must be of great personal beauty as well as thorough musicians" which would create "the most captivating aggregation of young women traveling the country today."[212] This focus on their looks is reflected in the account of the band. They are portrayed as "thorough musicians", but their appearance takes most of the description. "The girls wear a neat uniform of dark red skirts, white shirtwaists, red capes, and a military cap to match." Cora is also described regarding her appearance in the newspaper as "a young Indian girl" who "not only possesses a rich soprano voice, but she also plays with skill the euphonium, and a double bass tuba, said to be the largest solo instrument in the

[209] "New Band at Reichrath's," *The Commercial Tribune*, July 7, 1907.
[210] "Amusements," *The Scranton Republican*, August 3, 1907.
[211] "Amusements," *The Scranton Republican*, August 5, 1907.
[212] "Amusements," *The Scranton Republican,* August 4, 1907.

world."[213] Despite incorrectly stating Cora as a soprano instead of contralto, this article highlighted the different avenues in which she pushed to interest the public.

The *Scranton Republican* makes several remarks on Cora's stature and comparison to men of her skill. Descriptions such as "the spectacle of a slim, trim built girl playing a monster double bass tuba was a sight…" explained the novelty of her performance. She is also compared to men in the articles stating that she "plays the big tuba, which few men have conquered."[214] They do, however, credit Cora with her accomplishments stating "difficult as this instrument is for a deep lunged man to play, Miss Corson succeeded in securing a tone that awakened tremendous enthusiasm in both audiences."[215] With her evolution of acts, the papers transitioned from discussion of her euphonium solos to her tuba playing calling it "the most remarkable feature of her work."[216]

The band wrapped up their performances in Pennsylvania and headed for Michigan. The U.S. Ladies' Military Band performed at Wolff's Park in Detroit during the week of August 11 to 17.[217] From there, they continued onward to Port Huron where they played the final week of August.[218] In Michigan, at the end of the season for her concert band, Cora disbanded the U.S. Ladies' Military Band. In its place, she kept six girls to form Cora Youngblood Corson and her Sextette. Though short-lived, her first foray into creating a new band all her own showed Cora's spirit and drive to succeed against the many odds against her in the field.

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[213] "Ladies' Band Scores a Hit a Luna Park," *The Scranton Republican*, Scranton, Pennsylvania, August 5, 1907, 6.
[214] "Ladies Band at Luna Park," *The Scranton Truth*, August 5, 1907.
[215] "Ladies Band Scores a Hit at Luna Park," *The Scranton Republican*, August 5, 1907.
[216] "Amusements," *The Scranton Republican*, August 6, 1907.
[217] "Excellent Music," *Detroit Free Press*, August 16, 1907.
[218] "United States Ladies Military Band," *The Daily Herald*, August 23, 1907.

From 1905 to 1907, Cora Youngblood's career pushed her onto the national stage. Cora became a national star as a Native American, musical prodigy from the plains of Oklahoma. She outshined and outperformed all others. Her growth and career trajectory formed through her presentation of a Native American performance, musicianship, and breaking of gender norms. By creating a Native representation, she became a "compromise identity" as Nuckolls argued through her use of both settler and Native identities as well as in her professional career which served as a representation of "the values that are most salient to the formation of cultural identity."[219]

CHAPTER THREE: Vaudeville

[219] Nuckolls, 106.

During the early years of her fame, from 1905 to 1907, Cora Youngblood became a national star as a Native American, musical prodigy from the plains of Oklahoma. Her growth and career trajectory formed through her performance of a Native American representation, which reflected in the public opinion of Oklahoma's national image. At the height of her career, from 1907-1916, Cora evolved her Native image into an Oklahoma-centered persona. She made the adjustment to draw crowds and capitalize on popular trends. However, by presenting herself as a symbol of Oklahoma, namely proud, daring Native and settler, Cora set the stage for a popular misconception of Oklahomans in the minds of some audiences.

In this period, Cora's motives are interesting in that she chooses to point out her rugged and wild past in a profession that generally looked for elegance and refinement for women. On top of this, as Joanna Ross Hersey points out, "little is known about women's early experiences in the American musical labor market." Their roles and need to change reflect their struggles "in an economy where jobs were scarce, and pay was low."[220] Most people "associated women on stage with the chorus line and burlesque shows, and this caused women instrumentalists to market themselves in specific ways." Women entertainers would constantly emphasize their own high class and professionalism with attention paid to elaborate costume and presentation. This meant that women, like Cora who played an instrument typically associated with men "attempted to come as close to the Victorian ideal as they could while playing a band instrument."[221] Alongside this drive to project an ideal, Cora used her assumed Native persona to find her place on the stage.

[220] Joanna Ross Hersey, "An Attraction of Unusual Merit," in Jill Sullivan's *Women's Bands in America,* 74
[221] Joanna Hersey, 75.

Vaudeville provided a form of popular entertainment in America by a melting pot of entertainers of diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds. It offered immigrants and minorities the opportunity to forge a new life on the stage. Vaudeville represented the changing societal norms in American culture. These foreign themes and cultural representation exposed White audiences to ethnic groups they had not encountered or held typically harsh racist views against. This entertainment increased positive exposure of minorities such as Native Americans. The audiences began to accept outsiders in new ways instead of fostering bigotry and racism. Vaudeville accomplished this by redefining the American middle class that had expanded with the industrial revolution. New technology and income allowed the working-class opportunities for leisure they had not enjoyed in the past. Family-friendly entertainment meant that families could bring their children into the theaters to experience new and exotic performances without the crude forms of burlesque or minstrel shows.

Cora's growing popularity also plays into the growing consumer culture of the early 1900's. As a woman she also faced many challenges in finding her own way through a career controlled and operated by men. As in *Real Native Genius: How and Ex-Slave and a White Mormon Became Famous Indians* by Angela Hudson, the idea of racial cross-dressing helped performers find a place where they were no longer under the yoke of cultural limitations. Instead of just being a woman performer, by presenting herself as a Native, Cora commanded her own image, and it helped her navigate the business field and control how she would be perceived.

It was during her time in Vaudeville that she made the largest impact upon popular culture. In her book *"Vaudeville Indians" on Global Circuits: 1880s to 1930s*, Christine Bold argues that despite many authors failures to discuss the impact of Native Americans in vaudeville, it served as a very important venue for Natives to negotiate "stereotype and agency

by ethnic racialized groups."[222] As such, Cora and other vaudeville Indians helped to erase the old stereotypes in the public opinion and create the foundation that other performers like Will Rogers built upon. However, Cora and other ethnic impersonators also created a public misconception of Native representation. The audiences saw white performers claiming Native personas and incorrectly created associations such as Cora's link of an Oklahoman and Native.

Phillip Deloria argued that the early Native performers "led the way for future generations of Indian performers." They contested expectations and successfully worked to set them differently. It created a unique moment wherein these performers would reinforce racial stereotypes but also question them through musical performance. For instance, Natives such as Tsianina Redfeather and Princess Watawaso "crystalized a sense of surprise among white audiences" with their performance.[223] Incidentally, ethnic performers such as Cora Youngblood Corson also created this phenomenon since the audiences believed their false representations. If "Indian music was nothing more than savage screeching and howling, mindless poundings of drums and rattles, then what were Indian mezzo-sopranos and baritones doing on the concert stage, singing Native melodies – much less to opera! – to elegant and stylishly modern piano accompaniment?"[224] These Native performers, both real and imagined, played with White expectations. For Cora, it offered an avenue for fame and popularity.

Certainly, "playing Indian" was a clever marketing tool. It's possible that others conflated the fact that Cora's family lived in Anadarko, Oklahoma Territory, on land that was originally apportioned as part of Kiowa, Comanche, and Apache lands, and paired it with the last name of Youngblood to form an assumption that she was Native American herself. Others saw that Cora

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[222] Christine Bold, *"Vaudeville Indians" on Global Circuits: 1880s to 1930s*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022), 3.
[223] Phillip Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places*, (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 2004), 211-212.
[224] Deloria, *Indian in Unexpected Places*, 212.

also lived and worked among many Native Americans in her early years in Oklahoma, and her first husband, Charles Corson, was a member of the Piegan Nation of Montana. Perhaps her manager, J. Leslie Spahn, saw this exact scenario and chose to promote her as a Native performer. When others made the false connection that she was of Native ancestry, she never publicly corrected the myth which opens the possibility that she believed that she had Native ancestry. Another piece of evidence of this resides with her sister Eula. In October 1913, after Eula had left Cora's band, she was invited to perform at the third annual convention of the "Society of American Indians." She would join hundreds of other "representative Indians of America," but she declined the invitation due to "scheduling conflicts." The paper announced that Eula was "of Cherokee descent."[225] Cora may have believed, in some part, that she had Native heritage, but it certainly was not enough for her to fully identify as a Native woman off the vaudeville stage.

The way in which indigenous people are depicted by the public perception is crucial in discussing the idea of settler colonialism. Sameness is the means which reduces the individuals into a simple amalgamation. This process is generally perceived as a negative, but in the context of Cora's time, it could be a positive thing. The influence of public opinion cannot be understated especially when discussing how Native people are imagined. Therefore, the positive representation presented by Cora on the international stage extended beyond herself and offers a reflection of the whole. She provides a positive and extravagant image of Native Americans in a time where people are looking at Natives for a "national distinctiveness and proof of nationality" amongst a social belief that immigration threatened the idea of being an "American."[226]

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[225] "Honors for Mrs. Condon," *Tulsa Daily World*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, October 9, 1913, 7.
[226] Alan Trachtenberg, *Shades of Hiawatha: Staging Indians, Making Americans, 1880-1930*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004), xxii.

Some historians, such as Clyde Ellis, point out that the idea of "noble savages" of the Wild West shows versus modern Indians is a flawed perspective. He argues that the gap did not really exist and would instead suggest that Native communities across the country demonstrated a remarkable ability to negotiate the changing contours of Native identity by engaging the forces of modernity across a wide variety of social, cultural, political, economic, and religious institutions. I argue that the important piece of Cora's popularity is not her Native persona or the usefulness to the Native community, but rather the public perception of the white audience. Ellis and other Native historians focus, rightfully so, on Native agency as indigenous performers went through great lengths to present their acts and performances to a white audience. However, ethnic impersonators like Cora presented a multi-faceted performance. She does not stick to one act. She is not *just* a Native performer singing Indian songs. She is a woman of many talents. One performance may have 7 different acts that range from Indian songs to opera. From instrumentals to singing. It is the amalgamation of different representations that gives her a mass appeal and helps to establish her popularity and the popularity of other Native performers. The thoughts and assumptions of the white audience are the pieces that continue by word of mouth and create a skewed perspective of Natives.

The American public's obsession with Native Americans in the early twentieth century came from the "Myth of the Vanishing Indian" which is defined as a self-fulfilling prophecy that paralleled "Manifest Destiny." As territorial expansion by white settlers and violent conflict pushed Native Americans further west, an influential cultural myth took root that Indigenous peoples would likely disappear through conflict, disease, or assimilation. The "growing sentimentalism for the apparently dominated and disappearing wilderness turned Native peoples and places into commodities."[3] This idea sparked an interest in Native performers from the

White audience in the 1900s. According to Katrina Phillips in *Staging Indigeneity*, this correlation to a Native past created a "sense of authenticity" which pushed White Americans to recreate what they, or their audience, considered to be real. The performers would "stage" performances as expressions of "honoring" the Indian past, while simultaneously reframing it in ways that justified their exploitation of it. They zeroed in on what White America saw as the spectacle of Indigenous history and highlighted exaggerated proportions of perceived "Indianness."[227] Cora used this to her advantage when she performed in Native costume as an ethnic impersonator.

As such, Cora did participate in cultural appropriation because she is not participating in the cultural, spiritual meanings of Native music. However, she is an actor during the rise of Native Americans entering the world of vaudeville and American popular culture. As mentioned in the introduction of *Indigenous Pop: Native American Music from Jazz to Hip Hop*, musical traditions "are responsive, evolving, and in dialogue with shifting sociopolitical contexts."[228] Thus, Cora must also be placed within these contexts to understand her act. Cora's husband Charles even took the opportunity to earn a living with the rising popularity of Native culture and began to travel with Dennison Wheelock's Indian Band and later joined "The Flaming Arrow" vaudeville show. Through this avenue of popular culture, Native Americans, and those like Cora who performed Native songs, were subverting the Office of Indian Affairs that had policies banning Native dance and song. Using the ideas of John Troutman, "Indian music" had become synonymous with "savagery" and the controlling Native ability to

[227] Katrina Phillips, *Staging Indigeneity*, (University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 10-11.
[228] *Indigenous Pop: Native American Music from Jazz to Hip Hop*, (University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 4.

perform "was considered a critical tool in the government's agenda."[229] Therefore, a more positive light on Native American performers helps to change the public perception of Natives as a whole.

The non-Indian market for Indian-themed music allowed a new opportunity for Native entertainers in the early twentieth century. This need by the public for "authentic 'Indianness' in the entertainment industry complicated the emphasis on segregation and collided with the earlier described government efforts to destroy Native music traditions on reservations and withing boarding schools."[230] Therefore, in an ironic twist, it can be argued that Cora's popularity as a Native American performer helped to erase the old stereotypes in popular culture and helped build the foundation that other native performers continued. She presented a Native American that could not only perform on a musical stage but also outperform white musicians. John Troutman argued that the appeal of this presentation of Indianness came from "apparent cultural authenticity in an unseemly, inauthentic, vapid modern world – a world in which popular fantasies of Indianness serve as an antidote to the fabrication and immediacy of modernity."[231]

Cora Youngblood and her Sextette premiered at the Bijou Theatre in Battle Creek, Michigan on September 23, 1907. Her new act consisted of three attire changes with different scenes. Three of the girls played cornets and the other three trombones while closing with six pianos. Cora continued to play the euphonium and BB-flat tuba.[232] However, the girls added more instruments into the repertoire as they began to tour. The band remained under the

[229] John W. Troutman, "Joe Shunatona and the United States Indian Reservation Orchestra," *Indigenous Pop*, 17.
[230] Troutman, *Indian Blues*, 18-19.
[231] Troutman, *Indian Blues,* 154
[232] "Cora Youngblood Corson," *The Billboard*, September 29, 1907, 6.

management of J. Leslie Spahn and began to travel towards the east.[233] In this new group, Cora's use of Native American themes became a star attraction. The *Wisconsin State Journal* described their act at the Majestic Theater. "The opening chorus with the seven girls in Indian attire is very pretty, the song, war dance, and buckskin proving a distinct novelty. The horn solos and the instrumental numbers of the sextette win."[234]

By December, the girls began their performances in the East at Wheeling, West Virginia before moving up to Wilmington, Delaware.[235] They began a weeklong performance at the



Garrick Theater on January 6, 1908. The newspapers of Wilmington announced that Cora Youngblood Corson and her six Indian maids were due from the Far West.[236] Strangely, they also added a new claim for Cora as the former "leader of the famous Indian Reservation Band."[237] No record can be found of Cora ever being with an Indian band suggesting this is

[233] "Cora Youngblood Carson," *Variety*, October 26, 1907, 6.
[234] "Good Bill at Majestic," *Wisconsin State Journal,* October 15, 1907.
[235] "A bill of large proportions…," *The Morning News,* January 6, 1908.
[236] "The many patrons…," *The Morning News,* January 3, 1908.
[237] "Cora Youngblood Corson," *The Evening Journal*, January 6, 1908.

another press exaggeration or misunderstanding her time with the Anadarko Cornet Band. However, inaccurate some of their statements, the press did describe them as "girls from the Golden West," a title they later adopted for their performances.[238]

As Cora's popularity in vaudeville began to grow, her larger-than-life persona fascinated the readers of *The Billboard* magazine. A recurring article titled "Observations of the Stroller on



Theatrical Life and Environment" told interesting and humorous stories of vaudeville performers. Cora first appeared in the article on July 11, 1908, and filled four of the seven stories. These stories reflect a negative public image of the Natives and confirm the idea that Cora used her observational knowledge of Native Americans from her upbringing in Anadarko to create a Native performance. It also shows the difference between the professional vaudeville perception of Cora as an act and the public which only see her as a Native woman. Highlighting this, one of the stories details how she created The Red Girl and acquired her buckskin dress.

> Cora Youngblood Corson, who is now playing vaudeville time in The Red Girl, has a fond of reminiscences anent the manner and customs of the Indians of

[238] "Plays Last Night," *The Morning News*, January 7, 1908.

> Oklahoma, her native State…She knows the characteristics of the race she has studied at close range. They are shiftless, lazy and improvident. It is most fortunate that the Government will not allow them to dispose of their lands.
>
> It was this intimate knowledge of the red men's and the red women's habits and peculiarities that first gave Miss Corson, who is a musician of considerable note and versatility, the idea for her sketch, which she calls The Red Girl. While she was framing up the act and considering the matter of costume, she recalled having seen on her last visit to Oklahoma an Indian squaw with a dress and shawl that she felt would, in themselves, as novelties, be sufficient to make the act a success. So, as soon as she could arrange her plans, she went back to Oklahoma, and, going to the tepee of an Indian chief she asked where the squaw she was seeking could be found. The old chief replied that she had been "trun down," which is the Indian way of expressing abandonment by her husband. When an Indian becomes tired of his wife, or she of him, they do not seek the divorce court, but agree upon separation, and, starting back-to-back, they each walk so many paces in opposite directions; and the one that gets back first is entitled to all the property and personal possessions that they had held in common. So, Miss Corson sought out the abandoned squaw and bought the costume she wanted.[239]

These stories showcase the negative perception of Natives and Oklahoma in the public image. *Billboard*'s readers saw an image of squalor for Native Americans and Oklahoma while the public saw the elegance and exoticism of Cora's heritage on the stage. However, the tone of the article also shows the key point of Cora's actual identity. She does not identify as a Native, instead she makes a clear delineation between herself and the "Native squaw." The negative racial discussion also furthers the separation between Cora and the Natives the article discusses.

By July 12, 1908, the women returned to Louisville, Kentucky at the White City amusement park where Cora had performed with her U.S. Ladies Military Band the year prior.[240] The next month, Cora and her sextette found themselves in Indianapolis, Indiana performing at Wonderland. Here, *The Indianapolis Star* revealed the complicated issue of representation with local papers. Cora is claimed to be "an Indiana girl of beauty and intelligence." This appears to

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[239] "Observations of the Stroller on Theatrical Life and Environment," *The Billboard*, Vol. XX, No. 28, July 11, 1908.
[240] "Large Crowds," *The Courier-Journal*, Louisville, Kentucky, July 12, 1908.

be a confused reporter attempting to report her as an Indian woman as many papers had done in the past. However, the article does give one of the best descriptions of their vaudeville performance.

> Beautiful costumes, gorgeous scenery, and a miscellaneous glory of light and color combine to make the Cora Youngblood Corson Sextet one of the most magnificently staged acts in vaudeville…The act is divided into four scenes, each beautiful in itself, but arranged so that they lead up to a climax of beauty. The first scene presents an Indian camp, and the girls, dress in Indian costume, sing a characteristic song, and gracefully perform a characteristic dance. The next scene is a soldiers' camp. The girls are arrayed as soldiers and play military music on brass instruments. This scene merges into the third, which presents a battlefield. The music is again instrumental, the girls giving a musical picture of the battle. The fourth scene, one of the most gorgeous ever staged, shows the girls as animated flowers. The scene is opened by Miss Corson with a tuba solo "Asleep in the Deep." In this scene the girls were forced last night to respond repeatedly to encores.[241]

The Cora Youngblood Corson Sextette now became a novelty for the extravagance of their vaudeville performances. The performance draws upon multiple popular trends of the time such as the themes of Indian maidens and military scenes. The popularity of composer and director John Philip Sousa at this time saw brass bands performing more military-styled marches. Likewise, the growth of America's fascination with Natives spawning from the ideas of the vanishing race meant that Cora's act had something for all viewers. Finally, the extravagance of her performances, such as performing as animated flowers, meant that her show could draw a crowd eager to be entertained with a constantly changing show.

In October, Cora once again became a topic of discussion in *The Billboard* magazine. From the vaudeville perspective, she is claimed to be "an Indian girl, hailing from Anadarko, Okla." She had transcended from just a performer in makeup into a Native American in the eyes

[241] "Music, Drama, Parks," *The Indianapolis Star*, Indianapolis, Indiana, August 18, 1908.

of vaudeville. The article also announced that she remained "the best lady euphonium soloist in America." It also discussed her current show, the Act Beautiful, was defined as a "delightful musical comedy in miniature."[242] In the eyes of the national public and the top vaudeville magazine, Cora was Native American which made her accomplishments a representative example for Natives across the board.

During this early period of her sextet in vaudeville, the press generally did not focus on any supposed Native heritage. Instead, while playing at the Mantauk Theatre in Passaic, New Jersey, the *Passiac Daily Herald* described Cora as "a handsome young woman of extraordinary height and a pure Grecian profile. She appears in the first number dressed as an Indian and sings one of the latest Indian songs." This is the first time a paper commented on the complexion of her skin. She appeared to them not as a Native American but rather a white woman wearing native costumes. The paper concludes on the magnificence of the act's costumes and talent making them "one of the neatest acts in vaudeville."[243] Upon the completion of the contract, the paper announced the group had "more than fulfilled expectations."[244] After their performance in New Jersey, the sextet traveled to New York City where they sailed to Havana, Cuba for a six-week engagement.[245]

After the completion of their first performance outside of the continental United States, the act returned to New York and began touring immediately. Back in New Jersey, the Cora Youngblood Corson Sextet, "from Oklahoma City, Oklahoma," performed selections from "Lucia" and Cora played the "largest instrument in the world, the Double Bass Tuba."[246] Over

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[242] "Cora Youngblood Corson," *The Billboard,* October 17, 1908, 41.
[243] "Montauk Theatre, Passaic," *Passaic Daily Herald,* Passaic, New Jersey, March 19, 1909.
[244] "Montauk Theatre, Passaic," *Passaic Daily Herald,* Passaic, New Jersey, March 19, 1909
[245] "Word has been received," *The Daily Democrat*, Anadarko, Oklahoma, March 11, 1909.
[246] "Big Bill at the Bay," *The Daily Record*, Long Branch, New Jersey, July 9, 1909.

the next few months, The Cora Youngblood Corson Sextet performed in New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, and Connecticut without any remarkable promotion. They were given equal weight to the other acts through much of the advertisements. However, a couple exceptions found their way into the papers.

In Fall River, Massachusetts, the local paper announced the arrival of "the Cora Youngblood Corson Sextette, 'The Girls from the Golden West,' six Oklahoma misses, headed by the daughter of Chief Youngblood of the Ogallallas…"[247] This is one of the earliest instances in her career with the sextet that calls direct attention to a specific Native heritage and the first to suggest she is the daughter of a chief. The reference to "Ogallallas" is reminiscent of 1906 *Daily Times* article from Davenport, Iowa that said Cora appeared "in her native Ogalla."[248] However, Chief Youngblood and the Ogallallas tribe did not exist. Perhaps the reference was to the Oglala Sioux, or it may have been that eastern papers misread the previous articles and expanded upon them. Either way, it is a strange claim that highlights the confusion around Cora's actual identity as well as the successfulness of her public-facing attempts at creating a Native persona.

In Hartford, Connecticut, the *Hartford Courant* announced the uniqueness of Cora's act stating, "one comes out into the limelight and plays on a bass horn so long that there is not much of the girl visible as she plays it."[249] Cora's ability to solo large brass instruments as a woman had taken on a new novelty. Men had attempted to explain how she could be just as good, if not better than other male tuba players. In October 1909, *Variety* published an article that claimed, "the scientific division of Harvard College" had investigated and pronounced Cora's lungs to be "abnormal" and informed her that she would need to develop the upper portion of her body to

[247] "Next Week at the Savoy," *The Fall River Herald*, November 27, 1909.
[248] "Secure More Bands," *The Daily Times*, Davenport, Iowa, July 8, 1906
[249] "The Scenic," *Hartford Courant*, Hartford, Connecticut, December 14, 1909.

accommodate the abnormally large lungs. They blamed her "condition" on her continual playing of the euphonium. They concluded that "constant blowing has brought Cora and the lungs to a point where the physicians say that though weighing only 145 pounds, she has a development in her breathing apparatus equal to that of any man."[250] A later 1910 article in the *Kalamazoo Gazette* declared that Cora continued to play daily "in spite of the…brilliant medical men."[251]

This interest in her playing spawned a beneficial sponsorship. By this time in her career, the C.G. Conn company had taken an interest in her prowess and novelty as a woman that promoted brass instruments, especially the euphonium and tuba. Conn would use Cora as a walking advertisement by furnishing the horns for her band and at time gifting her elaborate instruments. By December 1909, the C.G. Conn company had made a "jeweled euphonium set with 25 diamonds, 176 rubies and emeralds" for Cora.[252] Cora soon became the most prominent woman featured in Conn advertisements for the next twenty years. Cora also had the C.G. Conn company create the largest recording bell in the world for her sousaphone, which she incorporated into her routine alongside her double Bb tuba. The 1910 *Kalamazoo Gazette* article also announced that the Conn Co. had decided to place the large



[250] "Too Much Lung Expansion," *Variety*, October 2, 1909, 9.
[251] "Cora Youngblood Corson," *Kalamazoo Gazette*, Kalamazoo, Michigan, June 1, 1910.
[252] "$10,000 Beauty Instrument," Postcard, In Author's Collection.

bell instruments into their regular line of products and call them "Corsonphones."[253] However, this never came to fruition.

On top of her work with the C.G. Conn company, Cora and her sextet were featured on the cover of the sheet music for "Cowboy, Nowboy" by Lewis & Bennet. Published in 1909, the theme and cover of a cowboy paired nicely with the Girls from the Golden West. The cover featured the words "Sung with Great Success by Cora Youngblood Corson Sextette" with an image of the girls in military costumes.[254] This added to her repertoire of unique music. She had continued to play composer John N. Klohr's "Corsonian Polka." Perhaps it was the fact that a favorite of Helen May Butler's band was Klohr's "The Billboard March" that connected Klohr and Cora.[255] Klohr would continue to write music for Cora's band and later wrote "The Corson Crouch" for Cora.

In 1910, the Sextette continued their tour in the East before heading West to Chicago. The Girls from the Golden West drew crowds with Cora's jeweled euphonium. *Billboard* announced, "this act is possessed of the largest and most valuable euphonium in the world…They are said to have created a riot in the East."[256] As the month ended, so too did the vaudeville season for Cora and her band. During this break, the girls returned to Oklahoma to spend the summer with their families' enjoying picnics and trips to the city without the stress of performing.[257]

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[253] "Cora Youngblood Corson," *Kalamazoo Gazette*, Kalamazoo, Michigan, June 1, 1910.
[254] Lewis & Bennett, "Cowboy, Nowboy," Joseph W. Stern & Company, 1909.
[255] Brian Meyer, "Helen May Butler and Her Ladies' Military Band," 24.
[256] "Chicago Variety Bills," *The Billboard*, May 7, 1910, 9.
[257] "Miss Grace Acton…," *The Anadarko Tribune,* Anadarko, Oklahoma, July 21, 1910; "Family Reunion and Picnic," *The Anadarko Tribune,* Anadarko, Oklahoma, September 1, 1910.

In October, the Cora Youngblood Corson Sextette kicked off their next vaudeville season with headlining performances at the Folly Theater in Oklahoma City. The theater advertised the group as the best vaudeville performance that would be performing that season. The Sextette performed two nightly shows for 20 minutes.[258] The background of the girls became the novelty for their performance "the fact that all of the girls are native of Oklahoma and spent most of their lives on ranch in western Oklahoma makes the act one of special interest."[259] Their gender and background made them a special interest in the social norms of their day. They could not rely solely on a Native representation to carry their popularity. While in Oklahoma the papers did not mention anything about a Native American heritage. Perhaps this is more evidence to the idea that she could not pull off a Native image in the state due to the observational knowledge of the public of Natives. After leaving Oklahoma City, the group moved north to Illinois where Cora's assumed native heritage came to the forefront. In Joliet, Illinois, the paper announced their performance at the Grand theater by stating that Cora "is a full-blooded Indian." The newspaper also contained a caricature of the women in native garb.[260]

In February, they performed in Mansfield, Ohio at the Orpheum Theater. While there, the papers announced that they were "the big noise on the bill." The paper also described their show as "emerging from their wigwams the six girls dressed as squaws give and Indian dance and war song about the campfire." As for Cora, her "final effort is a rendition of Rocked in the Cradle of the Deep with an instrument that resembles a foghorn and which serves the purpose perhaps of hiding her completely.[261] In Ohio, wherever they went "everyone is talking about the 'Girls from

[258] "The Folly," *The Daily Oklahoman,* Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, September 30, 1910.
[259] "Foll," *The Daily Oklahoman*, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, October 6, 1910.
[260] "Grand Theater Bill is Exceptionally Classy," *The Joliet Evening Herald-News*, Joliet, Illinois, November 13, 1910.
[261] "Theater Talk," *News-Journal*, Mansfield, Ohio, March 28, 1911.

the Golden West.'"[262] Cora's performance of a Native representation came full of all stereotypes in dress, culture, and environment.

Later that year, in November, while in Pennsylvania, Cora decided to drop her Native act. Instead, Cora changed her act to feature new "exotic" acts. In Pottsville, Pennsylvania, the sextet performed at the Slater Theatre where the paper announced "The Cora Youngblood Corson Sextette remains for the entire week, and they have changed all their music. Instead of the Indian number they now have a Spanish song, and they play new selections on their brass instruments for a finish. Miss Corson and one other young lady play the Scotch bagpipes, another the brass drum, and two other dance a Scotch dance."[263] Interestingly, they had switched their Native performance for a Spanish and Scottish act. This change confirms that Cora's performance of a Native is just a performance. It is not tied to any cultural identity. It is just another method to remain popular. This can be seen in the advertisements for Cora which featured a multitude of costumes in a single image. Perhaps this change came as a natural evolution as her Native acts became stale to the audience or even to her performers. In changing her performances, her act could remain interesting to the audience.



[262] "Cora Youngblood Sextette," *Hamilton Evening Journal,* Hamilton, Ohio, April 14, 1911.
[263] "Slater Theatre," *Pottsville Republican*, Pottsville, Pennsylvania, November 17, 1911.

In 1911, the band traveled to the northeast. As the Easter week attraction, the sextette performed at the Colonial Theatre as the "biggest act ever brought to Annapolis." They brought with them "more scenery than some of the regular shows that play Annapolis."[264] Their run was commended by a local critic who stated "the performance of Miss Cora Youngblood Corson cannot be described adequately – one must see and hear her perform to be fully convinced that she is the acme."[265] While in Maryland, Cora's native heritage garnered one mention by the paper stating she "is of Indian blood" even without her Native performance.[266] For the rest of the year, they continued their new act to great success.

The next year would take them into Ottawa, Canada at the Sherbrooke Fair known as "Canada's Great Eastern Exhibition."[267] They then continued a Canadian tour through the Bowmanville and Lindsay fairs, both in Ottawa, Canada before returning to the United States.[268] This kickoff started her approach into a high-profile career in 1912. That year she became a truly popular celebrity, the first from the state of Oklahoma. She started to grace the covers of popular magazines. On May 18, 1912, she adorned the cover of *The Standard and Vanity Fair*.[269] On August 30, Cora graced the cover of *The Player* magazine that celebrated her success:

> Cora Youngblood Corson, soloist and proprietress of the Cora Youngblood Corson Sextet, is a native of Anadarko, the Indian reservation of Oklahoma. She is self-taught, and plays solos on euphonium, tuba, cello, piano, and bagpipes. She is credited with being one of the most versatile lady musicians in the world. By the way of variation she writes, having written "The Red Girl," "The Israelite," and "The Tale of the Comet," and for musical papers under the title of "A Girl Musician." The sextet is celebrating its hundredth week this week.[270]

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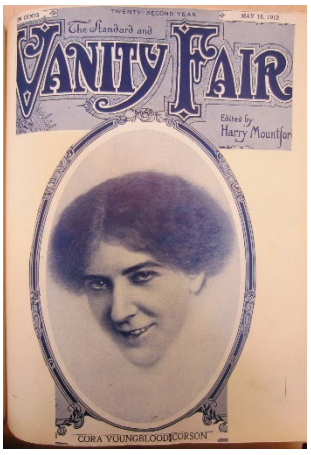
[264] "Big Act Tonight," *The Evening Capital*, Annapolis, Maryland, April 8, 1912.
[265] "Tribute of Appreciation," *The Evening Capital*, Annapolis, Maryland, April 13, 1912.
[266] "An all Girl Cast," *The Evening Capital*, Annapolis, Maryland, February 29, 1912.
[267] "Sherbrooke Fair," *Vermont Union-Journal*, Lyndonville, Vermont, August 21, 1912.
[268] "Route Book of Mae McBride," In Author's Collection.
[269] *The Standard and Vanity Fair*, May 18, 1912, Cover.
[270] "Hundredth Anniversary," *The Player,* Vol V., No. 39, August 30, 1912, 27.

The group had performed for one hundred consecutive weeks, a remarkable feat for any musician. But for Cora, she did it all in the public imagination as a native from an Indian reservation.

That same day, August 30, Cora appeared on the cover of *Variety* alongside other sextet members: Eula Youngblood, Graycie Acton, Lois Land, Ida Mundell, and Ethel Wright. *Variety* also celebrated the bands one hundredth week and published the same blurb as *The Player*.[271] On the next day, Cora was published on the cover of *Billboard* to also celebrate her accomplishments.[272] The next year, on May 30, 1913, *The Player* featured the group on their cover once again as the group "who have breezed into Vaudeville from the Western Plains."[273]







After returning from Canada, they continued to travel across the Northeast and Midwest. They then began to move back to Oklahoma for a well-deserved rest during the holidays. While back in Oklahoma, the girls performed for their local fans. On December 27, 1912, the group performed at the Anadarko Opera House for one night. The paper expected the performance to be greeted by an overflowing house.[274] The act also performed in Tulsa at the Wonderland Theater as the "big feature." Owing to their fondness for their home state, the group performed

[271] "Cora Youngblood Corson," *Variety*, Vol. 27, No. 13, August 30, 1912, 8.
[272] "Cora Youngblood Corson," *Billboard*, Vol. 24, No. 35, August 31, 1912, 6.
[273] *The Player*, Vol. 6, No. 26, May 30, 1913, Cover.
[274] "Anadarko's Own Girls Here to Entertain Us," *Anadarko American*, Anadarko, Oklahoma, December 19, 1912.

for rates lower than expected for a show of their skill. The papers reported it was "surprising to see such a high-class act presented at a theater with such moderate rates of admission." Their admission ran about 20 cents when they could easily be charging over a dollar for tickets.

The band then traveled to ring in the New Year in Tulsa, Oklahoma. As part of the city's New Years celebrations, the Hotel Tulsa held a cabaret where Cora Youngblood Corson's Sextette received "encore after encore" for their performance.[275] The next night, Cora and her group performed at the Wonderland Theater with an all-female bill. In response to this, and the talent of the acts, the *Tulsa Daily World* commented that the "suffragette movement gets a big boost in this show." However, it also made sure to compare the women to male counterparts such as the description of Katherine Selsor "a female monologist, who is just as funny as any of the celebrated male entertainers of this sort."[276] As the suffrage movement grew, Cora's gender would become a larger talking point of her career while her performance as a Native and Oklahoman would remain a part of the discussion.

Through January, Selsor traveled with Cora and her sextette into Arkansas and Louisiana. In her act, she would perform "The New Woman" which "burlesques the suffragette idea that is at its height in the feminine mind." Cora continued her tried and true methods of "solos, duets, trios, quartettes, and sextettes" while continuing the trend of performing songs from operas such as the sextette from *Lucia di Lammermoor*.[277] As usual, the beauty of the Sextette continued to take a large portion of the articles on their performance with reporters jealously telling of their beauty from those "lucky enough to gain admission back stage"[278] Or, as one reporter for the

[275] "1913 Arrived on Time in Tulsa," *The Morning Tulsa Daily World,* Tulsa, Oklahoma, January 1, 1913, 5.
[276] "Today's Amusements," *The Tulsa Daily World*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, January 1, 1913, 8.
[277] "Amusements," *Pine Bluff Daily Graphic*, Bine Bluff, Arkansas, January 5, 1913, 7.
[278] "The Majestic," *The Shreveport Journal*, Shreveport, Louisiana, January 8, 1913, 3.

Shreveport Journal commented, "the six members of the musical team not only were capable, but several of them had good looks, also."[279]

As the group toured, they continued to change their routine. One critic disliked the lavish production stating "the stage settings were perhaps more elaborate than is often seen with a turn on that nature."[280] They also added new scenes to their show and perhaps even new instruments. One advertisement for the show in Spokane, Washington on May 24, 1913, mentioned "the mermaid scenes is said to be beautiful. There are song and dance numbers and solos played on the weird instruments." This article also highlighted their gender with the title "Feminine Musicians Promise Novelty."[281] Another change came that month with the departure of Cora's sister, Eula, from the band. Eula had performed with Cora since the beginning of her bands in Anadarko and the formation of her band after leaving Helen May Butler. Eula left the band in Chicago "with plenty of rice and old shoes" to return to Anadarko to marry Glenn Condon. Condon would grow to be a leading politician, journalist, radioman, and editor of the *Vaudeville Magazine*. They married June 15, 1913, in Tulsa, Oklahoma.[282]

Shortly after Eula's departure, Cora and the remaining five ladies were featured on the cover of *The Player* and given a page dedicated to Cora's career. The article heralded this group that "breezed into Vaudeville from the Western Plains" and discussed their "interesting history in the field of American amusements." This article shows the novelty and wonder towards Cora and her group. Women who come from the American West that dominate the vaudeville stage with a production unmatched by even the best acts.

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[279] "The Majestic," *The Shreveport Journal*, Shreveport, Louisiana, January 10, 1913.
[280] "At the Empire," *Calgary Herald*, Calgary, Canada, May 16, 1913, 24.
[281] "Sextet of Girls Attractive Spot on Pantages Bill," *Spokane Chronicle*, Spokane, Washington, May 24, 1913, 8.
[282] "Weddings in June," *The Player*, Vol. 8, No. 3, (June 20, 1913), 18

> One does not commonly associate music and the fine arts with the West. Years ago, the westerner would have gloried in this fact – and even today a lot of those hardy people of the plains and majestic mountains who bank most upon action are just as well satisfied that it is the "Effete East" and not the "Wild West" which is recognized as the home of this particular kind of culture and refinement.
>
> The history of Cora Youngblood Corson and her associates in the musical sextet which bears her name illustrates in a somewhat striking manner this spirit of antagonism which is suggested by the pitting of the East against the West in music as one of the fine arts. A spirit of antagonism indeed, for it follows that, since there are exceptions to all rules, the West is by no means without its champions in the arts – and champions who have been persistent in their demand for recognition.
>
> *Played with Indian Girls and Squaws*
>
> Cora Youngblood Corson was born in Republic, Mo., but at the age of ten years, in company with her parents, removed to Anadarko, Okla., then a "rag," or tented, city which had sprung up at the time of the rush for virgin prairie land. Her earliest recollections are of the western plains, her playmate for five of the most important "playing" years of her life were Indian girls and squaws, and she is consequently proud to herself a pure and unadulterated product of the free and breezy West. In those early days of Miss Corson's residence in Anadarko, indeed, there was a time when there were but sixteen white women and six white girls in the "city." Incidentally, it may be mentioned that four of these six girls became members of the original Cora Youngblood Corson Sextet and are still associated with it.[283]

While this article features a few incorrect details, the overall opinion of the act places them in the context of vaudeville. The term "squaw" is an offensive ethnic, racial, and sexist slur for older Native women. Its common use in statements like this quote separate Cora from association as a Native American. This interview also points out, for the first time, definitively, that Cora was not a Native but rather a white woman that moved into Anadarko. This is the closest statement we have to Cora's actual perception of her own heritage. Even though this article only saw the light of day for those White Rats that subscribed to *The Player,* it shows that within the vaudeville circles it was understood that Cora was an ethnic impersonator. But to the rest of the country, Cora would continue to be seen as a Native American.

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[283] "Cora Youngblood Corson Sextet Champions Wild West," *The Player*, Vol. VI, No. 26, May 30, 1913, 6.

After the departure of Eula, "The Girls of the Golden West" began a tour on the Pantages Circuit that took them into Canada before returning to the United States along the Pacific coast. Their novelty of female musicians, extravagant sets, and impressive musicianship continued to grace the newspapers.[284] The advertisements of this period focused on their relation to "the West" and how it shaped their ability. The *Vancouver Sun* noted the ladies "are all western born and bred, with the easy freedom and independence of the west in their healthy young bodies." The article also mentioned their unmatched skill and rising popularity. "They are under the personal direction of Cora Youngblood Corson, and so well has she trained them that the 'Girls of the Golden West' Sextet are rapidly becoming famous throughout the whole of America."[285] The tour along the Pantages circuit brough the group back into the United States later in June where they performed in the Northwest, through Washington, Oregon, Montana, and California.

Their novelty had moved away from a directly Native performance but now encompassed an overall western stereotype. In fact, this unique western perspective led to an interesting interview with Cora while in Los Angeles, California.

> She loves horses, dogs, and her art…
>
> Add up the loves and hates and it spells Oklahoma. Try it. The leader of the Cora Youngblood Corson sextet was born in Anadarco county, which is just 30 miles from Mount Scott... Anadarco county is the native home of big watermelons and big girls. Miss Corson is 5 feet 10.[286]

[284] "At Pantages," *The Province*, Vancouver, British Columbia, June 7, 1913, 25.
[285] "Pantages Has Topnotcher Program," *The Vancouver Sun,* Vancouver, British Columbia, June 9, 1913, 9.
[286] "Oil Smells Homey," *Los Angeles Express*, Los Angeles, California, July 23, 1913, 15.

The sentiment here is that she represented Oklahoma, and her heritage could be seen as a reflection of the state and those that dwelled within it. She served as Oklahoma's national representation in popular culture.



At the end of their tour in California, the band moved east and prepared for their band's expansion. They performed so well in the tour that Alexander Pantages contracted the group for an even larger production.[287] The new contract increased the band to twelve women called Cora Youngblood Corson's Instrumentalists. In preparation, the group had already been booked from December 1913 to May 1914.[288] More women traveled to join the organization. Hattie Acton, another of Cora's friends from Anadarko, traveled to Kansas City to meet and join the band as they traveled from California to New Jersey.[289] During their journey they stopped in Tulsa, Oklahoma to perform on August 1, 1913, at the Empress Theatre.[290] By the end of the month, the group began touring the east coast.

[287] "In Vaudeville," *The Missoulian*, Missoula, Montana, July 1, 1913, 10.
[288] "To Make it a 12-Act," *The Player*, Vol. 8, No. 7, July 18, 1913, 22.
[289] "Miss Hattie Acton," *The Anadarko Democrat*, Anadarko, Oklahoma, July 17, 1913, 5.
[290] "Empress," *Tulsa Daily World*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, July 31, 1913, 7.

The band performed in New York and New Jersey before travelling to Virginia to perform in the State Fair in Richmond. For a week, the band performed alongside several acts including "Oklahoma Bill's Wild West."[291] After finishing their tour of the east coast, the group began to move west. They performed in Illinois, Missouri, and Kansas before stopping in Chicago to celebrate Christmas. During this short break, J. Leslie Spahn arranged a Christmas tree at the Demig Hotel with 160 presents from the homes of the girls. Many of the presents contained food which was used to prepare a big feast for the band celebrate. Owing to the band's popularity across the country, the packages "came from Oklahoma, Rhode Island, Wisconsin, Massachusetts, and Indiana."[292]

The new year continued the tour in the West. 1914 would bring new success and changes to the organization. The "extremely talented" instrumentalists continued to dazzle audiences, but their personal lives would shift the act.[293] For instance, one of the members, Louis Rand, married Jack Beck of the Sells-Floto-Buffalo Bill Circus.[294] Being in the West gave Cora the opportunity to visit home. While performing in Tulsa at the Empress Theatre in late January, Cora and



Tulsa, Oklahoma
January 19, 1914

[291] "Virginia State Fair," *The Time Dispatch*, Richmond, Virginia, October 3, 1913, 8.
[292] "Stage Girls Have Xmas Tree," *The Inter Ocean*, Chicago, Illinois, December 28, 1913, 42.
[293] "Hippodrome – Vaudeville," *The Kansas City Globe*, Kansas City, Kansas, January 2, 1914, 2.
[294] "Circus and Wild West," *Billboard*, January 10, 1914, 26.

several members of the band visited with Eula Condon before traveling to Anadarko to visit their families.[295]

Upon returning to Tulsa, the newspapers heralded their show with great enthusiasm. Titles such as "World's Most Versatile Lady Musician" followed with the astounding claim that the band used "$10,000 Worth of Gold Instruments!"[296] Owing to these advertisements and Cora's great skill, the performance proved to be a record breaker.

> When Manager William Smith secured the Cora Youngblood Corson instrumentalists as the headliner on the five-act bill which opened at his theater Sunday, he never imagined that it would prove a record breaker for the theater. But the fact remains that this magnificent production brought more people into the Empress theater on Sunday than any other attraction that ever played at that theater. The business yesterday was the biggest of any Monday since the house opened.
>
> Cora Youngblood Corson herself is probably the greatest lady musician in the world. Her versatility is marvelous. She plays the cello, the bagpipes, the euphonium, and the tuba in her present act, and is quite proficient on many others. Her tuba is the largest in the world, and few men musicians can play it, and no woman, excepting Miss Corson, has ever been able to make a successful solo instrument out of it.[297]

Cora continued to break records, and her performances garnered her more fame as her skill became the highlight of the papers. All week, the Empress Theatre continued to sell out all tickets for the show. Manager Smith became "so gratified with the extremely large business" that he began giving roses to all women who attended the shows as a gift. He wanted to "distribute a small percentage of his profits back to his patrons." This, of course, with a hefty fee to Cora and her group, as they cost "him more money than was ever paid for a vaudeville show in Tulsa" but,

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[295] "Informal Dinner," *Tulsa Daily World,* Tulsa, Oklahoma, January 15, 1914, 7.
[296] "Orpheum," *Tulsa Daily World*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, January 18, 1914, 6.
[297] "At the Empress," *Tulsa Daily World*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, January 20, 1914, 8.

this came with the favorable outcome of having to "turn people away at every performance" due to sold out shows.[298]

After a spectacular run in Tulsa, the group traveled to Texas where they met similar success. Publicized as "The Greatest Vaudeville Show in Dallas," the Cora Youngblood Instrumentalists continued to be "highlight praised by everyone."[299] The group then continued their tour in the South. In New Orleans, Louisiana, after their performance at the Hippodrome theatre, the group traveled to the Miliken Memorial and Charity hospitals to perform for the children who could not attend the Mardi Gras carnival.[300] After, the group enjoyed the celebrations and even entered the costume competition. Eula Condon had traveled with the band to Louisiana. She won the "most complete costume" competition with a "beautiful Indian costume, made by a Comanche squaw in Oklahoma, and decorated with Elk's teeth."[301] Cora and the girls, as a group, won a second-place prize of $10 from the Joseph Schwarz Company.[302] This perhaps best illustrates the idea that Cora understood the public's desire to see Native Americans as purely an entertainment.

The tour continued into Alabama. In Birmingham, Alabama, the group once again entertained crowds that declared them to be "the representative women musicians of the vaudeville world."[303] Just like in New Orleans, Cora took the band to perform for children at the East Lake Orphanage.[304] The band then continued through the South making their first

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[298] "At the Empress," *Tulsa Daily World*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, January 21, 1914, 3.
[299] "The bill at the Garden," *New York Clipper*, February 7, 1914, 18.
[300] "Crippled Kiddies," *Times-Picayune*, New Orleans, Louisiana, February 19, 1914, 5.
[301] "Won Prize at Mardi Gras," *Tulsa Daily World*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, February 28, 1914, 7.
[302] "Numerous Maskers Attracted to Store at Baronne and Lafayette Streets," *The Times- Democrat*, New Orleans, Louisiana, February 25, 1914, 5.
[303] "Orpheum Vaudeville," *The Birmingham News*, Birmingham, Alabama, March 8, 1914, 41.
[304] "Concerts to be Given Children at Orphanage," *The Birmingham News*, Birmingham, Alabama, March 10, 1914, 14.

performances in several cities including Atlanta, Georgia.[305] The group then traveled back north and continued across the northern United States. In South Dakota, the papers announced the group as having "held the attraction of all well-known dramatic critics as one of the big acts of today."[306] Per usual for advertisements, Cora's group continued to be proclaimed as the great act in the country. In Des Moines, Iowa the paper recognized, "Miss Corson is America's foremost tuba player and one of the greatest wild instrument soloists in the country."[307] After continuous performances, the band finally decided to take a break from the stage lights.

In June 1914, the girls began a two-month vacation to return home and visit their families. Cora, Ida Mundell, and Grace and Hattie Acton returned home to Anadarko.[308] In August, the girls prepared to travel to New York City to begin a contract that would take them back into Canada.[309] By October, Cora became a household name once more as she graced the cover of *Billboard Magazine*.[310] The city of Tulsa announced that "Tulsa may again place on the map this week when the entire front page of the Billboard, the world's greatest amusement publication, was taken up with a portrait of Cora Youngblood Corson, the noted lady musician." The article also announced that a "100-piece Indian girl's band would be taken to the world's fair at San Francisco next year by Cora Youngblood Corson and it will be known as the "Tulsa Indian Girls' Band. Every member of the organization must be of Indian descent." Reportedly, Cora would begin rehearsals in January 1915 and J. Leslie Spahn had already secured a contract from the exposition authorities. It would have been "the largest exclusive ladies' band ever

[305] "Cora Youngblood Corson's…," *The Atlanta Constitution*, Atlanta, Georgia, April 5, 1914, 7.
[306] "Big Acts Booked," *Argus-Leader*, Sioux Falls, South Dakota, May 2, 1914, 6.
[307] "Coming Attractions," *The Des Moines Register*, Des Moine, Iowa, May 3, 1914, 44.
[308] "Acton Family Reunion," *The Anadarko Tribune*, Anadarko, Oklahoma, June 11, 1914, 5; "Miss Ida Mundell," *The Anadarko Tribune*, Anadarko, Oklahoma, July 2, 1914, 9.
[309] "Mrs. J.M. Youngblood," *Tulsa Daily World*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, August 5, 1914, 3.
[310] Cover, *Billboard Magazine*, October 3, 1914,

gotten together in the world."[311] It is unknown what happened to the plans for this band as it never came to fruition. Nevertheless, the potential for such an organization reveals Cora's continuance of using Native Americans to bill her acts as exotic and unique.

The group ended their year in the northeast performing for very enthusiastic and sold-out crowds. One reporter eloquently wrote of the group: "this effulgent effervescence of engaging enchantresses has a reputation in the far west as the incomparable lady musical organization in that hemisphere."[312] After their performance, the paper concluded "this act is worth coming miles to see. It has no superiors as a musical organization and very few equals."[313] The standard set in 1914 meant that 1915 would be the highlight of their career. In fact, a new composition had been named for Cora by John Klohr called "The Corson Grouch" which they added to their repertoire for the next year.[314]



The new year started off with a tour through the Midwest. Through Indiana and Minnesota, the band became a hit and continued to perform for packed theaters.[315] In Minneapolis, Minnesota, Cora gave an interview about her life in Oklahoma and her career playing brass instruments.

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[311] "Tulsa Again on the Map; Plans for Band," *Tulsa Daily World,* Tulsa, Oklahoma, October 2, 1914, 7.
[312] "Cora Youngblood Corson's Instrumentalists," *The Berkshire Eagle*, Pittsfield, Massachusetts, December 12, 1914, 6.
[313] "Last Chance to See the "The 12 Girls of the Golden West," *The Berkshire County Eagle*, Pittsfield, Massachusetts, December 16, 1914, 9.
[314] "Cora Youngblood Corson's Instrumentalists," *Billboard*, Vol. 26, No. 37, (September 12, 1914), 8.
[315] "Vaudeville's Best Farce Comedy is Coming to Empress," *The Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette*, For Wayne, Indiana, January 31, 1915, 20; "New Palace," *Star Tribune*, Minneapolis, Minnesota, March 7, 1915, 30.

> They spoiled a lot of good pasture when they built Tulsa, Okla." said Cora Youngblood Corson, the headliner at the New Palace, between shows last night. "I can well remember when the country around there was as bare as the Sahara Desert, but not nearly so dry. I lived in Western Oklahoma and was a cowgirl when Tulsa was called Red Fork, and it was only a whistling station at that time. Few girls in that country have ever tried to do anything in the music world, but I know a number of them that would have made the public take notice if they had started out as I did. For they have the lungs and strength that is given those that live in the open in God's country.
>
> If only mothers could see their girls as I see them, thin-wasted, small chests, and sickly-looking faces, and for no reason except that they don't get the fresh air and don't exercise their lungs.
>
> A wind instrument costs all the way from $25 to $125, but that is only a small part of what a lot of people pay to doctors every year for their girls. If ever I quit this business, I intend to start a health resort for young girls with weak lungs and I know that all it will take to make them big and strong will be a lot of outdoor work and a big horn.[316]

This quote summarizes Cora's perspective of herself and her horn playing. An atypical woman; a cowgirl musician. It should also be noted that Cora was incorrect in her timeline, as the city of Tulsa incorporated in 1898. Despite this, this is the turning point away from the Native and female identities she took earlier in the decade. Now, Cora would fully push her connection as an Oklahoman to set herself above the crowd. Perhaps this could be attributed to the rising popularity of a true Native American and Oklahoman in vaudeville, Will Rogers.

Their tour took the group back into Canada and it appears that they expanded their tour to be themed towards Oklahoma. Beginning in Alberta, Canada, the Cora Youngblood Corson Instrumentalists played alongside "Oklahoma" Bob Albright.[317] As a professional singer, Bob Albright, had changed his name to "Oklahoma Bob" instead of "the male Melba."[318] He had formerly been a member of the Dockstader minstrels before expanding his solo career."[319] His

[316] "Cora Youngblood Corson was a Cow Girl," *Star Tribune*, Minneapolis, Minnesota, March 11, 1915, 9.
[317] "Girls From the Golden West to be Headliner," *Calgary Herald*, Calgary, Alberta, April 5, 1915, 5.
[318] "Cora Corson Players will be Seen Soon," *Spokane Chronicle*, Spokane, Washington, April 9, 1915, 20.
[319] "Pantages," *The Seattle Star*, Seattle, Washington, April 24, 1915, 2.

change in name likely spawned from a rise in interest of Oklahoma themed acts such as Cora and Will Rogers. The act returned to the United States on the Pantages circuit through Washington where they returned to theaters, they had performed in the year prior. The papers heralded them as "the best musical act now circling the Pan route."[320]

Once more, Cora's ability became the talk of the papers alongside her want to establish the health resort in Oklahoma:

> Why shouldn't the "champion lungs of the world" be owned by a woman who devoted most of her spare time to coaxing haunting melodies out of huge, kinky, and rotund brass instruments?
>
> Miss Corson attributes this fact chiefly, of course, to her addiction to wind instruments, but primarily to the fact that she was born and raised on the wind-swept plains of Oklahoma, where the ozone is to be had just as nature distilled it. She is decidedly athletic, tall, and handsome. She can ride a bucking broncho until the girth about the equator of the cayuse breaks from its plunges. It is declared, and not denied, that she has a greater chest expansion than any of the present-day champions. Her lung development has been declared by men versed in anatomical mysteries, to be a wonder of the medical world.
>
> She is a living, breathing, walking, and talking advertisement of the fact that the open plains of the great west are God's country, she says, the land of health, happiness, and prosperity. She declares Oklahoma and a wind instrument will make lungs for those who have none.[321]

Ever the performer, Cora's comments brought attention not only to Oklahoma and the west but also to her seemingly inhuman ability. This also became more apparent in advertisements as they continued to combine their titles as The Girls from the Golden West became "America's Representative Lady Musicians."[322]

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[320] "Cora Corson Players will be Seen Soon," *Spokane Chronicle*, Spokane, Washington, April 9, 1915, 20.
[321] "Pantages Has 'Lung' Champion," *The Spokesman-Review*, Spokane, Washington, April 18, 1915, 29.
[322] "Pantages," *Spokane Chronicle*, Spokane, Washington, April 21, 1915, 5.

During her performance in Seattle, Cora told the crowd that she planned to open a school to help people afflicted with tuberculosis. She would "retire from the stage before long and when I do the school will become a reality. I aim to found the institution on my 160-acre ranch, near Anadarko, Okla."[323] They also performed well receiving praise for their ability to "render the most difficult of classical selections with rare power and expression and their interpretation of the popular tunes of the day is a source of genuine delight to all who can appreciate tuneful and catchy melodies."[324] Cora was also heralded as "the brilliant young musical genius" and "one of the world's greatest musicians."[325]

Oddly, in Victoria, Canada, a newspaper article brought up Cora's assumed Native ancestry and provided a new tribal affiliation.

> Cora Youngblood Corson, who is at Pantages this week at the head of one of the biggest musical acts in vaudeville, is one Indian girl who has made good as a public entertainer. Her father was a chief of the powerful Mohawks, and she herself is a full-blooded Indian girl, and a graduate of Carlisle university. Her tribe is a wealthy one and she owns considerable property near Lawton, Oklahoma. She spends her summers on her ranch there, taking members of her company with her. She is an expert horsewoman and is skilled in all the arts of the athletic plainswoman. It is not financial need that sends her into vaudeville but a genuine taste for music and an interest in public appearance. She has traveled all over the world with her musical act and has made good in Europe as well as in this country. Her special instrument is the euphonium, which becomes unusually expressive in her hands.[326]

This article not only declares Cora to be a full-blood Mohawk, but also a graduate of Carlisle. She never attended the school, but her husband, Charles Corson, had. Also, she had never

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[323] "Woman Has Unique Scheme for Cure of Tuberculosis," *The Seattle Daily Times*, Seattle, Washington, April 28, 1915, 8.
[324] "Girls of Golden West Feature of Pantages Bill," *Vancouver Daily World*, Vancouver, British Columbia, May 1, 1915, 9.
[325] "Albright at Pantages," *The Vancouver Sun*, Vancouver. British Columbia, May 3, 1915, 7.
[326] "Pantages Theatre," *The Victoria Daily Times,* Victoria, British Columbia, May 13, 1915, 6.

performed in Europe at this point. This strange description of Cora also found its way into the *Oregonian* newspaper with the title "Indian Musician is Here."[327] This may have been an attempt by Spahn to connect Cora's performance to well-known Indian tropes of that era or an unknowing journalist attempting to create a story to draw a crowd. Either way, it illustrates how Cora had successfully affixed herself to a Native persona within vaudeville.

In June, Cora received one of the highest honors of her career. The band took their tour down the Pacific coast into California to attend the Panama Exposition, also known as the 1915 World's Fair. On June 3, 1915, the State of Oklahoma celebrated "Cora Youngblood Corson Day" at the fair to "honor the noted Oklahoma girl." In celebrating, Cora and her group held an all-day open house at the Oklahoma – Arkansas building at the fair where Cora performed solos on the "euphonium, cornet, trombone, bagpipes, cello, and other instruments."[328] To commemorate the event, buttons and hand mirrors adorned with Cora's image and the words "Cora Youngblood Corson Day; June 3, 1915; Oklahoma State Building." Many telegrams of congratulations came from across the country. For example, the mayor of Tulsa, Oklahoma send the message "The city of Tulsa sends congratulations. Today's event is a well-deserved recognition of Oklahoma's most talented daughter."[329] The next day, June 4, the C.G. Conn company also celebrated "Cora Youngblood Corson Day" at their exhibition in the Fine Arts Building.[330] This is a significant endorsement as the other big name associated with Cora's for C.G. Conn was John Phillip Sousa who gave a performance later that month on June 28.



[327] "Indian Musician is Here," *Oregonian*, May 23, 1915, 2.
[328] "Oklahoma Girl is Honored at Frisco," *Tulsa Daily World*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, May 30, 1915.
[329] "Oklahoma Girl is Honored at Frisco," *The Morning Tulsa Daily World*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, June 4, 1915, 8.
[330] "Friends in This City," *Tulsa Daily World*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, June 2, 1915, 4.

Reflecting the significance of Cora's name, *The Music Trade Review* reported on Sousa's planned engagement and followed by stating "about the middle of the month this exhibit will also be well advertised, as arrangements have been made to have Cora Youngblood Corson's girl musicians play there."[331] This great honor cemented Cora's legacy as a representative of Oklahoma and places her Native persona into a new light. She became nationally associated and celebrated by Oklahoma which therefore made her assumed Native heritage something to be admired and seen as a reflection of other Native performers of the time who did not have the same recognition. In the public's eyes, Cora represented every part of Oklahoma, a cowboy, a native, a settler, a woman, and a musician.

After the fair, she played at the largest vaudeville house in San Francisco and then continued their tour.[332] After finishing the Pantages circuit in California, Cora and her group performed in Salt Lake City, Utah in early July. The review of their show reveals the exceptionality of their performance.

> The musicians wear several changes of gorgeous costumes, and the scenic investiture of the act is in keeping with the general excellence of the production. Miss Corson's popular numbers on a double B-flat bass horn which was made especially for her and known as the Corsonphone, and on the euphonium, a double-bell horn, were roundly encored. Who said women were deficient in lung power when compared with men? Lungs – why, Miss Corson filled that great bass horn to overflowing and then apparently had plenty of bellows power left. Her work was that of the master and she was able assisted by the four women cornetists and the four women trombonists.[333]

The show reflected the height of her popularity. It was not only extravagant and memorable, but it made the audience leave with a new appreciation for such a woman to defy their expectations.

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[331] "Sousa's Band at C.G. Conn Booth," *The Music Trade Review,* Vol. 60, No. 24, June 12, 1915, 12.
[332] "Oklahoma Girl is Honored at Frisco," *Tulsa Daily World*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, May 30, 1915.
[333] "The Pantages," *The Salt Lake Herald-Republican*, Salt Lake City, Utah, July 1, 1915, 4.

After the performance in Utah, Cora took her group back to her ranch in Oklahoma for a break, which lasted from July and into August. While in Anadarko, the group decided to "regale their home folks with their high-class musical entertainment."[334] Unsurprisingly, this show sold out and "the girls who made Anadarko famous" could not fit anymore spectators into the Opera House.[335] During this period, the group went by Cora Youngblood Corson and her Oklahoma Musical Maidens, despite several of the women being from out of state.

After a rest in Anadarko, they traveled to perform in Tulsa at the Empress Theatre for four days.[336] On August 3, Cora and the girls performed for the Tulsa Chamber of Commerce at a luncheon at Hotel Tulsa. After their performance, Edward O. Tilbourne, secretary of the organization, announced that "they played their brass instruments better than any feminine organization he had ever heard and mentioned the fact that the Chamber of Commerce appreciated the "boosting" that had been done for Oklahoma and Tulsa by Miss Corson in all parts of North America."[337] The recognition of Cora's role in promoting Oklahoma on the national and international stage confirmed her ability to represent the state and its cultural heritage.

After their stay in Tulsa, the group performed at the Cozy Theatre in Okmulgee, Oklahoma. The small town enthusiastically announced their performance as "undoubtedly the greatest and most expensive vaudeville act ever brought to Okmulgee."[338] They performed in

[334] "Cora and Her Girls Wednesday, July 28th," *American-Democrat*, Anadarko, Oklahoma, July 22, 1915, 1.
[335] "Instrumentalists Draw Good Crowd," *American-Democrat*, Anadarko, Oklahoma, July 29, 1915, 1.
[336] "All From Oklahoma," *Tulsa Daily World*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, August 1, 1915.
[337] "Corson Band Girls Play for C. of C.," *Tulsa Daily World*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, August 3, 1915, 10.
[338] "Cozy Theatre," *Okmulgee Daily Democrat*, Okmulgee, Oklahoma, August 9, 1915, 4.

Okmulgee for four days with constantly sold-out shows.[339] The constant success of her show led one reporter to pose the question of forming an all-Oklahoma vaudeville bill.

> Why don't some enterprising person frame up an "All-Oklahoma" "vodvil" bill? Cora Youngblood Corson and her nine musical maids would be a good feature for such layout, Lucille Mulhal and her west offering would be available. Then there is the great "male single," "Oklahoma Bob" Albright, whose home is at Nowata and who is now a headliner on the Pantages time. Will Rogers, the greatest cowboy monologist and rope spinner on the stage today, lives at Claremore. Rogers was recently featured on the bill at the Palace, New York, over Trixie Friganza. There are any number of other "vodvil" stars – real ones too – who claim Oklahoma as their home. An all-star Oklahoma bill could be routed over some of the leading cities of the state – "mop up" is right![340]

This became the first mention of Cora along with Will Rogers as his career had just begun to take off. Unfortunately, this grand idea never came to fruition.

While in Tulsa, the band had announced that they would "be the feature attraction at all of the big state fairs in the middle west this year."[341] Beginning on August 25, 1915, the band dedicated itself to the fair circuit as a Fred M. Barnes attraction, performing at state fairs in Iowa, Wisconsin, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas.[342] In Oklahoma City, Cora Youngblood Corson's twelve Girl Instrumentalists became "the top number of this all-star bill" from September 25 to October 2.[343] Cora's sister, Eula, joined the band in their performances at the fair. Of the exhibition, Cora declared that compared to the other fair she had played "not one of them was a whit better than our Oklahoma fair and exposition."[344] Cora's brother-in-law, Glenn Condon, wrote a review of their time at the fair be telling how "enthusiasm held the vast throng, and as

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[339] "Show at Cozy is the Big Sensation," *Okmulgee Daily Democrat*, Okmulgee, Oklahoma, August 9, 1915, 4.
[340] "Film Flashes," *Tulsa World*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, August 22, 1915.
[341] "They're all Oklahoma Girls," *Tulsa World*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, August 1, 1915.
[342] "Cora Youngblood Corson," *Billboard*, Vol. 26, No. 40 (October 3, 1914), 1; "Fairs Played," *Billboard*, Vol. 27, No. 46, November 13, 1915, 64.
[343] "Five Star Acts Vaudeville Bill," *The Daily Ardmoreite,* Ardmore, Oklahoma, July 26, 1915, 3.
[344] "Best Ever, is Oklahoma's Fair," *The Daily Oklahoman*, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, September 27, 1915, 4.

the dazzlingly arrayed young women started off the stage they were called back again midst the plaudits of the multitude."[345] On October 1, the fair had "Press Day" where "four hundred editors and their wives" were expected. They had a banquet in the Fair's dining pavilion in which Cora and her girls gave a cabaret performance for the attendees.[346]

After their final fair performance, the group saw this as a wonderful opportunity to advertise their appeal. In the November 13, 1915, edition of *Billboard*, a large advertisement displayed the eight fairs played by Cora Youngblood Corson's Instrumentalists. It then told the reader: "If you want to know the value of the act, ask the Secretary of Fairs we have played for, not the men that are selling you acts."[347] The year of 1915 had cemented Cora and her act on both the vaudeville stage and the State Fair grandstand, both coveted venues. The significance of her accomplishments landed Cora back on the cover of *Billboard* magazine on November 20, 1915. The accompanying article stated:



> Our front cover subject for this week is Cora Youngblood Corson, one of the few women in the profession making and deserving repeated successes as a musical directress.
>
> Miss Corson has pooled her individual accomplishments as an instrumentalist with the young musical talents of twelve other young women, with the result that Cora Youngblood Corson's fair and vaudeville acts are universally known and highly rated in the class of sterling offerings.[348]

[345] Glenn Condon, "State Fair Better Than Ever Before," *Tulsa World*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, September 28, 1915, 2.
[346] Glenn Condon, "Record Crowds at Fair on Tuesday," *Tulsa World*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, September 29, 1915, 10.
[347] "Fairs Played," *Billboard*, Vol. 27, No. 46, November 13, 1915, 64.
[348] "Cora Youngblood Corson," *Billboard*, Vol. 27, No. 47, November 20, 1915, 63.

True to her nature, Cora did not slow down. She immediately took the show on the road and returned to the vaudeville stage.

Their tour began in Kansas City, Missouri at the Empress Theatre. This is the period where it seems Cora wanted all her names used in advertising. On ad contains "Cora Youngblood Corson and Her 10 Musical Maids, The Girls of the Golden West, and America's Representative Lady Musicians."[349] They then continued through Missouri until moving north to Chicago, Illinois to perform at the twenty-fifth annual convention of the American Association of Fairs and Expositions.[350] After these performances, the group traveled to Chicago where they spent Christmas at the Hotel Van Buren. However, this moment of joy and happiness, this feeling of being at the height of their career and extraordinarily successful, would not follow them into the new year. Immediately into 1916, Cora would find herself fighting for not just her reputation, but for the various workers in theaters.

Vaudeville provided a form of popular entertainment in America by a melting pot of entertainers of diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds. It offered immigrants and minorities the opportunity to forge a new life on the stage. Vaudeville represented the changing societal norms in American culture. These foreign themes and cultural representation exposed White audiences to ethnic groups they had not encountered or held typically harsh racist views against. This entertainment increased positive exposure of minorities such as Native Americans. The audiences began to accept outsiders in new ways instead of fostering bigotry and racism. Vaudeville accomplished this by redefining the American middle class that had expanded with the industrial revolution. New technology and income allowed the working-class opportunities

[349] "New Empress," *The Kansas City Star*, Kansas City, Missouri, November 13, 1915, 4.
[350] "Successful Convention Held by Fair Secretaries," *Billboard*, Vol. 27, No. 50, December 11, 1915, 62.

for leisure they had not enjoyed in the past. Family-friendly entertainment meant that families could bring their children into the theaters to experience new and exotic performances without the crude forms of burlesque or minstrel shows.

For Cora Youngblood Corson, her time in vaudeville saw her rise to the very highest points of her profession. She became a national star often billed as a Native American, a musical prodigy from the plains of Oklahoma. Her growth saw her presentation of Native American performance which evolved into a Western persona with Oklahoma being the focal point. She later shifted her act to remove the stereotypical Indian themes and costumes, but her false Native heritage remained. She made the adjustment to draw crowds and capitalize on popular trends. However, by presenting herself as a symbol of Oklahoma, namely proud, daring Native and settler, Cora set the stage for a popular misconception of Oklahomans also being Native Americans in the minds of some audiences.

CHAPTER FOUR: War at Home

Up to 1915, Cora had been associated with high vaudeville which included popular and classical musicians while low vaudeville typically had more crass acts and came with a lower admission fee. She had built her public persona from a settler on the plains to a celebrity whose shows routinely run over $10,000 in production costs. She performed with a gem-encrusted euphonium and the ladies in her group all wielded golden instruments. Her performance had become that of a woman with class and elegance at a level few could afford to attend, and she certainly would not be seen in small, local theaters. However, troubles began to brew in the field of vaudeville as Cora began to run into conflict with the Vaudeville Managers Protective Association (VMPA), a powerful organization of major theatre owners.

At the end of 1915, Cora found herself in Chicago to perform at the Keith's Hippodrome. However, her performance would not materialize. Instead, she found herself blacklisted due to her role in the White Rats Actors Union. She quickly became the face of opposition against the Vaudeville Managers Protective Association (VMPA). The state of Oklahoma became the stage for her fight as she led multiple strikes in Oklahoma City and Tulsa. As Oklahoma began to see the rise of unionism, Cora emerged as a leader and national example. Just as she had connected with a Native and Oklahoma persona to increase her popularity in vaudeville, Cora found that by attaching herself to an image as a working force hero, she could build a new popularity amidst a harrowing public fight. She reinvented her performance to appeal to a working-class audience that would attend her shows in Oklahoma and support her fight against the VMPA. Her response to the public blacklisting, call upon the support of Oklahoma, and strikes with the White Rats gave Cora the opportunity to fight for what she believed in while also marketing herself to a new

audience. Fortunately, Oklahoma provided the perfect space to reinvent herself as a socialist, a unionist, and achieve almost folk-hero status.

In Oklahoma, the politics of the 1910s became primarily Democratic and quickly worked on passing laws that discriminated against the many immigrants and poor Black and White farmers that had settled in the state. For instance, in 1910, voters had to complete a literacy test which virtually ended Black voting which meant that Democratic leaders no longer needed the support of the poor farmers and workers to balance the scales. This loss of political influence occurred alongside a declining economic standard for farmer with saw farm tenancy in Oklahoma increased 120 percent from 1900 to 1910. Facing the loss of political and economic safety, many impoverished farmers turned to the Socialist movement. By 1914, over twenty percent of voters in Oklahoma cast their lot for the Socialist party.[351] Therefore, Cora's decision to fall back to Oklahoma for support of fighting an unfair governing body showed her understanding of politics and how it could be used to help with public relations.

Within Vaudeville, the major theater chains fell under two cartels of theater managers. The Vaudeville Managers Association (VMA) was dominated by the Keith-Albee chain which controlled major theaters throughout the United States and Canada. In Chicago and most of the West, the Orpheum Circuit dominated through the Western Vaudeville Managers Association (WVMA). To assist in acquiring acts for their theaters, the VMA created the United Booking Office (UBO) in 1907, a theatrical employment agency. It allowed all the theaters to book acts

[351] "Twentieth Century Oklahoma," *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, https://www.okhistory.org/.

that had previously been unavailable to certain venues. It also ended the bidding wars for popular acts between managers.[352]

This seemed to be advantageous to both the actors and theaters, but the VMA soon became a monopsony in which this single employer dominated the labor market. The theater managers could control the pay and conditions of their acts. This issue only increased in 1913 when Edward Albee II managed to gain effective control over both the VMA and WVMA essentially controlling most of the acts in the country. This meant that the Keith-Albee chain could enforce any rule regarding pay for its acts since it controlled most of the theaters and the booking.[353] The acts that paid their dues, had access to the best theaters and schedules, but this became a source of contention for many acts. These unions held ultimate power over most of vaudeville removing any control from the artists who wanted to perform in the larger theaters. Those who did not toe the line would find themselves unable to secure bookings and therefore could not make a living in theater.

In response to the managers creating this monopsonies, the actors quickly banded together to form the White Rats Actors Union, the first union for vaudeville artists in the United States. They chose the name as a nod to one of the founding members, Mark Murphy, who had prematurely snow-white hair. They also noted that Rats spelled backward became "star."[354] The organization only accepted white male members into its ranks. In 1910, they received a charter from the American Federation of Labor and founded the Associated Actresses of America as a

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[352] Travis D. Stewart, *No Applause--Just Throw Money: The Book That Made Vaudeville Famous*, (New York: Faber and Faber Inc, 2005), 122-123.
[353] Stewart, *No Applause*, 122-123.
[354] Kerry Segrave, *Actors Organize: A History of Union Formation Efforts in America, 1880-1919*, (McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, North Carolina, 2008), 30.

sister organization to allow the membership of women.[355] Despite the union's efforts, by 1915, Keith-Albee used the UBO to increase their reach into almost 1,500 theaters.[356] They steadily increased their pressure on acts for more fees and control over their performances. If an act did not follow by their rules, they would be placed on a blacklist wherein they would be barred from all major theaters under the control of the VMA or WVMA.

At the end of 1915, Cora found herself in this position in Chicago. Her popularity in 1914 had propelled her into the largest theaters in the country with record attendance. She could now negotiate a better deal for her act against the VMA. On January 4, 1916, Cora announced that she would not pay the VMA "a booking fee equal to half her salary or more." However, they did not take well to her demands. Because of this, they refused her performance time on "one of the large western circuits." On top of this, Cora was placed firmly on the blacklist to ensure that she would no longer be able to perform at any of the major theaters she had once graced.

Instead of backing down, Cora decided to fight back against the VMA, VMPA, and UBO by calling upon the support of her native state. Fortunately, her farm in Anadarko brought in around $10,000 a year which allowed the freedom to openly confront the VMPA without much damage to her livelihood.[357] Her reputation as "The Oklahoma Girl" and internationally as "the world's most versatile lady musician" meant that her opinion held weight in the field of vaudeville. However, her popularity had been in the theaters considered "high vaudeville" which meant she was typically out of touch with the working class that would attend any small-town

[355] Anthony Slide, *The Encyclopedia of Vaudeville*, (Greenwood Press, Westport, CT, 1994), 554.
[356] Michael J. Haupert, *The Entertainment Industry*, (Greenwood Press, Westport, CT, 2006), 16.
[357] "Vaudeville Actors' Haven." *Billboard*, Vol. 32, No. 32, (August 7, 1920), 20.

theater. To succeed in Oklahoma, she needed to reinvent her image to appeal to the public which had not normally been able to afford or travel to see her performances.

To accomplish this, she presented herself as an independent artist and proud Oklahoman. She told the papers:

> My first move will be to invade my home state, where everybody believes in fair play. I shall take my act, with scenery, costumes, gold instruments, and all other properties, into the theaters of Oklahoma that are not controlled by these disreputable, bloodsucking Chicago grafters, and show them that I can prove my case before the greatest court in the world – the American public. The trust figures that its word is law – that it is the supreme court of vaudeville – but I know better. I know that they cannot survive if they do not give the theater patrons their money's worth. Dozens of good acts are laying off now, while cheaper ones are working, but I am not going to lay off. I am going to keep working. I leave for Oklahoma tonight, and I shall play the large towns and the small ones. The trust evidently wants a fight. They shall have it.[358]

True to her word, Cora immediately made her way to Oklahoma.

Once there, she began a "tour of two months throughout her native state," much to the benefit of small towns theaters that had never seen such high-quality vaudeville. Of course, the towns had the VMPA to thank for their good luck and made sure to mention it in their advertisements. In Claremore, Oklahoma, the paper announced her arrival due to "fighting the vaudeville trust." The paper also mentioned that the trust has "blacklisted Miss Corson because she played a theatre in Chicago that was not on their list." Fortunately, Cora's fighting spirit led her to "show them that she can 'get by' without their assistance." The paper also told that all should see the show because there was no question the show would be "the greatest vaudeville attraction ever booked to appear in Claremore."[359]

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[358] "Oklahoma Girl is Fighting Octopus," *Tulsa World*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, January 5, 1916.
[359] "She is Fighting the Vaudeville Trust," *Claremore Progress and Rogers County Democrat*, Claremore, Oklahoma, January 20, 1916, 7.

The girls upheld their reputation in every theater they graced in Oklahoma and Kansas. In Tahlequah, Oklahoma the paper lamented "the only objection heard that it was over too soon" but if they returned "they will be met by a large audience."[360] In Vinita, Oklahoma the act "was one of the best attractions seen in Vinita."[361] Echoed in Coffeyville, Kansas the act would be "the best vaudeville act ever playing Coffeyville."[362] Also in Coffeyville, *The Sun* reported "Miss Corson played in a theater that was not on the list owned by the trust" and was subsequently blacklisted.[363] In Collinsville, Oklahoma, the paper stated that the town "is to be treated to the best show obtainable in this part of the country… No act of higher class and no troupe with more native talent and with wider popularity could have been booked in Collinsville the Cora Youngblood Corson and her ladies' concert band." It also mentioned that "it is the act which the state of Oklahoma unanimously selects to represent it in theatrical circles everywhere."[364]



The Collinsville paper also remarked that "Cora is now waging a war with the vaudeville trust, and with the support of the Oklahoma constituency is making enormous headway in the fight." Her reputation became the novelty to sell the act. "This is the smallest town the act has ever shown in, having played in every town of any consequence in America. They have been

[360] "Cora Youngblood Corson's Lady Instrumentalists," *The Tahlequah Arrow*, Tahlequah, Oklahoma, January 22, 1916, 3.
[361] "The Cora Youngblood company," *The Vinita Weekly*, Vinita, Oklahoma, January 27, 1916, 8.
[362] "Coming First Half of Next Week," *The Morning News*, Coffeyville, Kansas, January 28, 1916, 1.
[363] "Orpheum," *The Sun,* Coffeyville, Kansas, January 29, 1916, 4.
[364] "Cora Youngblood Corson," *The Collinsville Times*, Collinsville, Oklahoma, February 2, 1916, 3.

featured at World expositions and exploited at state fairs everywhere they ever went and have painted the name of Oklahoma in conspicuous lights all over the United States."[365] Throughout the year, they continued to perform at smaller theaters throughout the state while speaking out against the unfair policies of major theater managers.

In an odd twist, in a move to force the VMPA into an agreement with the White Rats, in January 1916 Cora attempted to get a law passed in Oklahoma to ensure that the White Rats Actors Union would be the main organization for vaudeville performers. She began a campaign "among local lawmakers and labor union representatives on behalf of a bill that would require all vaudeville acts playing theaters in this state to have a White Rats Actors' Union contract with the manager of the house they play." Despite arguing that she fought against monopolistic organizations, she ultimately attempted to create one herself with the White Rats at the helm. As one of the life members of the Associated Actresses of America and being independently wealthy, she could put up this fight without fear. However, other acts were not so fortunate and could not afford to go against the wishes of the major theaters. The *Tulsa Daily World* reported it was "understood that state federation of labor will approve her bill and that there will be little opposition to the passage of the act."[366] However, it does not appear to have been passed. This perhaps shows that Cora was not as concerned with the practices of the VMPA but rather the restriction of her career. To maintain control of her popularity, Cora had simply changed her act. Now, she had to change the laws in order to find the power needed to remain where she wanted in vaudeville.

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[365] "Well Known Among Noted Musicians," *The Collinsville Weekly News,* Collinsville, Oklahoma, February 3, 1916, 1.
[366] "W.R.A.U. Contract May Become a Law," *Tulsa Daily World*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, January 28, 1916, 4.

This blacklist left Cora with few options to get her voice out to the public and fellow performers. She found an avenue in *Billboard* but so too did her opponents. The magazine became a public battleground between not only Cora but by extension, the White Rats Actors Union against the VMPA. Major James Doyle and Harry De Veaux, two vaudeville performers who did not agree with the tactics or leadership of the White Rats first wrote to *Billboard* to attack Harry Mountford, the leader of the White Rats for his failure in leadership and the past failings of the union.

In response, Cora retorted with her first column to establish her position and arguments against the VMPA giving them the "other side" of the case. She opened with:

> Dear Sir,
> This is a letter from a woman.
> This is a letter from a performer.
> This is a letter from a member of the Associated Actresses of America.
> This is a letter on behalf of the White Rats Actors' Union.

Cora then proceeded to refute the arguments made by Doyle and De Veaux by declaring that "that neither of this pair is sincere, and that they could be of no benefit to any organization of performers. They are traitors." Cora then argued that *Billboard* had turned against the actors in support of the VMPA who she claimed had paid off the major vaudeville publications. Her distrust in the paper had precedent as *Variety* had openly dismissed the White Rats and would not run their articles. For Cora, she saw this as the beginning of a new fight against the very publications that had once used her image on the covers of their magazines. She pointedly argued "If it is to be the performer versus the theatrical trust and *The Billboard* let us know it!"[367] This open letter began Cora's very public support of the White Rats Actors' Union. Unfortunately,

[367] "A Loyalist at Last Writes to The Billboard Asking Space," *Billboard*, Vol. 28, No. 7, (February 12, 1916), 3, 58, 63.

Cora's rush into openly attacking the largest vaudeville publications at the time meant that she would also lose her best avenue for public relations. Without the magazines, she would no longer have a national reputation further reducing her ability to control her public image.

The VMPA had managed to corner her into a small corner, but Cora refused to back down. Instead, she doubled down on the support of Oklahoma as a state that believes in fair practice. It appears that Cora saw Oklahoma as an area where she could control the narrative while keeping her career alive. To accomplish this, Cora continued to extoll her love for the state of Oklahoma as she continued her fight.

> The people of Oklahoma have always given me their unsolicited support. They have stood by me from the time I started in the music business and their encouragement has made me what I am, the most widely known lady musician in North America. I, in turn, have spelled my native state O-K-L-A-H-O-M-A in capital letters wherever I have appeared. And I am sure that in my present fight against the vaudeville trust they are going to stand by the girl who is engaged in the fight of her life. This battle is not waged selfishly, but on behalf of hundreds of other girls in the profession who are being placed under the contemptible ban of the trust's blacklist.
>
> Should I win this fight I will have Oklahoma to thank for my success, and Oklahoma will, in turn, be enabled to point with pride to their girl, the first professional woman to oppose the vipers who are attempting to dictate to all the theatrical world. It's a big battle, but it's being fought by a big girl with the assistance of the people of her native state. Oklahomans have overcome big odds in building this glorious commonwealth. They do not know the meaning of the word 'quitter.' I learned that during my residence in this state, and that is why I am doing what I am.
>
> I was brought up in Oklahoma and was taught to believe that we were free to do as we please so long as we did not violate the laws of the commonwealth. I did not believe that any body of men could make laws of their own that would forbid me making an honorable living in my chosen profession. And with that in mind I have taken it upon myself to place myself in your hands.
>
> Musically yours,
> Cora Youngblood Corson
> Of and For Oklahoma[368]

[368] "I'm Fighting the Vaudeville Trust," *The McAlester News-Capital*, McAlester, Oklahoma, February 12, 1916, 3.

Cora's passionate plea to her state came before a performance at Busby Theatre in McAlester, Oklahoma. This letter showcased not only her love for the state but her belief that Oklahomans would support a grassroots effort to fight against the trust. It is interesting to note that at no time does Cora call to a Native heritage nor does she perform as one in any theaters Instead, she is just using Oklahoma and the socialist, pro-union politics as a tool to help her regain control over her career. Her performances in small towns do not threaten the VMPA economically, but it does deny them the ability to completely control Cora's career on stage. Thus, her approach to Oklahoma is a public relations stunt meant to exploit the social and political climate of the state for her own benefit, just as she had used a Native image in the past.

As they continued to perform across the state, their musical ability became the draw. For instance, the Overholster Opera House in Oklahoma City, considered the best theater in the city, had the group perform. This endorsement by the Overholster drew attention, such as *The Kingfisher Times* stating that their booking there "in itself ought to be guarantee enough that it is a high class company."[369] In Guthrie, Oklahoma, the band was announced to be "beyond any doubt the very highest class attraction ever here."[370] They did not disappoint as the review stated the group consisted of "high grade artists" who "were pleasing and wholesome in person too."[371]

Cora continued to use these opportunities to create public sympathy to her cause be writing directly to the people of Oklahoma. However, the extent of her Oklahoma campaign does not seem to extend outside of the state. This localized reality of this public relations work built

[369] "Cozy Secures Stellar Attraction," *The Kingfisher Times*, Kingfisher, Oklahoma, February 17, 1916, 1.
[370] "Tonight Highland," *The Guthrie Daily Leader*, Guthrie, Oklahoma, February 22, 1916, 8.
[371] "The Cora Youngblood Corson," *Oklahoma State Register*, Guthrie, Oklahoma, February 24, 1916, 5.

the moral high ground for when she would take the next steps against the theater managers. She told of her dislike for Press Agents and that she only cared for the people and their happiness.

> The happiest day of my life was when I appeared at the Panama Exposition on Oklahoma Day. I have had many pleasant days in my life, but the one the State of Oklahoma gave me there stands foremost in my memory. It was not the expression of one or two people, but a handshake from all the people of a splendid commonwealth.
>
> My heart was in my mouth, tears stood in my eyes on that occasion which will ever be dear in my memory. It seemed to me that all of Oklahoma was there, proud of a native girl who had made good, glad in her success and glad of the opportunity to show it.
>
> I mean to show the people of Oklahoma that Oklahoma grit coupled with Oklahoma indorsement is a combination which nothing but the greatest of success can reward.[372]

Cora wanted to ensure that the State of Oklahoma knew where her heart lay and that her fight could succeed with their support.

In April 1916, the Southwest Vaudeville Managers Association (SWVMA) added a new circuit in Oklahoma, Texas, and Missouri. Acts for this route were booked by Charles E. Hodkins out of the Pantages offices in Chicago. Since they did not have an affiliation with the UBO or VMA, Cora and her group managed to secure booking to head a show on the circuit and proved to be a big feature.[373] With the SWVMA, they toured through Oklahoma and Texas until May.

During this time, Cora performed on the euphonium, tuba, and bagpipes at the twenty-fifth annual convention of the Oklahoma Press Association.[374] Following this performance, Cora

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[372] "Cora Youngblood Corson Opens Heart to Sing Praises of Her Native State," *The Daily Oklahoman*, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, February 20, 1916, 41.
[373] "The Southwest V.M.A.," *New York Clipper*, April 22, 1916, 6.
[374] "Following a spicy…," *The Morning Tulsa Daily World*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, May 16, 1916, 3.

took a well-deserved rest in Anadarko until July after a "very-successful season."[375] During this break, the White Rats Actors' Union appointed Cora as Deputy Organizer for the State of Oklahoma making her the first woman in a leadership position within the union. This is the break that Cora had been building towards with her campaigns through Oklahoma. By securing a local leadership position, she could now take the next steps to returning to a national level. Cora took this mantle and began a "red hot campaign" for the White Rats. She campaigned for theaters to only book White Rats members to combat the UBO. In Tulsa, she succeeded when the Broadway Theatre, which marked the opening of the Southwest Circuit, adopted the closed shop policy of White Rats meaning they would only hire acts that belonged to the union.[376] This small victory showed that she could make a difference within Oklahoma that could potentially spark change nationwide.

Soon, Cora's ability to lead would be tested as well as the extent she would be willing to go to return to national fame. In July, members of the musician's union in Oklahoma City allied themselves with the stagehands and 'movie' operators to walk out in protest for higher wages. Since Cora now led the White Rats of Oklahoma, she joined the strike until the demands of the strikers were met. The managers of the theatres held firm and attempted to hire other acts. However, Cora argued that if the White Rats decided the strike, then the theaters would be "unable to secure other performers to fill in until there is a settlement of the controversy."[377] These strikes garnered national news as part of a larger fight against the VMPA which gave Cora the not-so-glamorous return to a national spotlight.

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[375] "Vaudeville Notes," *Billboard*, Vol 28, No. 23, June 3, 1916, 17.
[376] "Cora Youngblood Corson, Deputy Organizer," *New York Clipper*, June 10, 1916, 3.
[377] "Musicians Strike with Stage Hands," *Tulsa Daily World*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, July 21, 1916, 5.

On July 16, stage employees from the Folly, Liberty, and Lyric theatres in Oklahoma City walked out and began a strike alongside some motion picture operators demanding a raise of $3 a week. The managers of the theatres declared that they would simply hire new employees or "go behind the scenes and in the booths to keep the shows running" themselves.[378] A week into the strike, no ground had been gained for either side. The Lyric theater under the management of Peter Sinopoulo continued to show five acts and claim that he could hold out against these strikes.[379] On July 28, the strike escalated with a picket line forming that impeded the approach to each theater.[380] This picket began showing signs of success as some acts began to quit from their contracts though the threat of violence became the excuse from the theater managers.[381]



After two weeks, the strike escalated once again as libelous statements began appearing in the newspaper from the managers of the Lyric, Folly, and Liberty theaters. The Tucker Brothers, owners and publishers of the *Free Pointer* newspaper, worked with the managers of the Metropolitan and Dreamland theaters to bring a $25,000 lawsuit against the picketed theater owners led by Sinopoulo. Cora also announced that a strike of the stagehands in Tulsa would be likely to place more pressure on theatre managers in the state.[382] To this end, W.M. Smith, manager of the Empress Theatre in Tulsa told the newspaper that the White Rats wanted an

[378] "Stage Hands Out, Striking for Pay," *The Daily Oklahoman*, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, July 17, 1916, 1.
[379] "New Theater After Strike?," *The Daily Oklahoman*, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, July 24, 1916, 8.
[380] "Theaters are Picketed," *The Daily Oklahoman*, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, July 28, 1916, 16.
[381] "Strikers Picket Theaters," *The Daily Oklahoman*, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, July 31, 1916, 2.
[382] "Newspaper Sues Theater Owners," *Tulsa Daily World*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, August 10, 1916, 1.

impossible task to hire only union associated acts. He argued that the fight should be the booking agents in Chicago against the White Rats rather than targeting the theater managers directly.[383]

To promote their own acts, the White Rats and leaders from the other unions raised money to rent the Metropolitan Theatre to provide an alternative venue for customers who wanted to support the strikers. Cora was not only instrumental in acquiring the lease, but she and her girls paraded through Oklahoma City to promote that they would be performing at the Metropolitan with nine other vaudeville acts. While used by all the striking unions, the White Rats bore the brunt of the cost for the lease.[384] Unfortunately, the theater could not operate at a profit and drained money from the White Rats so much that the organization had to borrow money to continue their activities.[385]

As the strike continued, the public opinion began to support the strikers. The theaters in Oklahoma City had far fewer in attendance than an average night. The unions began declaring their victory over the Oklahoma City Theatrical Managers' Association.[386] However, an ultimate victory still looked out of reach as both sides declared "they have plenty of money to back them and are supremely confident of winning." Ultimately, the strike would end with either the theaters being blacklisted by the White Rats, or the Rats being destroyed as an organization.[387] Furthermore, this crusade was not supported by all White Rats who saw Cora's strike as a ridiculous request. Dr. Joy's Sanitarium, an act that also belonged to the White Rats denounced Cora and the strike writing "Miss Cora Youngblood Corson, who lives in Oklahoma City or

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[383] "Strike Directed at Booking Agencies," *The Tulsa Democrat*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, August 11, 1916, 9.
[384] "Actor's Strike will be Called in Tulsa," *The Tulsa Democrat*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, August 11, 1916, 10.
[385] "Mountford's Statements Not Borne Out by Facts," *Billboard*, Vol. 28, No. 36, (September 2, 1916), 8.
[386] "Theater Strike Continues; Employees Winning," *Oklahoma Federationist*, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, August 12, 1916, 1.
[387] "White Rat-ism at Stake," *The Daily Oklahoman*, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, August 19, 1916, 3.

neighborhood, and who had nothing to lose, thought she'd call a strike because a couple of stagehands wanted $3 a week more, and I should pull out and lose a few hundred. I think it's unfair to acts that come down there."[388]

The strike also created a poor image of Oklahoma in the press. Cora was once again losing the war of public perception. One article stated that people feared traveling to the state because of the troubles:

> Such things do not help the reputation of any city and especially one in the southwest. People from the east are all under the impression that Oklahoma is populated by bandits, cowboys, and wild Indians, with bandits in the majority. Some of them are reluctant to come to the state in times of peace and it is a wonder that they will come at all when a theatrical war is raging.[389]

Nevertheless undaunted, Cora and her Rats continued the strike. Cora also took the fight to the courts as she sued the Theatrical Managers Association of Oklahoma City for $20,000 after an article published by the association reflected poorly on Cora.[390] In contrast, Harry Mountford, the President of the White Rats Actors Union praised Cora and the strike in *Variety* magazine stating:

> Miss Corson is in this fight and accepted the position of Honorary Chief Deputy Organizer for Oklahoma because she felt that she could do some good for the men and women among whom she has spent many years, and with whom she earns her living. Her actions and attitude in this matter have proved her an honest, fearless, unselfish, and generous-hearted woman – and the first reward that she received from the scurrilous and libelous pens of the suborned newspapers is that she is doing this for pay.[391]

In August, new pickets began to form in front of the Empress Theater in Tulsa as the Oklahoma strikes grew. On August 22, the picket escalated as two men were arrested while

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[388] "Artists' Forum," *Variety*, Vol. 63, No. 11, (August 11, 1916), 8.
[389] "Roughnecks at the Capital," *The Evening Times*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, August 19, 1916, 4.
[390] "Miss Corson Sues Theatrical Heads," *Tulsa World*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, August 16, 1916, 2.
[391] Harry Mountford, "The Oklahoma Outburst," *Variety*, Vol, 43, No. 12, (August 18, 1916), 14.

picketing the Empress Theater. Officially, they were arrested for disturbing the peace by talking during their pickets. The White Rats promised to fight this arrest up into the highest courts.[392] Despite the union support, both men were fined $25.[393] This incident further widened the divide between the cities and theater managers and the labor union so much so that the Oklahoma State Federation of Labor pass a resolution denouncing the actions of J.H. McEwen, president of the Tulsa Chamber of Commerce.[394] It appears that for Cora, these strikes succeeded as a publicity stunt that gave her more control to expand out of Oklahoma. During the strike, Cora and her group took a break from Oklahoma to travel to St. Louis and begin another performance tour leaving the strike to continue without her leadership.[395] This appears to show that Cora's leadership was not the goal in pushing the strike, instead, Cora used the White Rats Actors Union and its resources to regain control of her image. She changed her identity to appeal with the working-class audience and garnered enough support to gain employment at more theaters outside of Oklahoma.

Without Cora's leadership and the poor publicity, the strike soon lost steam. The introduction of the White Rats brought too many issues to the cause. Cora and her Rats demanded a "closed shop" policy wherein only union-associated acts could perform at the theaters. This absurd demand damaged the public image of the stagehands' cause. By September, *The Employer*, the journal of the Oklahoma Employers Association, declared that the strike had

[392] "Theater Pickets Put Under Arrest," *The Morning Tulsa Daily World*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, August 22, 1916, 5.
[393] "Theater Pickets Draw Fines of $25," *The Morning Tulsa Daily World*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, August 23, 1916, 10.
[394] "Unionists Criticize Head of Chamber Commerce for Anti-Union Sympathy," *The Tulsa Democrat*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, August 24, 1916, 1.
[395] "Good Bill at Grand Opera House," *The St. Louis Star and Times*, St. Louis, Missouri, August 23, 1916, 9.

"fizzled out. It has been a fizzle from the beginning."[396] That same week, more arrests and fines followed for picketers in Oklahoma City.[397]

Perhaps to save their image, the White Rats began to argue that they had planned a nation-wide strike in October, but the Oklahoma strikes provided a good starting point for them. Francis Gilmore, an organizer for the White Rats, told the press that the heart of the issue was the theatrical trust "composed of the Interstate and Orpheum Circuits, Western Manager association, and United Booking association." For the Rats, they had three purposes for their strikes: "to eliminate graft by booking agents; enforcement of closed shop policy for White Rats only; protection of women of the profession against unscrupulous booking agents and managers."[398] Cora's support and small successes in Oklahoma proved that they could fight back if they had the support of the public but it also showed that Cora could use these strikes as a way to return to the national public's attention.

On September 16, the idea that a State Board of Arbitration and Conciliation should be formed gained traction and by September 23, the newly formed board investigated the strike.[399] After testimony from all parties, the Board suggested a compromise that would include: a contract between managers and stagehands that only union stage employees be employed in the city; that wages be increased by $3 per week; that workers not have to arrive before 11:00am and are given proper time for relief periods, lunch, supper, and are not required to work later than 10:30pm; and that all those who went on strike are reinstated in their positions with the theaters.

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[396] "Editorial," *The Employer*, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, September 1, 1916, 12.
[397] "Two Theater Pickets Fined," *The Oklahoma City Times*, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, September 9, 1916, 1.
[398] "Inside Dope of Rat Union May be Told Board," *The Oklahoma News*, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, September 14, 1916, 1.
[399] "Arbitration Board Investigates Strike," *Oklahoma Federationist*, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, September 16, 1916, 1; "State Board is Holding Session on Strike Cause," *Oklahoma Federationist*, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, September 23, 1916, 1.

This decision did not include any discussion of the White Rats' demand of only hiring their performers.[400]

The theater managers chose not to follow the recommendation and instead increased their opposition to the strikers. On October 14, the Oklahoma City Commissioners, working with the theater managers, passed an ordinance that made it:

> unlawful for any person, or persons, to walk, stand, or loiter on any street, sidewalk, alley, or public place within the city of Oklahoma City, in front of, or near to any place of business, and call out, speak to, or attract the attention of any person along such street, sidewalk, alley or public place, with the intent to induce such person or patronize or not to patronize such place of business.

The ordinance also made it illegal to display a sign or banner while walking or standing on any street.[401]

In response, the pickets began again with Mayor Edward Overholser declaring he would not enforce the ordinance until he had "looked over the situation."[402] Meanwhile, the ordinance went before the high court to determine its constitutionality.[403] Soon, another blow came down upon Cora and the White Rats. On November 1, 1916, the Vaudeville Managers' Protective Association placed a national order against booking any White Rats acts because of their picketing activities in Oklahoma.[404] On top of this, E.F. Albee founded the National Vaudeville Artists, Inc., (NVA) in 1916 as a "company union" for vaudeville artists as a means to take away the strength of the White Rats.[405] Membership in this organization became a requirement for artists to book with the UBO which caused even more acts to leave the White Rats. This blow

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[400] "Board Submits Findings," *Oklahoma Federationist*, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, September 30, 1916, 1.
[401] "Ordinance is Intolerable," *Oklahoma Federationist*, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, October 14, 1916, 1.
[402] "Pickets Again in Front of Shows," *The Daily Oklahoman*, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, October 17, 1916, 1.
[403] "Ordinance Before High Court," *Oklahoma Federationist*, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, October 21, 1916, 1.
[404] "Booking Lockout Effective Today," *The Daily Oklahoman*, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, November 1, 1816, 9.
[405] Slide, 368.

and the continuance of the strike dwindled the White Rat support of the strike, and they began to distance themselves from an active role in Oklahoma City.[406] The strike had damaged the Union's national image and shaken the faith of many union members who began to call out Harry Mountford's shady dealings and hypocritical attitude toward striking union members.[407] The strike seemed to be the beginning of the end for the White Rats Actors Union.

For Cora, November brought some success for both her and her family as she recovered from the stress of performing and leading the Oklahoma strikes. Cora's brother-in-law, Glenn Condon, began his campaign for state representative with Cora and her band invited as the entertainment for his rallies in Broken Arrow, Skiatook, and Sand Springs.[408] In the realm of her Union work, Harry Mountford used Cora's Oklahoma strike to push the case for the White Rats to be acknowledged by the Federation of Labor instead of a new union, the Actor's Equity Association. The theatrical strike proved to be the discussion point of the Federation of Labor convention. The White Rats' cooperation with the various union stagehands, musicians, and operators in Oklahoma City and Tulsa became the key feature in Mountford's argument as he extolled of Cora's successful leadership.[409]

During this period, the editors of both *Billboard* and *Variety* began to voice their opinions against the White Rats and specifically Cora Youngblood Corson. The editors of *Billboard* announced that they would print pro-White Rats letters, but they did not support the union. Cora had lost the war of public relations. The push against *Billboard* and *Variety* had caused the loss of the only hope she had of reaching the national public eye as she had done in years prior.

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[406] "Arson and Violence," *The Employer*, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, November 1, 1916, 7.
[407] "Harry Mountford – Will You Make Good," *Billboard*, Vol. 28, No. 43, (October 21, 1916), 20.
[408] "Candidates Have an Eventful Day," *Tulsa World*, November 4, 1916.
[409] "White Rats Get Support of Labor," *Tulsa Daily World*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, November 23, 1916, 4.

Billboard stated, "we are convinced that the White Rats Actors' Union is not what it purports to be – that it is not a union at all, but an organized predatory raid upon the resources of the vaudeartists of America." This opinion meant that they would not print any pro-Rats advertisements from Harry Mountford.[410] The White Rats would not receive any support from *Billboard* for their crusade. Likewise, *Variety* criticized Cora in an article titled "Cora's Self Boosting" for sending letters to acts performing at non-union theaters that contained "much literature mostly about the Cora Youngblood Corson act."[411] Without positive national attention, Cora continued to sell out the small Oklahoma theaters before moving into Kansas at the end of November.

In December 1916, Cora took her band through Kansas. The newspapers heralded their talents enticing all to come watch the special show that could only before having been seen in major theaters. The *Columbus Daily Advocate* also wrote an article detailing the accolades of Cora Youngblood Corson through statements of "notable men of the country." Many of these had been printed in the previous months through various newspapers. This repetition seems to indicate an attempt to salvage parts of her reputation that may have been damaged through the Oklahoma strikes. It read, in part:

> "Someday this little girl will be greater in her line than Sousa." – interpreted from an expression by the late Apache Warrior, Geronimo, who presented Miss Corson with a tree woven blanket shortly before his death. – Anadarko, Okla., Sept. 12th, 1908
>
> "Such music can only be inspired by genius," Wm. H. Taft, Cincinnati, Ohio, Notification Day
>
> "Thank God that Oklahoma has produced a girl who can play like you, Miss Corson.," – the late Wm. McKinley, at Buffalo World's Fair
>
> "If you are as beautiful in looks as the music you play is good, you must be the prettiest young lady in the universe." – Thomas Pryor Gore, Senator from Okla., Anadarko, Okla.

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[410] "West's Letter," *Billboard*, Vol. 38, No. 45, November 4, 1916, 14.
[411] "Cora's Self Boosting," *Variety*, Vol. 44, No. 13, November 24, 1916, 5.

> "It is greater to be a silver-toned Musician like Miss Corson than to be a silver-tongued orator." – Wm. J. Bryan, Anadarko, Okla., Oct. 2nd, 1902.[412]

As she had done in the past, Cora attempted to draw a connection to Geronimo to connect back to her Native exoticism. However, these are so ludicrous that they show a desperate attempt to regain a positive image. For instance, Cora did not play at the Buffalo World's Fair and there is no reference to William J. Bryan ever mentioning Cora during his visit to Anadarko.

By January 3, 1917, Cora and her "9 Lady Musicians" were in Fort Scott, Kansas performing at the Theaterette.[413] Advertisements in Kansas called attention to her skill and professionalism by discussing her ability to perform her vaudeville dates, write sketches, "transact most of the business in connection with her theatrical enterprises, manages her ranch and stock farm at Anadarko, Okla., and personally buys all her thoroughbred cows, hogs, and Shetland ponies."[414] The ladies continued their tour as a traveling Orpheum special show through the Midwest. While traveling through Missouri the papers heralded Cora's abilities by comparing her to another woman stating, "What Mary Garden is to Opera, Cora Youngblood Corson is to the Brass Instrument."[415] Garden, being one of America's most famous and talented opera singers at the time. In Illinois, the papers also lauded upon Cora and her group with statements such as calling them "the greatest aggregation of lady musicians appearing before the American public today."[416] The ladies also continued under the moniker "Oklahoma's Prodigys."[417] Cora's success as an independent show continued to draw the ire of the VMPA. If a theater played Cora's act, they received a letter from the VMPA to convince them to stop

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[412] "Give Her Great Praise," *Columbus Daily Advocate*, Columbus, Kansas, December 22, 1916, 6.
[413] "Theaterette," *Fort Scott Daily Tribune and Fort Scott Daily Monitor*, Fort Scott, Kansas, January 3, 1917, 4.
[414] "A Versatile Lady," *The Miami Republican*, Paola, Kansas, January 5, 1917, 3.
[415] "Grand Theatre," *Jefferson City Post-Tribune*, Jefferson City, Missouri, January 13, 1917, 1.
[416] "The Season's Treat," *Daily Republican-Register*, Mount Carmel, Illinois, February 9, 1917, 1.
[417] "Majestic Theater," *Journal Gazette*, Mattoon, Illinois, February 14, 1917, 8.

booking independently and instead use the trust to obtain "a good consistent show each week."[418] Cora had successfully made her way out of Oklahoma into more theaters against the power of the VMPA. Her successful use of Oklahoma to change her public image allowed some power to control her own career without the theater managers. However, her good tidings and the successful press would not last against the power of the theater monopolies.

In February, J. Leslie Spahn arrived in Chicago, Illinois ahead of the act having them booked in advance. But Chicago was a powder keg for the White Rats Actors Union. A strike had been reportedly planned by the union the first week of February, but it failed to materialize in Chicago. The vaudeville managers did not even take precautions against it as they paid little attention to strike rumors. In response to save face, Harry Mountford announced that the call for a strike from their New York headquarters had not been authorized. Mountford also declared that the "acts of the V.M.P.A. are in direct contradiction of the Sherman Anti-Trust Law" and that he and "W. Rubin, a Milwaukee labor attorney" and "Edw. Nockels, secretary of the Chicago Federation of Labor" had met with "U.S. District Attorney Clyne" to ask for prosecution of the vaudeville managers.[419] This trouble would soon boil over into making Cora national news once more.



On March 8, 1917, the White Rats called for a strike of Chicago theaters. Although the union expected more support, only one act, the Four Danubes, walked out. Many other theaters had no problems and continued to run smoothly. However, the Windsor, Lincoln, Hippodrome,

[418] "Playing Independent and Getting Business," *The Missouri Breeze*, Chicago, Illinois, January 19, 1917.
[419] "Strike of White Rats in Chicago Didn't Materialize," *New York Clipper*, February 14, 1918, 15.

Kedsie Avenue, and Academy Theatres had pickets working in front of their establishments distributing handbills and declaring the unfair conditions they work in.[420] Cora, took up the mantle for the White Rats and, as head of the Associated Actresses of America, led a spirited campaign on "behalf of unionism for actors and actresses via booklets and folders."[421]

Cora and her ladies, May McBride, Fern Senoff, Gladys Cronk, Grace Acton, Hattie Acton, Ida Mundell, and Ethel Hiatt joined the picketers at the various theatres. On the 8th, Cora and her ladies picketed the Lincoln Theatre where they were arrested and "taken to the Sheffield Station and later released on bonds." On the 11th, Cora and a few of her ladies were once again arrested for picketing the Kedzie Theatre alongside other strikers.[422] That same evening, six more of Cora's band were arrested while picketing Windsor Theatre for "creating a plot and disturbing the peace."[423] The White Rats claimed that there would be a larger tie-up in Chicago within two weeks that would result in a big victory for them.[424] However, the White Rats could not materialize this victory.

Instead, this "nation-wide strike" failed spectacularly with reportedly only 20 acts following the order. *Billboard* declared the strike "the most dismal of failures, and even the most sanguine of the Rat supporters are fast beginning to realize the hopelessness of their cause." No theatres suffered any loss of shows or business. To the editors of the *Billboard* the strike seemed a "last dying effort" of the leadership which had failed to accomplish any major victories for their union. The "rodent organization" could not wield its membership as an effective weapon against the V.M.P.A. and now the nation had witnessed their failure. In response many of the

[420] "Pickets Busy at Chicago Houses," *New York Clipper*, March 14, 1917, 5.
[421] "Cora Corson Issues Booklets," *New York Clipper*, March 14, 1917, 15.
[422] "Pickets Busy at Chicago Houses," *New York Clipper*, March 14, 1917, 5.
[423] "Chicago, March 12," *Billboard*, March 17, 1917, Vol. 29, No. 11, 9.
[424] "Pickets Busy at Chicago Houses," *New York Clipper*, March 14, 1917, 5.

theatre managers asserted that they would no longer hire acts belonging to the White Rats. Marcus Loew of the Loew Circuit, publicly announced that "so long as I am in the show business none of them will ever work for me, you can depend upon that."[425]

The strike lost even more power when the law turned against the strikers on March 14, 1917, when Chicago Judge Jesse A. Baldwin issued an injunction against several leaders of the White Rats Actors Union. This injunction established a restraining order against many picketers including Cora Youngblood Corson "and all associations, firms, and persons assisting and aiding them or conspiring with them." The judge strictly commanded them to "desist and refrain from interfering with said complainants, said theatres and business, respectively, and with any of the employees of the said theatres." This mean that they could not picket or even hand out union material in the vicinity of the theaters.[426] This concerned many of the Rats as a month previous, the same judge issued an anti-picketing injunction against a garment worker's strike. He followed this by sentencing one of the striking workers to 60 days in the Bridewell prison.[427]

With their power to strike gone, the White Rats attempted to show their power by performing a show in the Columbia Theatre just opposite the Windsor Theatre where they had picketed. This show of all White Rats members garnered poor attendance and even worse reviews. A reviewer for *Variety* wrote that the show "was purely for public sympathy." Regardless of their attempt, the Windsor Theatre still "registered a solid profit" despite the competition. Cora and her act closed the show. The reviewer stated her act "had not made any improvements since last seen and filled the Columbia with enough noise to make a boiler factory seem quiet by comparison."[428]

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[425] "More Attempted Strikes by W.R.A.U. are Fiascos," *Billboard*, Vol. 29, No. 11, March 17, 1917, 6,8.
[426] "Picketing Injunction," *Variety*, Vol. 46, No. 4, March 23, 1917, 6.
[427] "Picketers in Blacklist," *Variety*, Vol. 46, No. 4, March 23, 1917, 7.
[428] "Columbia," *Variety*, Vol. 46, No. 4, March 23, 1917, 42-43.

This failure further buried the White Rats as the V.M.P.A. took this opportunity to add all the picketing acts to its blacklist. On March 23, 1917, *Variety* published an article detailing how the blacklist worked. The list was designed so "an agent running afoul of it will lose his booking franchise in whatever offices or agencies he may have the privilege of booking." The V.M.P.A. indicated that any agent booking a blacklisted act, even under an assumed name, would face consequences. Each agent had to research each act they booked to ensure that none of the actors or actresses had been placed on the list. The official list would not be published, but "any agent booking through any office of a circuit or manager belonging to the V.M.P.A. may be informed whether any names or titles are on the blacklist." The V.M.P.A. designed this to disenfranchise outside agents and essentially force anyone who caught their ire out of vaudeville.[429]

Unfortunately, Cora seemed to be place at the top of this list at the V.M.P.A. vehemently fought against her and her career. As an article in *Variety* put it, "While the White Rats troubles were on, Miss Corson had written and talked. She easily wrote and talked herself onto the Keith's "blacklist" and Miss Corson liked it – she kept on working and kept on talking." Aid to the cause of the V.M.P.A. accidentally came from the White Rats leadership in the form of Harry Mountford. In a public statement, Mountford's frustrations came to the forefront. Due to the lack of success in the strikes in New York City and Boston, he claimed that "the Loew circuit for the past six weeks has been playing the lowest class of acts, made up of the sweepings of the gutter, as no decent act would accept time on the Loew circuit because of the terrible conditions on it." This wild statement did not bring any support to the Rats but instead further isolated them from most vaudeville performers by driving an even larger rift between union and non-union acts. This, paired with the lackluster showing for the strikes, led *Variety* to declare this period to be

[429] "Agents Will Lose Franchises if Booking Blacklisted Acts," *Variety*, Vol. 46, No. 4, March 23, 1917, 1.

"the death knell to Mountfordism."[430] The term "Mountfordism" had become an aspersing term for discussing the White Rats Actors Union which meant that the death of Mountford's leadership spelled the end of the White Rats.

The VMPA also turned its wrath to those who assisted Cora Youngblood Corson such as E.E. Meredith of Chicago, Illinois. Meredith edited and published *The Missouri Breeze*, a leading vaudeville and theatrical publication. Meredith had assisted Cora in obtaining bookings in Chicago despite the blacklist. J. Leslie Spahn also used the *Breeze* office as his headquarters while working with Cora and the White Rats during their strike. As punishment, the VMPA announced that they would not allow Meredith "the usual courtesy of the booking offices and theatres given newspapermen hereafter."[431] This further alienated Cora from her allies that feared retribution from the VMPA.

As public opinion turned against the White Rats, so too did the representation of Cora turn in the papers. *Billboard* wrote that Cora had been "the greatest agitator on picket duty before the injunction against picketing." They also noted that "together with her eight girls she picketed in front of different houses and was arrested several times." The article also mentioned that picketing would be classed as a misdemeanor and could result in imprisonment.[432] In a more negative tone, *Variety* wrote that "Cora Youngblood Corson expects a Carnegie medal for riding the Chicago police patrol wagons." The magazine also stated that the restraining injunction did "the Chicago picketing crowd an inestimable favor" but giving them "an alibi for not picketing, a job none of the faithful few relished."[433] What little success her time in Oklahoma had given her

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[430] "Mountford's Wild Statement Enrages Small Time Acts," *Variety*, Daily Bulletin No. 9, March 10, 1917, 3; "Mountfordism Dead in Chicago and Boston," *Variety*, Daily Bulletin No. 9, March 10, 1917, 4.
[431] "Mountfordism Dead in Chicago and Boston," *Variety*, Daily Bulletin No. 9, March 10, 1917, 4.
[432] "Chicago, March 19," *Billboard*, Vol. 29, No. 12, March 24, 1917, 190.
[433] "Cora Youngblood Corson," *Variety*, Vol. 46, No. 4, March 23, 1917, 9.

control now meant nothing. Appealing to Oklahoma's working class and pro-union crowds could only get her so far. Unfortunately, with the ultimate power of the VMPA, Cora would not return to the grand stages of vaudeville, even if she changed her identity multiple times to be exotic.

Back in Oklahoma, the impact of the Oklahoma City strikes still rang true. The *Tulsa World* wrote of her role in Chicago and published an interview with her on the matter.

> To slightly paraphrase the old saw – 'it will never get well if you picket' – would be to misrepresent my case. I had a terrible headache one evening last week and was in anything but a good humor when I went from my hotel to picket, and the open air and excitement drove my illness clear out of mind and I enjoyed the evening very much.
>
> Picketing is not so exciting here as it was in Oklahoma City, but then the strike is young yet. Another thing which I figure counts against the excitement is the fact that all the theaters in Oklahoma City are within four or five blocks of each other while in Chicago the affected houses are so far apart that a picket at one house knows nothing of what is going on at the others…
>
> These visits to the police station are becoming commonplace. The time there is getting dull, so the officers have studied our ways of amusement. They dug up an old cornet that some prisoner had left there, and my girls played it a little one night. We often have games of checkers to pass the time. The police officers appear very much interested in the Cora Youngblood Corson act and have promised to come to the Columbia the "last half" to see us.
>
> I wish to take this opportunity to sat that I did not come to Chicago with any idea of starting a strike, tho I am glad to have had an opportunity of doing my bit in the fight. I had nothing more to so with the strike than anyone else. I followed the instruction of my superiors just like anyone else.[434]

Their "popularity" in Chicago garnered quite a bit of attention from fellow Oklahomans. Cora refused to back down and even "had a copy of the injunction framed and is very proud of it." Reportedly, an unnamed wealthy oil magnate of Okmulgee, Oklahoma had been in Chicago and read the articles about Cora and her arrests. Since he had met Cora multiple time before, he "was anxious to assist the plucky girl." So, he "placed thousands of dollars in cash at her disposal and prepared to remain in Chicago indefinitely so as to put up cash bonds for Miss Corson and her

[434] "Oklahoma Girl Wake Up 'Chi'," *Morning Tulsa Daily World*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, April 1, 1917, 11.

assistants as long as the police cared to arrest them."[435] The financial support for Cora came only from those who knew her connection to Oklahoma. Without any major support, the strike would fail.

Unbeknownst to Cora or any of the other White Rats, their entire fight against the V.M.P.A. would come to a screeching halt on April 6, 1917, when the United States declared war on Germany thrusting the country into the Great War. On April 10, Harry Mountford declared all strike by the White Rats to be called off. Mountford argued that is the a "patriotic duty, with the nation at war, to refrain from striking as proof of their loyalty and patriotism."[436] Another blow came to the White Rats when Theresa Maridol, an actress and wife to the president of Chicago's local chapter of the White Rats passed away later in the month. Cora and her ladies served as pallbearers for the funeral in Mt. Carmel, Illinois.[437] With her funeral, any further want to push their fight in Chicago subsided.

To find work, J. Leslie Spahn created a White Rats roadshow that would present acts that belonged to the union, although he did not always advertise this association.[438] Seven other acts joined Cora Youngblood Corson in this tour. All belonged to either the White Rats Actors' Union or the Associated Actresses of America. Echoing her tour of Oklahoma, the year prior, newspapers reported on the circumstances that led to Cora's act performing at small local theatres. In Princeton, Illinois, the paper stated that:

> only because of labor trouble between the booking agents and the members of the actors' and actresses' unions that a star of this kind is secured for Princeton.

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[435] "Oklahoma Girl Wake Up 'Chi'," *Morning Tulsa Daily World*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, April 1, 1917, 11.
[436][436] Kerry Segrave, *Actors Organize: A History of Union Formation Efforts in America, 1880-1919*, (McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, North Carolina, 2008), 137.
[437] "Theresa Maridol," *New York Clipper*, Vol. 65, No. 12, April 25, 1917, 23.
[438] "Spahn has White Rat Show," *New York Clipper*, Vol. 65, No. 12, April 25, 1917, 5.

> Under normal conditions an actress of her reputation and standing would be booked for weeks and even months ahead on the Orpheum circuit.[439]

The unfortunate truth in this statement reflects the depth Cora had fallen because of her union work.

This show continued through Illinois garnering the same type of attention. In Henry, Illinois the paper stated, "such a program as the one Tuesday evening is not often seen in large city theaters, and to be in a place so small as Henry it is a rare treat."[440] The performance of such high-quality acts cost only between .35 and .50 cents.[441] This could not last financially, and by June the act had ended its tour. Cora and her ladies traveled back to their homes for an extended break from performing. Cora returned to Anadarko, visited friends around Tulsa, and attended family reunions.[442] She continued her fight against the VMPA even when she was not performing.

By September 1917, Cora felt that she had no power to compete with the trust. The failure of the White Rats Strike coupled with her lack of power after being blacklisted for over a year left her with no options. In desperation, Cora reached out to Eugene V. Debs asking for assistance in fighting the union. Debs had very public career as an American socialist, political activist, trade unionist, and candidate for President of the United States from the Socialist Party. He became one of the most well-known socialists in the country, especially in Oklahoma where his union, the Industrial Workers of the World, had become prominent. In the 1910s, the Socialist Party had become one of the dominant organizations in the state with almost 20 percent of Oklahomans supporting the party.

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[439] "Big Vaudeville Program at Apollo Tomorrow," *Bureau County Tribune*, Princeton, Illinois, April 27, 1917, 1.
[440] "All-Star Vaudeville," *Henry Republican*, Henry, Illinois, May 3, 1917, 1.
[441] "8 Big Acts," *Rock Island Argus*, Rock Island, Argus, May 12, 1917, 7.
[442] "Collinsville," *Tulsa Democrat*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, June 24, 1917, 20; "Mr. And Mrs. Glenn Condon," *Tulsa Daily World*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, August 5, 1917, 20.

On September 5, 1917, she received a disappointing response that no help would be forthcoming from Debs' brother, Theodore:

> Dear Comrade Corson,
>
> Your very kind letter of the 26th is received. Your words of personal kindness in reference to my brother are all too generous, but I beg you to believe that I am deeply touched, as he will be, by this beautiful tribute of your confidence and esteem. Coming from you, one who knows and understands the struggle of the workers, one who staunchly upholds principle against the most bitter opposition, sacrifices and suffers for conviction, - such words from such a comrade will be as cheering as they are inspiring and appreciated for more than these poor words of mine can express…
>
> In the work you are doing you have the comfort and satisfaction of knowing that you are in the right; that you are building for the future; that your efforts are not in vain; and that it will live to bless all the race long, long after the Booking Trust is dead and remembered – if at all – only for its infamy.[443]

On October 3, 1917, Cora sent another telegram to Debs. Cora lamented that upon arriving in Rochester, New York, the V.M.P.A. "have ordered my work cancelled on account of my fight for my organization." She pleaded for help from Debs stating, "if I let them get away with this I'll be forced to quit."[444] A response has not survived but it does not seem that Debs was able to offer any assistance. These pleas for help seemed to be Cora's last gasp of breath before her fight slipped away.

That same month, the V.M.P.A. made good on their promise to enforce their blacklist even further. Cora Youngblood Corson and her octette had contracts to perform in the Lyric, Buffalo, and Family theaters in Rochester, New York the first few weeks of October 1917. Despite these contracts, the managers of the Family and Lyric "both house members of the Vaudeville Managers' Protective Association, were informed they could not play the act." It was reported that the managers were given an ultimatum that if they allowed Cora to perform then

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[443] Letter from Theodore Debs to Cora Youngblood Corson, September 5, 1917, Eugene V. Debs Collection, Indiana State University Library.
[444] Telegram from Cora Youngblood Corson to Theodore Debs, October 3, 1917, Eugene V. Debs Collection, Indiana State University Library.

they would lose their membership in the V.M.P.A. Cora threatened legal action against these houses, but the managers were "apparently agreeable to it in preference to playing the turn." Cora had apparently been booked through an "outside agent" and therefore should never have been given a contract due to the blacklist. Now, the theater managers had to "take their medicine."[445]

In November, both Cora and the White Rats Actor's Union continued to face major public issues. Harry Mountford faced a court case in the New York Supreme Court wherein he admitted to illegal operations between the W.R.A.U. and the White Rats Realty Co. This placed even greater strains between the few remaining White Rats members and the organization and further villainized the union in the eyes of the public. Alongside this, in Providence, Rhode Island, it became known that an act called "Florence Livingstone and Her Oklahoma Prodigies" had been booked at Edward M. Fay's Theatre through the M.R. Sheedy Agency in New York. Inquiry revealed Florence Livingston had been Cora Youngblood Corson under an assumed name.[446] Further investigation revealed that Cora had appeared at the Colonial Theatre in Newport, Rhode Island, as the "Nine Broadway Musical Belles," as well as the Academy Theatre in Lowell, Massachusetts, and then performed in Haverhill, Massachusetts, with these theatres being "booked through John J. Quigley of Boston." None of these theatres had a connection with the V.M.P.A. but the blacklist against her still stood strong in the eyes of the Association. Therefore, the V.M.P.A. turned their attention toward the managers that had booked her.[447]

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[445] "Blacklisted Act Barred from V.M.P.A. Theatres," *Variety*, Vol. 48, No. 8, October 19, 1917, 6.
[446] "Mountford Admits Rats' Funds Were Place in Realty Stock," *Variety*, Vol. 48, No. 11, November 9, 1917, 7; "Fay's Theatre in Bad," *Variety*, Vol. 48, No. 11, November 9, 1917, 7.
[447] "Fay's Theatre in Bad," *Variety*, Vol. 48, No. 11, November 9, 1917, 7.

Variety reported that one of the managers called Fay had filed "an application for membership" in the V.M.P.A. but it had not been decided upon. It was assumed that by playing Cora at his theater, Fay likely eliminated "that house from any further consideration for V.M.P.A. membership." The article also believed "an immediate adjustment of the Sheedy agency" would come "in so far as it relates to booking theatres belonging to" the V.M.P.A. This would be accomplished through targeting the theatres that use Sheedy as a booking agency, namely the "Gordon Brother's theatres in New England." *Variety* believed the V.M.P.A. would "call upon the Gordon's to withdraw from its membership, if the Gordons continue playing Sheedy bookings."[448] The V.M.P.A. would uphold their war against Cora through any means necessary.

By November 16, 1917, Fay had consulted his attorney August Dreyer about action against the V.M.P.A. Fay told *Variety* he was "oppressed through the activity of the Vaudeville Manager's Protective Association in pronouncing his theater on a 'blacklist.'" In response, he and other businessmen in Providence took steps to "prevent action of that sort in the future" but would not comment on what action would be taken.[449] The John Quigley Association also incurred the enmity of the V.M.P.A. but argued that booking acts under false names allowed them to be booked through other agencies in the future.[450] However, the damage had been done and Cora could not perform. The consequences of Cora's union work had now grown to attacks on any theater that allowed her to play. Thus, Cora could not find any major theaters to book her act, so she returned to Anadarko.

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[448] "Fay's Theatre in Bad," *Variety*, Vol. 48, No. 11, November 9, 1917, 7.
[449] "Fay Organizing Independents?" *Variety*, Vol. 48, No. 12, November 16, 1917, 6.
[450] "Quigley Suggests Deception," *Variety*, Vol. 48, No. 12, November 16, 1917, 6.

For Cora, 1916 had seen the crushing the end of her career in vaudeville. Her fight for union rights against the Vaudeville Managers Protective Association secured her spot on a blacklist that would follow her for years. To combat this injustice, Cora turned to Oklahoma as a place where her union work would be supported, given the state's socialist leanings. By taking advantage of the rise of socialism among the working-class Cora attempted to regain control of her career. If she could return to her beginnings in Oklahoma perhaps, she could rebuild her career. The strikes she led in Oklahoma City and Tulsa quickly gained national attention and spurred other strikes in major cities by the White Rats Actors Union with Cora as a leading figure. Just as she had connected with a Native and Oklahoma image to increase her popularity in vaudeville, Cora found that by attaching herself to an image as a working force hero, she could build a new popularity amidst a harrowing public fight. Her response to the public blacklisting, call upon the support of Oklahoma, and strikes with the White Rats highlighted the ease in which Cora could reinvent her image within Oklahoma to appeal to the working-class audiences. Furthermore, Cora's big push within the state increased her popularity and public recognition which would keep her in public memory within the state as a popular Oklahoman and a Native.

CHAPTER FIVE: War Abroad

By 1917, Cora had found the lowest point in her career. The failure of the White Rats and the steady decline of her popularity seemed unstoppable. However, American joining World War I would provide a unique opportunity for her to save her reputation and career. World War I had a profound impact on the state of Oklahoma. By its conclusion, the state would be transformed politically and socially. The outbreak of the war left many agriculturalists in the state reeling as the German blockade of the Atlantic Ocean closed off European markets. The American entry into the war in 1917 also led to the passing of the Selective Service Act, which called for all men between the ages of 21 and 30 to register for military service. The response to the draft was disastrous.

In August of 1917, an armed revolt of tenant farmers erupted in the state, triggered by opposition to the draft and the issues of low crop prices. Many of the outraged tenant farmers had joined Oklahoma's Socialist Party and sought change through marching on Washington D.C. The rebels began burning bridges and cutting telegraph lines until groups of armed local authorities stopped the revolt. A few men died in the altercations and over four hundred were arrested. Due to the failure of the rebellion and the extreme public backlash, the Oklahoma Socialist Part disbanded.[451] The Green Corn Rebellion revealed the intense opposition to the war in the state. It also created a negative image of Oklahoma to the rest of the nation.

Fortunately for the state, the reopening of European markets in 1916 increased demand for Oklahoma agricultural goods and brought farmers prosperity. The aftermath of the Green Corn Rebellion sparked a backlash against war decriers in Oklahoma. The state that epitomized

[451] Nigel Anthony Sellars, "Green Corn Rebellion," *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture, https://www.okhistory.org/publications/encyclopediaonline.*

anti-war sentiment quickly gave way to enthusiastic and sometimes violent patriotism. A sense of anti-radicalism became the norm in the American psyche as the war ramped up. Ideas of being unpatriotic or disloyal became the talk of foolish "individuals contradicting the unified ideal, and the war, faced intense stigmas of being unpatriotic and disloyal because they were perceived to be derailing the spotlight from the war effort."[452] Moreover, the American ideal during the war years promoted "beliefs of national unity, strength, and cohesion."[453] Therefore, any contradiction of the mainstream just made them even stronger throughout society. The First World War created a "hegemonic national culture enforced by administrative, economic, and public pressures" that brought the country together nationally.[454]

For women, the adherence to the gendered national discourse of American patriotism resulted in what Annessa Ann Babic calls "patriotic women." In *America's Changing Icons: Constructing Patriotic Women from World War I to the Present*, Babic argues "that home front mobilization, gendered politics like women receiving the vote, the advancement of women in the labor force, and promises of suburbia all played a role in changing the face and duty of the patriotic female."[455] The war created an opportunity for women to transform themselves away from the "Victorian ideals of womanhood" into the ideas of the "new woman" that sometimes "acted politically and certainly remained independent."[456]

Babic claims that women "who acted against the mainstream showed patriotism through protest. They acted for the larger good but "did not always fit the ideal."[457] Volunteerism served as the heart of the nation but service for women contradicted mainstream ideas about female

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[452] Annessa Ann Babic, *America's Changing Icons: Constructing Patriotic Women from World War I to the Present,* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2018), 27.
[453] Babic, *America's Changing Icons* 45
[454] Babic, 19.
[455] Babic, 1.
[456] Babic 32, 34.
[457] Babic, 2.

roles. Women were supposed to be housewives or mothers who supported the war effort at home. But some women would push the boundaries of these "manufactured images, revealing the patriotic female to be a complex and continually changing metaphorical icon." Through the war, women were to be "wives, mothers, daughters, wartime factory workers, field nurses, and women who fought for equality."[458] No one woman fit the ideal. Instead, the patriotic female image evolved as different aspects of their service was highlighted in the American press. This provided a new opportunity for Cora to once again change the public perception of her to increase her popularity. During the war, Cora Youngblood Corson exemplified the national change as she used the war to reinvent herself from a trouble-making socialist unionist, into a patriotic, American veteran of the war through her volunteerism, promotion of American patriotism overseas, and her association with the American soldiers.

As the war ramped up for the United States, many vaudeville performers joined the military to do their part in the war. Theaters were thus lacking much of the male entertainment they had enjoyed in the past. Then, in late 1918, the influenza epidemic closed many theaters around the country. This added to a decline in vaudeville popularity. To stay in the public eye, theatrical managers put their full force into the war effort such as A. Paul Keith and E.F. Albee, joint owners of the B.F. Keith vaudeville circuit. Their highest paid actors and actresses were assigned to war work such as magician Harry Houdini and Lillian Russell. Reportedly, Russell "secured more recruits for the United States Marine Corps than any other single agency and was rewarded with a decoration and the rank of Colonel."[459] The Keith theaters also became a highly effective fundraising platform for Liberty Loans throughout the war. While some performers completed their duty to the war effort at home, many joined the military and for this, "generous

[458] Babic, 26.
[459] "Keith Circuit in War," *Billboard*, Vol. 30, No. 52, December 28, 1918, 3.

provision was made" by "their names being carried on the payrolls for a large percentage of their salaries."[460]

With the blacklist and subsequent case with the Federal Trade Commission on pause, Cora Youngblood Corson could not take part in this vaudevillian effort. Instead, she put her efforts into supporting the Red Cross and promoting war gardens. On July 31, 1917, Cora wrote



a letter to Oklahoma Governor Robert Williams complaining that "the Red Cross has fallen down awful" in dozens of Oklahoma counties. She offered that her brother-in-law Glenn Condon could be interested in helping Oklahoma "make a much better showing then it has done." She also sent a photograph of her plowing her war garden with the caption "I am Doing My Bit."[461] While small, these measures were repeated by many Americans across the country to relieve the stress on the nation's agricultural system.

Patriotism and personal needs justified her desire to act for the greater good of the country and her reputation. Cora's concern with aiding in the war effort culminated in the decision to brave the submarine infested waters of the Atlantic Ocean and travel to Europe to entertain the men in service. By July, Cora Youngblood Corson's Instrumentalists secured a tour of the Moss Empire theaters and twenty independent halls throughout Great Britain with A. Scranton, of Scranton's Variety Agency in Manchester, England.[462] This leg of their trip would be booked for forty-two weeks.[463] After the changes in the band over the past year, nine women

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[460] "Keith Circuit in War," *Billboard*, Vol. 30, No. 52, December 28, 1918, 59
[461] Letter from Cora Youngblood Corson to Robert Williams, 20648.15.4, Box 1, Industries and Occupations, Robert L. Williams Collection, Oklahoma History Center; Photograph of Cora Youngblood Corson, 20648.15.2, Box 1, Industries and Occupations, Robert L. Williams Collection, Oklahoma History Center.
[462] I am unable to ascertain A. Scranton's name. Therefore, I will refer to him as Mr. Scranton.
[463] "London Letter," *Billboard*, Vol. 29, No. 49, December 8, 1917, 67.

went overseas including Cora Youngblood Corson, Ida Mundell, Graycia Acton, Clairette Hamel, Simone Hamel, Ethel Hiatt, Olive Hiatt, Lela Myers, and Gladys Cronk. The "Oklahoma Prodigies" also sailed with J. Leslie Spahn their manager and Glenn Condon joined them as "press representative."

For Glenn Condon, he had another reason for accompanying the band other than entertaining the soldiers.[464] At twenty-five years old, Condon had become the youngest member of the Oklahoma Legislature. He also worked as the editor of the *Tulsa Daily World* newspaper. Shortly after his election, the war broke out and he lent his talents to the Oklahoma Council of Defense as State Chairman of the Four-Minute Men, an organization of public speakers who could give impromptu patriotic speeches. With the announcement of Cora's intention overseas, the Oklahoma Council of Defense solicited Governor Robert L. Williams to appoint Condon as a Commissioner of Oklahoma and send him overseas to obtain firsthand information about the war and "how best it can serve Uncle Sam."[465] Therefore, Condon would not stay for the entirety of the band's time overseas.

As for Cora, it appears she intended to return within a year to "attend to her case now before the Federal Trades Commission at Washington, D.C., and others in the courts of New York and Rochester, N.Y.[466] *Variety* announced,

> Miss Corson made herself active in the White Rats trouble and later found herself undesired in regular vaudeville, probably through her openly expressed antipathy to vaudeville managers. She became classed as one of the most aggressive agitators and to her was accredited the indirect source of the Rats' trouble, through Miss Corson involving the Rats' organization in the Oklahoma City strike that brought the acts then in Oklahoma City into it by Miss Corson's efforts, it was reported at the time.
>
> Of late the Corson Sextet has attempted to play in eastern vaudeville houses, but without much success excepting in an isolated instance or two when

[464] "Prodigies to Tour England," *New York Clipper*, December 19, 1917, 9.
[465] "Condon Goes to Europe," *Billboard*, Vol. 39, No. 52, December 29, 1917, 32.
[466] "Cora Youngblood Corson," *Billboard*, Vol, 29, No. 22, December 22, 1917, 36.

> booked into theatres not members of the Vaudeville Managers' Protective Association. It is said the act's management made some attempt to ferret out if a "blacklist" existed against it, but this course brought no relief, although the foreign bookings for the turn, in England, announced as made by "A. Scranton, of Manchester," may have been previously entered. The statement sent out by the act said Miss Corson would return to this country next August.[467]

The stage was set for the band members to not only return to the headlines but also save their careers as court proceedings in the United States stalled.

For their journey overseas, J. Leslie Spahn turned to the American Express Co. for their transportation about four months before they intended to sail. All the girls and Spahn applied for passports around October 1917 planning on leaving in December to arrive in England the first week of January. Ida Mundell wrote in her personal journal that "everyone told us we could not get passports as the governments were not letting any women travel on the ocean on account of submarine dangers and the governments needing all the shipping space." Fortunately, they "did not have a bit of trouble getting passports."[468] To travel overseas, they used the Cunard line which changed their sailing date three different times due to submarine activity.

On December 17, they prepared to sail for England onboard the R.M.S. *Orduna*. The ship carried only about forty other passengers beside the nine members of the band with only four other women. Filling the rest of the ship were fifteen hundred American soldiers mostly belonging to Aero Squadrons: the 11th Aero Squadron, the 20th, the 117th, and 135th. The ship finally set sail, leaving New York Harbor for Halifax. For this trip, the girls remained on the deck taking in the sights before having supper with officers from the Aero squadrons. However, seasickness quickly took the appetites of many of the passengers.

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[467] "Corson Sextet Sail," *Variety*, Vol. 49, No. 4, December 21, 1917, 7.

[468] Journals of Ida Mundell, December 1917-July 1919, In Authors Possession, Unpublished. From this point on, all quotes and references come from these journals unless otherwise cited.

On December 20, the shipped pulled into Halifax through the destruction of the Halifax Explosion which had occurred only two weeks prior. A French cargo ship carrying high explosives collided with another vessel. The resulting fire spread resulting in a massive explosion that devastated Halifax, killing more than 1500 people. Ida Mundell recorded that they "could see the destruction caused by the ship explosion. It looked as though an earthquake and fire together had destroyed things. Several ships were sunk or lying on their sides upon the bank." While anchored in the harbor, they gave a concert in the second-class lounge for many first- and second-class passengers. The next day, they sailed out from Halifax to join the convoy that would take them to England. The girls performed "Over There" as they were leaving.

In the initial days of their voyage, all the passengers underwent lifeboat drills and had to constantly carry their life preservers due to the threat of German submarines. To pass the time, the ladies would chat with the officers or relax in steamer chairs on deck while the soldiers had calisthenics. In the evening Cora and the band would give a concert for various audiences while Cora sang some solos. Along with their short concerts for the passengers, Cora and her band also performed in aid of Seaman Charities created for the benefit of sailors' widows and children. Some of the soldiers played piano and sang. A Mr. Palmer of the Y.M.C.A. and Glenn Condon gave recitals. Cora and the girls "filled all the last half of it. Some on first part of the program were sick so we made the largest part of the entertainment. Three of the girls was too sick to be there." The ladies closed the program with "God Save the King" and "Star Spangled Banner." They gave two more charity concerts to officers and enlisted men.

A small printing press on board the ship allowed them to sell programs for a dollar a piece. It also printed the most important news that the wireless operator received every few days. Glenn Condon took advantage of this opportunity and edited the on-board paper. A fellow

Oklahoman onboard, 2nd Lieutenant Claude A. Webb, from Tipton, Oklahoma wrote home to his family that "Glenn Condon of the Tulsa World was on the boat with me coming over. I don't know what he was coming over for, but he was with Cora Youngblood Corson and her troupe of vaudevillists."[469] His casual mention of her group shows that Cora had succeeded in creating a popular image of herself in Oklahoma in years prior.

During this tumultuous journey, the musical world in England began to announce their arrival in the county. On December 27, 1917, The Cora Youngblood Corson Octette graced the cover of *The Performer*, the official magazine of the Variety Artiste's Federation and leading theatrical publication of Great Britain. It announced their opening performance dates and heralded their spectacular shows.[470] In preparation, the women had rehearsals aboard the ship, but seasickness still plagued the women and their ability to play. But they continued to make the best of their trip. In the evening, the girls would join the soldiers in the dining room to play cards, checkers, and drink.

On the 30th, the coast of Ireland came into view. That night, the ladies decided to have a watch party all night. They turned cablegrams into the wireless operator to send home as soon as they safely landed in the United Kingdom. By 8:30 AM the ship stopped rocking and the vibration from the engines ceased. They had arrived safely in Greenock Bay in Scotland. Since they arrived safely, they received the truth of their voyage. The captain had received a message "to change his course for there was near two hundred submarines formed a blockade waiting for our convoy." Regardless of the actual number of submarines, the Pilot Ship had been sunk on its way to meet the convoy resulting in nearly all men being lost except for the radio operator. The

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[469] "Webb Gives 'Sidelight' on Condon's Journey," *The Daily Oklahoman*, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, March 3, 1918, 25.
[470] *The Performer*, December 27, 1917, Vol. XXV, No. 614.

convoy ahead of Cora's lost four ships. Along with the ladies and the soldiers, the *Orduna* also "carried four million dollars' worth of treasury notes and two million dollars' worth of gun cotton" while another ship in the convoy "was loaded with aeroplanes and one with horses and cattle." Fortunately, Captain Taylor had a "reputation of knowing how to dodge the Subs" and therefore rerouted the convoy to Scotland rather than their destination of Liverpool, England. A week later, he would later receive the Victoria Cross for bringing over the most troops and cargo safely since the war started.

Once they docked at Glasgow, the soldiers began to disembark. Cora and her band waited onboard the ship until the next day as custom officers came aboard to check their papers and luggage. This wait resulted in missing their train for Manchester, so they stayed another night on the ship. The next morning, the ladies told the crew goodbye and disembarked the ship. They soon boarded a train to take them to Manchester. They arrived late at night and met their book agent's stenographer at the station. The city was cloaked in darkness as all lights had been painted over to protect the citizens from German air raids. At the hotel, the ladies asked if they had any food and received a lunch of "a thin piece of boiled ham, two thin pieces of war bread, and a cup of tea." Once in their rooms, they found no running water, no heat, and an extra cost to have a fire. To keep warm, they slept two to a bed. Their volunteer service would not be comfortable, but the women trudged on with their duty to serve.

Their first week in England would be confined to Manchester as they got their official paperwork sorted. They all needed individual Identity Books and Ration books. They had to register at the Police Station in every town they stayed in and had to notify the police of their departure. To have some sort of national identity in this foreign land, Cora looked all over Manchester for American flags and finally found a few little ones in a bookstore. The ladies

wore them on their coats. On January 4, J. Leslie Spahn returned from a trip to London with Glenn Condon. He brought Cora a gift from a British soldier, a bracelet made of metal taken from the first German airplane brought down near Canterbury, England in November 1917. The soldier had been a stage manager in the United States at one time and knew the vaudeville world intimately.

On January 7th, their life began to get into a familiar routine. They arrived at the Palace Theatre in Chelsea for rehearsal around noon. Immediately, an issue arose as the ladies were "in low pitch while the orchestra was in high." Some of the slides for their instruments were in the hotel trunks and some in the theatre trunks. Cora's tuba had no high pitch slides because it was built in low pitch. This mix-up did not bode well for their first performance in England.

In the end, Ida believed they had "a bum show but got by – everything seemed to be against us." Fortunately, the theatre manager, audience, and agents seemed to like their performance. Adding to their worry, Mr. Scranton had brought George Foster to see the act. Foster was "the most noted Variety Agent in the world." But he commented their act "was the most beautiful and the best dressed act that ever come over from America." His only criticisms were that the music was too slow and that they should put in two popular songs instead of so much classical. On their way back to their boarding house, Spahn carried Cora's euphonium and case and rode on the second floor of the bus. When coming down the stairs, he slipped and fell into the street. The euphonium flew into the street, but the case saved it from any substantial damage. To avoid issues in later performances, the next day Cora purchased a high pitch bassoon tuba.

On January 11, the ladies performed at their first concert for wounded soldiers. The Lord and Lady Mayor attended this performance in Islington at the Central Library. J.P. Mitchelhill,

manager of Collins Music Hall, organizer of the event, made a speech before Cora and her band performed in which he told the audience that they were Americans and how they braved the submarines to get there. He also mentioned that these men were the first soldiers for which they would play. Just before the ladies played "Over There," Glenn Condon made a talk about it and told them how popular it was with American Soldiers. This performance went well and established their reputation with the soldiers of the British and Canadian Expeditionary Forces.

On their way back to their rooms, the women noticed the searchlights placed strategically around the city. At night, the sky would be full of searchlights watching for enemy aircraft and zeppelins. This brought the war closer to them. Letters from their loved ones also brought the reality of the war as some of the women had relationships with men in Army service. Ida Mundell was dating Sergeant First Class Patrick J. Burke, of Company A, 319th Engineers, whom she had met some time before the war. Olive Hiatt received letters from First Lieutenant Samuel J Mustain, of the 135th Aero Squadron whom she had met onboard to *Orduna*. Ethel Hiatt was engaged to Private Carl E. Buck of Newcastle, Indiana who served in the 26th Regiment, 1st Division. Clairette and Simone Hamel had a brother, Private Fernand Hamel serving in Company D, 19th Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary Forces. Even Cora's husband, Charles Corson, served in the 17th Infantry Band.

But their lives must go on and they would need to adapt to a new style of theatre, audience, and musical tastes even the terminology took some time to get used to. But fortunately, many American soldiers would pack the theaters to see them perform which helped in transitioning. Unfortunately, they also needed to adapt to frequent German air raids on the city by zeppelins and aircraft. Everyone around them warned of the dangers from above and below. For instance, Cora's housekeeper at the Palace Music Hall told them of how she would go into

the Tube during an air raid. “The people jam in there so thick one can’t hardly get their breath. Nearly always someone is killed either trampled on or smothered to death.”

Fortunately for the homesick ladies, London also housed the large American Y.M.C.A. called the Eagle Hut. They frequented this establishment both as a group and individually. Packed with American soldiers, the ladies did not lack in attention. The men would feed the women, take photographs, and the ladies would perform for the boys. While performing there on the January 17, Cora met “Mrs. Phillips, a sister-in-law of Waldorf Astor.” Phillips invited the ladies to perform at Westminster Hospital which was under the direction of the Prince of Wales. On the 22nd, they obliged and traveled to the hospital to perform for very eager patients. Ida recalled “They seemed to enjoy it and applauded so loud you wouldn’t think they were sick.” This would become a trend as the ladies would volunteer to travel and entertain the sick and wounded whenever asked.

Their performances in Europe dropped the routines which had started their careers. They did not carry a large caravan for costumes which limited their acts. They no longer performed Indian Songs, dressed in Native garb, or even had a stage of wonderful set pieces. No advertisements even mentioned their assumed Native heritage. Instead, they focused on technical and popular songs that could showcase their skills as musicians and appeal to patriotic audiences. They did not need to show up the competition with showy performance because they had the monopoly as one of the only groups allowed to travel to Europe. Their volunteerism served as their appeal, and they used this to create new popularity in Europe and reinforce themselves back in the United States as papers and magazines told stories of the brave women who faced submarines and air raids to perform for American and allied audiences abroad.

On January 28, the women performed at the Metropolitan Theatre as the fourth in the first show and 7th the second show. A beautiful skylight above the stage that could prove "lovely for an air raid when pieces of shrapnel can come through." After their first performance, they returned to the dressing room and settled in comfortably. Suddenly, J. Leslie Spahn entered the room and said, "Come on downstairs there is an Air Raid on." They put on their coats and went down to a dressing room on the first floor while some of the performers were under the concrete stairs. The House Manager had addressed the audience telling them not to be frightened but warned them of the air raid. He told them the show would end due to that lovely skylight that risked the lives of the artists. The audience of mostly women and children could remain in the building under the balconies until the raid ended.

Just then, the anti-aircraft guns began to boom all around the theater. They could hear bombs drop outside with a "big thud." In true Oklahoma fashion, like most Oklahomans who go outside at the sound of a tornado siren, the girls all wanted "to stick our heads outside to see if we could see some of it but they won't let us." Ida wrote in her journal that women and their children would cry in fright as the guns got louder and the explosions seemed closer. It seemed to her "funny to be waiting around in a crowd doing nothing."

During the excitement, Glenn Condon walked outside to watch the attack. He told the ladies that the antiaircraft fire was "all you can see, and they look like a star when they burst. There is so much firing one can imagine they are on the battlefront." Inside the theatre the fear continued to grow within the audience. The manager asked if Cora and the ladies would go out and play for them to help ease the tension. They agreed and walked out into the orchestra pit "in our Kimonos, our boots, and our long street coats." The orchestra had disappeared the minute the

raid had been announced and no one had seen them since. They played three rags before sitting with the audience and listening to some of the other artists sing.

After their impromptu raid performance, the theater manager made a speech about how "much pluck the British Artists have to entertain at a time like this and never mentioned we Americans." Unsure if he forgot that the Cora and her ladies were American, Glenn Condon also made a short speech to inform the audience that they were all Americans and had braved the submarines to get there but none of them had been the least bit afraid. Once finished, he asked the girls to play the American and British national Hymns.

At this point, they could still hear the anti-aircraft guns firing away but decided to get ready to go home. The firing stopped by the time they were dressed, and everyone cautiously stepped outside. One of the stagehands stopped Spahn as they left and gave him a piece of shrapnel that had fallen in front of the stage door. They returned to their boarding house and were eating dinner when the guns began firing once more. Everyone but the Americans left the house for an air raid shelter across the street. Instead, they watched out their windows as bombs fell throughout the city. The ladies had survived their first Air Raid. Ida recorded the casualties of that night as "98 men, 59 women, and 17 children were injured in the Tubes. 14 men, 17 women, and 16 children were killed in the raid."

Beginning as early as May 15, 1918, papers across the United States reported the story of this air raid as a syndicated story of brave American women who daringly performed through a German air raid. Headlines of "Uncles Sam's Nieces in London Unafraid During Bomb Raid," "Bombs Didn't Scare a Bunch of Pretty Oklahoma Actresses," "U.S. Girls Prevented Panic," and "German Bombs Fail to Scare the Youngblood-Corson Girls" told of their harrowing

experience.[471] The girls reportedly performed "like veterans" and succeeded "in preserving order."[472] The reported story varied from Ida Mundell's journal entry reflecting the journalistic liberties of the time.

The papers stated that when the air raid warning came, the manager of "a West End theatre" announced that all who like could stay in the theatre for shelter, but he would not be responsible for any accidents. The people began to leave but "the performers in the musical act that had been interrupted" took their instruments and played "the jiggiest, hoppingest ragtime music that they knew." They then "marched into the aisles, still playing." The girls then shifted from ragtime to patriotic airs of the Allies which brought cheers that "drowned out the sound of the gunning and bombing." Other performers on the program, then came down and sang accompaniment. During this air raid, "Miss Cronk – one of the prettiest of the eight – was missing for a time." She soon returned carrying a piece of shrapnel she found outside the theater.[473] This variation of the story brought immense pride to the families of the girls and inspired appreciation of the volunteer effort from Cora Youngblood Corson and her band overseas.

By February 2, Glenn Condon had received his permissions to travel to the frontlines of France as a guest of the British government. He left as a party of twelve men with half being members of Parliament. On February 6, the women saw firsthand the stresses of combat upon the men from France. Ida recalled they had seen:

> a Soldier boy with "Shell Shock" he was shaking all over could not stand up. An Ambulance come and took him to a Hospital. They say some times the least bit of

[471] "Uncles Sam's Nieces in London Unafraid During Bomb Raid," *Waterloo Evening Courier and Reporter*, May 16, 1918, 8; "Bombs Didn't Scare a Bunch of Pretty Oklahoma Actresses," *Tulsa Daily World*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, May 20, 1918, 7; "U.S. Girls Prevented Panic," *Bristow Record and the Bristow Enterprise*, Bristow, Oklahoma, May 23, 1918, 3; "German Bombs Fail to Scare the Youngblood-Corson Girls," *American-Democrat*, Anadarko, Oklahoma, May 30, 1918, 1.
[472] "Hoosier Girls in England are Quiet During Attack," *Indianapolis Star*, Indianapolis, Indiana, May 19, 1918, 45.
[473] "Girls are Brave Ones," *The Hutchinson News*, Hutchinson, Kansas, May 15, 1918, 12.

> noise unusual will cause one of those Shell Shock boys to go into a nervous breakdown like that poor fellow was. It is a pitiful sight. He was crying and groaning like he was in terrible agony.

The month of February would prove to be a rough month for Cora and her band as they adapted to their new routines dodging the frequent air raids. The night of the 16th, they traveled to the tube during a raid and stood under a shed to watch the excitement. "We could see the burst in the Air of the shells. They looked like Stars twinkling…It was interesting and rather exciting but was so cold we were about to freeze."

On February 17, the ladies once again had an exciting night but this time they had company. The day began at the Aldwich Hut, the Y.M.C.A. for the Australians where they performed a short concert to a house full of soldiers. Just as they went outside to leave, the first warning of an air raid was announced. So, J. Leslie Spahn went over to the American's Eagle Hut and asked if the ladies could play for them. They performed a short concert for the soldiers and a crowd of newly-arrive American nurses.

After, they sat down for tea and cakes when the air raid warnings signaled to take cover. The hut had to be evacuated as it was not a safe building during a raid. The ladies accompanied the soldiers to the Walford Hotel and went down into the Masonic Room in the basement. There, they spent the time entertaining each other by singing, playing piano, and some Y.M.C.A. men recited. They had such a good time that they "almost forgot there was a raid on." But, during their quiet moments, they could hear the guns. By midnight the all-clear allowed them to start home for a short rest.

The next day, they performed at the Tottenham Palace Theatre. After their first show, the ladies sat down for a snack when the guns suddenly began firing. They quickly realized they had missed the air raid signals. However, the show went on as if the war was not progressing outside.

Once finished with their performances, they began their journey home through the tube which was filled with people. When the All Clear was given, they had to wait outside the station until the people left the tunnels. Hundreds of people had "been down in there for hours just like rats in a hole." The air "was simply foul and it was almost sickening." Ida remarked that the "poor people are simply scared to death of Air Raids." Without access to a safe shelter, the tubes were the only place to go. The ladies, however, did not fear the air raids and instead found them "awfully inconvenient and keep us up so late."

Brightening their spirits on the 19th, Glenn Condon returned from France full of war stories and souvenirs. All the ladies crammed into Spahn's bedroom to hear of his experiences and look over his relics including a "a canteen, a helmet, and shells out of an old, demolished tank" as well as some issues of *Stars and Stripes* printed in Paris. With Glenn's return also came an interesting excursion through London on the 25th. While walking through the city, the ladies became a curiosity for the locals. "Dirty children" asked Glenn for money while many poor women gathered round wearing shawls. In response to this situation, Ida wrote "these shawl women aren't as clean and neat as our Indians are." Her first mention to Native Americans during their trip abroad. This comment reveals another instance of the separation between "us and them" showing a clear difference in the identification of the girls versus their past Native personas used on stage.

March brought a change of scenery for the ladies. They would now begin the Scottish leg of their tour. Their first performance in Dundee, Scotland at the Kings Theatre was a hit with a packed house. Glenn Condon had sailed for the United States on March 12 to travel around Oklahoma and promote patriotism and participation in the war effort. After returning to Oklahoma, Glenn began a speaking tour of the state to raise interest in Liberty Loans. In

Anadarko, the paper announced that he had "been over in France and on the firing line and knows a great deal of what is going on over there."[474] Glenn also brought with him souvenirs of his experience, including a piece of shrapnel gathered after the air raid in London.[475] Glenn's tour also helped add to the reputation of Cora and her group as he spoke of their harrowing adventures.

On April 1, the women experienced a warm welcome by both the locals and American soldiers in Glasgow, Scotland. Cora's name appeared in big electric lights in front of the theatre. After their performance, American soldiers would line up outside just to speak with the ladies. Cora reported home that "stage door Johnnies are a thing unknown in England, it seems. That's why it seems so strange to the doorkeepers that we get so many flowers and invitations to dinner. Our Johnnies are the soldier and sailor boys of Uncle Sam. When they see on the program that we're American they want to be clubby right off."[476] This good luck continued as they broke house records by taking encores. In every show, they would go big. On April 15, a house manager asked the ladies not to play much ragtime because of his "refined audience." Spahn convinced him to wait and see how the audience reacted to their music. After the show, the manager said if they changed anything it would be "to put in more ragtime as they seemed to be crazy about it." Their tour of Scotland was a tremendous success.

Once they had left Scotland, their train pulled into Liverpool, England. Hundreds of American soldiers lined up on another platform, so the ladies got out and played "Over There" for them. The ladies then found their next boarding house and prepared for another week of performances. On April 30, they performed at a Canadian Hospital for almost one thousand

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[474] "Representative Glen Condon to Speak Here," *American-Democrat*, Anadarko, Oklahoma, April 18, 1918, 1.
[475] "Short Locals," *Anadarko Tribune*, Anadarko, Oklahoma, May 30, 1918, 2.
[476] "Girls are Brave Ones," *The Hutchinson News*, Hutchinson, Kansas, May 15, 1918, 12.

wounded there. Some American soldiers also attended the show and brought gifts of sugar, white bread, cake, and candy.

On May 13, Cora and the girls learned of their rumored fates. One of the acts on the bill had been scheduled to perform with them at Stockport, but due to the change of port upon their arrival, they missed the show. A rumor started that they had been killed after their ship had been torpedoed. But all the acts felt much better upon learning of their survival. The reputation of these American ladies had also grown with the British army. Despite the packed house, several rows would be filled with English officers. Some would write notes to the girls wanting to meet them after the show, but the ladies would go out the front door to avoid them.

This popularity became so evident that the American vaudeville publications in the United States began to pay attention to these women after having excluded Cora during her fight with the VMPA. *Billboard* reported that Cora and her band were "making a decided hit in and around London, Eng., with their All-American Band." The magazine stated that "they are giving invalided British Tommies a very good sample of what real Western American Girls are like" and that their "offerings are on a par with any male brass band that has gone to that side of the Atlantic to entertain English audiences."[477] With this attention, the C.G. Conn Company also attempted to capitalize by including the ladies in the company's publication *Musical Truth*. The advertisement mentioned that the women had "braved the dangers of submarines and are now playing in the leading theaters of London, England." Of course, the band was completely equipped with the latest model Conn instruments which provided the "inspiring music provided by our American girls" that would "add materially to the patriotic fervor of the Tommies."[478] Cora and her band were actively participating in rallying the English people behind America and

[477] "Miking Hit in England," *Billboard*, Vol. 30, No. 31, August 3, 1918, 8.
[478] "Cora Youngblood Corson and Her Eight," *Musical Truth*, Vol, 10, No, 22, (May 1918).

their success seemed, at least to the people in the States, to prove it. This renewed reputation proved that their gamble to travel overseas had succeeded in helping to repair their reputations after the disastrous last few years with the White Rats.

On May 27, the ladies traveled to Folkstone, England which would be the closest they got to the frontlines before the armistice. Situated along the coast at the Dover Strait, the narrowest part of the English Channel, the ladies could "hear the big guns in France distinctly. They roar like thunder a long way off." At night, they could hear the artillery firing and "could see shells bursting in the sky. They looked like little, tiny stars disappearing quick. We wondered if it was an Air Raid on some French town." Other than their time in London dodging air raids, this served as a stark reminder of the fierce fighting happening across the channel.



In this town, many American soldiers trained and readied to embark for France. The ladies met many talented men, such as Russell E. Levy of the 311th Infantry, a wonderful pianist and even Jack Keller, shortstop for the New York Giants. They also got into spats with other foreign performers over the integrity of American troops. On June 1, Spahn got into an argument

with Laura Novea, a Belgian singer, because he bragged about American soldiers. She commented that she thought they would not "do any more than the others have." To this, Spahn retorted "There aren't any spies among them, anyway" and left her. Novea later commented to Cora and the girls that he should not brag so much to which Cora told her it was none of her business to tell an American citizen what to do.

Perhaps some resentment also existed due to the attention garnered by the Americans from Oklahoma in English publications. On June 5, Cora graced the cover of *The Performer* once again. June would prove to be quite a month for Americans in the news from Europe. June 6 saw the start of the Battle of Belleau Wood and the newspapers around the world were quickly filled with stories about the United States Army and Marine Corps and their vicious fight to stop the German spring offensive.

On July 17, Cora and the ladies did something that would appear to be counter to their core beliefs given their work with the White Rats. They performed at a theater while the stagehands while the stagehands were on strike. Before the war, Cora had been a champion of these strikes, but during the war, she seemed to have lost the appetite for such work or perhaps this shows that she did not need to participate because she was already in the spotlight. The manager of the theatre had to pull the front curtain himself for their act. The war, it seems, had impacted all facets of their lives, and displays Cora's ability to understand the perception of her image and ability to change her associations to rebuild her reputation.

Physically, air raids had drawn them into the fighting, albeit as passive observers but it would soon hit closer to home. On August 5, Ethel Hiatt received the devastating news that her fiancé, Private Carl E. Buck of Newcastle, Indiana had been killed in France. He had been wounded during the Battle of Soissons. He died of his wounds on July 20, 1918, and was buried

in the Aisne-Marne American Cemetery in Belleau, France.[479] Ethel, understandably, took the news hard, being "all broke up over it. It has only been three weeks since he landed in England. It surely brings this terrible war close to home to us." Despite the somber news, they determined to go on with their show, continuing their scheduled rounds of performances throughout England and Wales. On October 9, Ida Mundell received word from Joseph Burke that he was on his way to France. Fortunately, things were beginning to look up for the war effort. On October 12, just before the ladies went on stage for a performance, the manager stopped them and announced, "that Germany had accepted President Wilson's peace proposals unconditionally." He wanted to announce it on stage but would likely spoil their act. So, Cora and the girls went on an played the "National Airs of the Allies." Despite the celebration that followed, this news proved early as it would still be another bloody month before the armistice.

In England, Cora and her band were not the only female Americans making headlines for their performance. Elsie Janis, the "sweetheart of the AEF" had made a name for herself by traveling to France and entertaining troops on the frontlines. She would also travel back to England to perform in musical revues. On October 23, the ladies all went to see Janis in "Hullo, America." Janis would become their greatest competition in establishing a reputation for entertaining the troops. However, competition did not worry the ladies. They were still booked for several months straight. Besides, a new issue started to grow around the world, influenza. The 1918 flu epidemic hit full swing in late October and would ultimately kill millions of soldiers and civilians alike. The major cities started to take precautions with quarantines, lockdowns, and new laws in the hope of slowing down the spread of the disease. In London, "the city soldiers were called out to help take care of the dead, the flu is taking so many that the

[479] Indiana Historical Commission, *Gold Star Honor Roll: A Record of Indiana Men and Women who Died in the Service of the United States and the Allied Nations in the World War*, (Indianapolis, 1923), 248.

undertaker can't handle them, and they are running short of caskets." This also meant that people feared gathering in confined spaces, such as the theatre.

On November 11, 1918, Cora and her band were on their way to perform at the Stockport Hippodrome outside Manchester, England when they heard the news that the Germans and Allies had signed an armistice. It did not mark the official end of the war, but it meant the hostilities were finally over. As the streets filled with people celebrating the end of the war, Cora and the ladies prepared to travel to Manchester for their next engagement.

As the band traveled to Ireland to perform, the women began to show the strain of travel and the flu. The ladies were "tired and sleepy" and paired with an orchestra whose "leader beats such awful time no one could stay with him." While in Dublin, Ireland, an American solider came to their show and told them that he had come over on the *Orduna* with them. Since then, he had been to see them perform multiple times. Back in the United States, the *Billboard* reported that Cora Youngblood Corson and her girls were "creating a sensation" in Ireland after their performances at the Theater Royal Hippodrome and Winter Gardens, Dublin. Their performances reportedly "warming the hearts of the Irishmen and their excellent appearance is being favorably commented upon everywhere they show."[480] This promotion from *Billboard* showcases that Cora's trip to Europe worked to get her back into the new and the good graces of vaudeville.

Mid-December, their tour of Ireland ended, and they returned to Manchester, England. While there on December 26, they received news that United States President Woodrow Wilson had arrived in London, but they had a matinee performance and could not go see his arrival. However, on December 30, 1918, President Wilson traveled to the town hall in Manchester to

[480] "Touring Ireland," *Billboard*, Vol. 30, No. 52, December 28, 1918, 59.

meet with American citizens who had been invited by the Lord Mayor. Cora and the girls "went around at the front entrance of the Town Hall but could not get very close. The crowd was so thick." Spahn quickly thought of an idea and paid a man with a hand cart to let them use it as a platform. "It wasn't a very big cart, but it just held we girls…Had a fine view above everyone's head." As President Wilson arrived, Cora led the ladies in playing "Over There." "The President smiled and waved his hat at us." As the President continued up the stairs, the band played "Star Spangled Banner." A host of newspapermen and photographers rushed over to speak to and photograph the band. A few cameramen even filmed their impromptu performances. As President Wilson left Town Hall, they played "Dixie" for him. After leaving the area, the girls went to the station and spoke to some Marines from the President's guard. They "had heard about the near-sensation we had created and complimented us on having the nerve to supply the one thing that the local committee had overlooked – music. It was a most wonderful [481] and we shall never forget it." That evening and the next morning, the papers "had some nice write ups



[481] "Oklahoma Music in Staid Old England," *Tulsa World*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, January 26, 1919, 2.

and mentioned our little band. Tuesday's *Daily Mail* of Manchester had our pictures in it. The *London Daily Mirror* had our pictures in it and mentioned us as Americans welcoming President Wilson in Manchester.

After this impromptu performance, they continued with their scheduled tour. On January 6, while performing in Brixton, they encountered a hostile audience that disliked many of the acts on the bill. They threw pennies at the performers on stage. Cora and the ladies also received projectile pennies. Ida stated "They threw pennies at "Estell Rose" just ahead of our act. So, we got them too…They call that "getting the bird" it is the first time we have ever got it. And it was funny to us." It does not appear that the audience's reaction was a true reflection of their performance. Some agents were also present and after the show, offered Mr. Scranton contracts to have the women play "six weeks in South Africa with an option of another month opening there the last of August." The women all signed the contracts the next day.

On April 4, 1918, J. Leslie Spahn secured a five-week contract with the Knights of Columbus (KoC), a Catholic fraternal service order founded in 1882. During World War I, the Knights established welfare centers across the United States and abroad for all soldiers, regardless of religion. The organization often provided entertainment at military camps and in major cities. However, the organization only allowed men to join. The only women associated with the Knights during the war were secretaries until Spahn secured the contract which made Cora and her band the only female entertainment to perform under the auspices of the Knights of Columbus. Because of the exclusiveness, no female uniforms existed except for that of the secretaries.

Fortunately for Cora, she and many of the girls were accomplished milliners and seamstresses. The Knights provided the girls with permission to acquire various cloth and

material reserved for the war effort, to make their own uniforms. On April 26, Cora and Grace went into Manchester for material where they purchased a light, tan wool used for English Officer pants. They decided to make them "just plain high waisted skirts with two big English Officer coat pockets" with "three quarter length capes with a military collar and the over sea caps." Once they obtained the material, they had only four days to make their uniforms. They did not perform for the next few days, only sewed. They also purchased khaki blouses to go with the



suits. On May 2, the women traveled to the French and British Consuls to get their passports approved. On May 3, they worked buttonholes in their uniforms and Spahn purchased some enamel American shields to wear on their overseas caps. They now had their uniforms to go along with their overseas service.

Back in the United States, the success of the Cora Youngblood Corson Instrumentalists continued to make the news. *Billboard* reported on the group's contract with the Knights of Columbus stating,

> Through the efforts of James William Fitzpatrick and Will Conley, the Cora Youngblood Corson Instrumentalists will arrive in France week of May 5, opening in Paris at the big K.C. Theater, which has a seating capacity of more than 3,000. They are to play every camp in France and Germany that has an American soldier in it, and as things now stand it will be the most complete trip ever made by a theatrical company. It will take five week, and Miss Corson has offered her services free of charge to the Knights of Columbus.
>
> Miss Corson intended to play for the U.S. boys in July but finding that a great many of them would be going home before that time she made satisfactory arrangements with Mr. Scranton, her agent, and some of the theaters at which she

> was booked, so that she could make her entertainment tour for the doughboys two months earlier.[482]

On May 4, the girls excitedly boarded their transport. Their time in Great Britain had garnered them quite a reputation. The *Performer* referred to their act as the "foremost musical act ever sent to Europe from America."[483] The *Tulsa Democrat* went so far as to declare Cora Youngblood Corson "Oklahoma's foremost instrumentalist, who has toured the nation many times with her musical organization composed entirely of women and who gained a nation-wide reputation for her fight against the theatrical trusts."[484] Their successful tour in Great Britain had secured their reputation with the public and showcased their support of American patriotism and volunteerism. Their tour in France and Germany would secure their reputation with the military.

Their crossing of the English Channel proved to be a smooth journey into La Havre, France. Upon disembarking, the girls were taken to the head of the queue and had French entrance stamps put on their passports. Shortly after, Mr. Sullivan, the Knights of Columbus representative that would manage their tour of France and German met them with a Ford truck designed for tours[485]. It had side seats, a top with canvas curtains, and just enough room the ten women as Mr. Sullivan rode up front with the driver.

In La Havre, they drove to the Knights of Columbus clubhouse that served as their base of operations in this city. There, the women rested and continued "sewing buttons, making buttonholes, and sewing pockets one our uniforms." Their outfits quickly garnered a lot of praise as "the classiest uniforms" in the American Expeditionary Forces. They gave a short concert at

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[482] "Cora Youngblood Corson," *Billboard*, Vol. 31, No. 17, April 26, 1919, 6.
[483] "Corson's Instrumentalists are Advertising Anadarko," *American-Democrat*, Anadarko, Oklahoma, February 13, 1919, 1.
[484] "Cora Youngblood Corson Talented Oklahoma Girl Tells an Interesting Story," *Tulsa Democrat*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, June 8, 1919, 15.
[485] I am unable to ascertain the name of Mr. Sullivan. Therefore, I will continue to address him as Mr. Sullivan.

the clubhouse at 2:00 P.M. They then spent their afternoon sightseeing in the area. For the first time, they saw French officers "with their light blue coast and bright red pants" and German prisoners. They also visited American graves at the St. Marie Cemetery. That evening, they prepared to entertain more troops.

At 7:00 P.M. they traveled to the Motor Reception House for a concert. They were supposed to play at the KoC Clubhouse, but the commander, Captain Phillips said the club was too small to fit all the soldiers. So, he gave his troops leave "from 3 P.M until twelve P.M" to "go get their girls and he would have busses and trucks at the Hotel DeVille to carry the crowds out." The result was a packed house with almost two thousand or more soldiers. The excitement in the air meant that the ladies played a long concert.

On May 6, Cora and the girls played a surprise concert for the members at the KoC Headquarters in Paris, France. After lunch, the ladies met two American officers who were attending the Peace Conference. So, they wandered down to the Hotel de Crillon where the talks were in progress. Due to their uniforms and status, American soldiers would salute the women whenever they crossed paths. Cora wrote home that "our K.C. uniforms take us anywhere."[486] On May 7, they travel to Orly Flying Field where Quentin Roosevelt, son of former United States President Theodore Roosevelt, had trained before being killed in an aerial dogfight on July 14, 1918.

Between May 8-9, the performed at American Base Hospitals No. 4 and No. 57 as well as at the American Military Prison. At the prison, they performed in the courtyard so that the prisoners released from confinement "could come to the windows." Afterwards, the ladies traveled to Cirque de Nouveau where the Knights of Columbus held prize fights. A packed house

[486] "Cora Youngblood Corson Talented Oklahoma Girl Tells an Interesting Story," *Tulsa Democrat*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, June 8, 1919, 15.

holding three thousand people greeted them. They played a concert in the ring before the fight then watched nine matches. The American boxer, Gene Delmont fought against "one of the best" French fighters, de Pontheiu.[487]

On May 11, the girls took a trip out to Belleau Wood. This trip to the battlefields of France further ingratiated them with the veterans. They had now served overseas and seen first-hand the horrors of the war both in England and France. The girls entered Belleau Wood and were immediately confronted with the ghosts of the conflict that took place a year prior. "All the



way up the hill was holes where machine gun nests had been – one just above the other. Then every so often there would be a trench. On the very top of the Hill is a Tower. It is very battled-scarred but still very pretty good condition. There are four unknown German graves near the tower...The trees here are a wreck, so broken and cut to pieces" During their visit, the women all picked up souvenirs in the form of shrapnel. They also stumbled across a "dead German lying in a trench, he had never been covered and his suit is still looked very good. Mr. Spahn jerked a soldier strap off his suit with this cane." During this trip, Ethel Hiatt visited Carl Buck's grave near Chateau-Thierry and placed "a lily of the valley and a bead wreath" onto his grave.[488] On their drive back to Paris, they had a bit of excitement as their "truck caught fire from some cause and it was with great speed that we

[487] "Gene Delmont to Box de Pontheiu for K.C.'s Tonight," *Chicago Tribune*, Paris, France, May 9, 1919, 4.
[488] "Cora Youngblood Corson Talented Oklahoma Girl Tells an Interesting Story," *Tulsa Democrat*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, June 8, 1919, 15.

unloaded. The driver had a fire extinguisher on the car, however, and the flames were soon out."[489] Upon their return from Belleau Wood, Mr. Sullivan arrived from Le Havre to take charge of their show.

Under Mr. Sullivan, the representative from the organization, the group began calling themselves the Knights of Columbus Troubadours and prepared to travel to Germany. On May 14, 1918, they boarded a train in Paris for Koblenz, Germany.[490] After the signing of the armistice on November 11, 1918, the victorious Allies gave Germany thirty-one days to evacuate Belgium, France, Luxemburg, and Alsace-Lorraine and withdraw their armies from the Rhineland, and a neutral zone 40 kilometers from the river.[491] The American Third Army moved towards Germany on November 17, 1918 and took controlled of the Rhineland alongside a French and British Army. The American Army of Occupation garrisoned at Koblenz and billeted the various divisions in Germany towns throughout their zone of influence.[492] Cora and her group would spend the next two months traveling throughout the Army of Occupation to perform for the unites of the Third Army.

The Third Army included the First, Second, Third, and Fourth Divisions. However, it would be the Second Division that received most Cora's time. The last major performer to entertain the Second Division was Elsie Janis during their stay in the Marbache Sector in August of 1918. Janis had been brought in by Major General John A. Lejeune, Commanding General of the Second Division, to raise morale after the costly battles of Belleau Wood and Soissons. She told jokes, sang, and danced.[493] By competing with Janis, the "sweetheart of the AEF," Cora and

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[489] "Cora Youngblood Corson Talented Oklahoma Girl Tells an Interesting Story," *Tulsa Democrat*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, June 8, 1919, 15.
[490] Ida Mundell Journal Three, Unpublished Memoir, In Author's Possession.
[491] Alfred E. Cornebise, "Der Rhein Entlang: The American Occupation Forces in Germany, 1918-1923, A Photo Essay," *Military Affairs* 46, no. 4 (December, 1982): 183.
[492] Harry R Rudin, *Armistice 1918* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), 426.
[493] William T. Scanlon, *God Have Mercy on Us*! (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1929), 155.

her band received a moniker of "second only to Elsie Janis." Back in Oklahoma, *Tulsa World* reported that the Cora and her ladies were "not content with having entertained more American soldiers on foreign soil than any other living woman, with the possible exception of Elsie Janis."[494]

At 12:15 a.m., on May 15, their train arrived in Koblenz. The girls lined up at the Billeting Officer window for their housing securely placing them "in the army now." Of course, the Officer found them a nice, large hotel to stay in for their duration of service in Germany. In Koblenz, the Knights of Columbus had established a comfortable presence through commandeering the local festival hall and even establishing a large doughnut factory capable of turning out more than 60,000 doughnuts a day. The next day, May 16, the KoC Troubadours gave their first concert at the KoC Club. Being such a high-profile performance the "rooms were full. Almost as many doughboys outside as there were in. Also, lots of Germans on the sidewalk." Their tour in the Army started off as a success and they would continue this trend.

On May 18, they performed a matinee in the festival hall, which seats 2500, packed to standing, making it the largest matinee the American Expeditionary Forces had in that building. This became a common theme to packed houses. On May 24, in Rhinebrohl, the "little picture house was full, and they were sitting on the floor right up to the stage." On May 26, in Honnigen, "the Theatre was packed. They were sitting on the floor and in the windows and we could see them in the trees outside looking in the windows." To say that their act drew the attention of the men, would be an understatement. The popularity of the act could not be understated. Gladys Cronk wrote home about this stating, "Lela and I were walking down to eat, our first night here, and in front of us was a boy down on his knees sweeping the dust off the street. He said, 'You

[494] "Oklahoma Girl Receives One of the Highest Honors of War," *Tulsa World*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, July 13, 1919, 17.

mustn't walk on any dirt.' They think a lot of the 'K.C. Girls' as they call us. We are the only K.C. girl entertainers over here."[495]

Their time in Germany also included many opportunities for personal entertainment. Multiple times during their stay in Koblenz, the girls would go on a pleasure cruise up the Rhine River. They also found themselves invited to dances with the men in the Army of Occupation. One night, "the Marines wanted to have a dance and the Artillery men wanted one. So, Mr. Spahn said no to both." Ever persistent, the Marines gathered around their vehicle and "Mr. Spahn finally promised them we could dance a half hour. Went to the Y.M.C.A. club room…Every dance was a tag dance. The hall was about full. Had a great time." Unfortunately, J. Leslie Spahn would not allow the girls to attend a ball held by Major General John A. Lejeune, Commanding Officer of the Second Division, due to the long drive back to Koblenz. [496] Perhaps this was a blessing in disguise as Ida Mundell later wrote after their first dance with officers that she would "rather dance with the doughboys. The officers are too much on their dignity." The girls also attended a couple of baseball games and boxing fights held by the Army. They also took advantage of being in Germany and visited many points of interest such as Beethoven's home.

Being closest to Koblenz, the soldiers and Marines of the Second Division enjoyed the music of the KoC Troubadours often. Traveling to the men sometimes meant travel to castles along the Rhine, like Ehrenbreitstein where the 17th U.S. Field Artillery occupied the fort. It was on June 2, 1919, that the true effort of Cora and her group would be tested as the Second Division held a massive celebration for the anniversary of the Battle of Belleau Wood. In every

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[495] "Gladys Cronk Play for A.E.F. in Germany," *Montfort Mail*, Montfort, Wisconsin, July 10, 1919, 1.
[496] "Anadarko Girls Entertain U.S. Soldiers in Germany," *American-Democrat*, Anadarko, Oklahoma, June 26, 1919, 8.

town that housed troops, entertainment abounded which included bands but comprised principally of ball games in the afternoon and shows and dances at night.

After the celebrations, the girls continued their scheduled tour of the occupation zone. But the Marines particularly enjoyed the opportunity to entertain the girls. On one such occasion, the girls met Captain William B. Croka of the 6th Machine Gun Battalion from Hennessey, Oklahoma. Ida Mundell stated that he "was the first Marine Officer from Oklahoma." For their efforts, Cora wrote home that "the Marines want to adopt us, and it is now up to General Lejeune, the commanding officer. It will certainly be nice if they do that, as we will be the only girls thus honored. I will consider it the biggest thing that ever happened to me."[497]

For the next two weeks, the girls continued performing in various theatres and camps. However, beginning on June 17, their audience grew exponentially. Traveling to Wehr, they performed for 3,000 soldiers. From June 18 to 20, they performed for a combined total of almost 7,500 soldiers at Andernach Hanger Theatre.



[497] "Oklahoma Girl Receives One of the Highest Honors of War," *Tulsa World*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, July 13, 1919, 17.

During their tour in Germany, many of the girls in the band began to update their uniforms to reflect their Army service. On May 22, 1919, they purchased Third Army insignia patches which they sewed on the left shoulder of their uniform, just as the men did to signify the unit they served in. After a while, as Glady Cronk wrote home, "the boys ask us where our service stripes are – we would be entitled to three now."[498] So, some of the girls sewed on three service stripes on their left arm to signify more than eighteen months overseas. Finally, a few of the women also wore insignia and medal bars, given to them by soldiers and sailors. By the end of their time in Germany, the Cora Youngblood Corson Instrumentalists had essentially earned the accolades of military service through their contribution to the war effort. After a month of performing across Germany, the Cora Youngblood Corson Instrumentalists finally returned to France on June 27, 1919.

In Paris, the band performed at the Knights of Columbus Circus from July 1 to 4. During this time, they performed for over 108,500 soldiers. On July 5, they traveled to Brest, France to Camp Pontanezen which served as one of the major debarkation ports for American troops returning to the United States. Here, they opened the Knights of Columbus Carnival that provided the tens of thousands of troops waiting for their ship home to find some enjoyment. A Marine, Pvt. Thomas L. Stewart, 96th wrote home of the popularity of the entertainment stating "the K.C. has a free carnival every evening out in one of the open lots and it is always crowded."[499] Interspersed through their time in the carnival, the girls performed for various dances and events such as Fort Ferberes Casino, 13th Marine Battalion Dance, 319th Engineers Dance, and at General Smedley Butler's Hall.

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[498] "Gladys Cronk Plays for A.E.F. in Germany," *Montfort Mail*, Montfort, Wisconsin, July 10, 1919, 1.
[499] James P. Gregory Jr, *The Story of One Marine: The World War I Letters and Photos of Pvt. Thomas L. Stewart*, (Ashland, OR: Hellgate Press, 2017), 240.

On July 5, 1919, Cora wrote a letter to *Billboard* to praise the "Stage Women's War Relief" which coordinated the efforts of volunteers among women in the theatre. The organization had also provided hospital supplies and clothing for soldiers in Europe, conducted Liberty Loan drives, arranged entertainments and stage performances for troops, and opened a canteen in 1918 for soldiers and sailors in New York City. The gist of her letter revealed that Cora believed that they did not receive enough credit for their role in the war effort. The theater profession worked tirelessly during the war to raise morale and support in any way possible.[500] This praise, coming at a time of renewed popularity and service overseas, likely served as a strategic communication to mend Cora's relationship with *Billboard* after her time in the White Rats.

After a week of performances on land, the band began a "Bon Voyage Tour" to provide entertainment for the men onboard the transport ships docked in the harbor. Since they could not get leave to go into the carnival, they brought the show to them "through the courtesy and



[500] "Letters to the Editor," *Billboard*, Vol. 31, No. 25, June 21, 1919, 16.

cooperation of the naval authorities."[501] Every day, the K.C. Girls traveled to a new ship and performed on the deck with two other KC entertainers, the Jersey City Police Quartet and Elmer Jerome.[502] Sometimes, such as the case of the U.S.S. *George Washington*, Cora and the girls jumped on a small boat and sailed out into the harbor to play for the ship as it left for the United States on July 25, 1919.[503]

The band closed the carnival on July 26 and entrained to Paris. For the next two weeks, they performed around Paris for the few remaining American forces until August 11, 1919. During their time overseas the girls had performed:

> sixty-eight (consecutive) weeks in Great Britain and Ireland, more than 60 concerts for the sick and wounded soldiers. To more than a million Allied Soldiers in France. To more the 75,000 men in the American Army of Occupation in Germany. To more than 10,000 men of the U.S. Navy in the harbors of Europe, Glasgow, Scotland, Queenstown and Belfast, Ireland; Hull, Plymouth, South Hampton and Liverpool, England; La Havre and Brest, France.[504]

This record easily made this band which began in Anadarko, Oklahoma one of the most well-known musical organizations in the world. Of their military audience, Cora later commented that they were the most appreciative audience and "were so nice. So well-mannered. So well-behaved. They never spoke out of turn. They treated the girls in the band like queens."[505]

Before officially wrapping up their tour, the "Cora Youngblood Corson's instrumentalists, 10 American girls from the West" gave their final performance at the Knights of Columbus Paris Clubhouse to a large crowd of "Gobs" and "Doughboys."[506] Finally, on August 12, 1919, after 18 months overseas, Cora Youngblood Corson and her instrumentalists

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[501] "Bon Voyage Troupe Entertains Yanks on Ships in the Harbor," *The Pontanezen Duckboard*, Brest, France, July 23, 1919, 3.
[502] "Jerome in Booking Business," *Billboard*, Vol. 31, No. 43, (October 25, 1919), 6.
[503] James P. Gregory Jr, *The Story of One Marine: The World War I Letters and Photos of Pvt. Thomas L. Stewart*, (Ashland, OR: Hellgate Press, 2017), 241.
[504] Cora Youngblood Corson Instrumentalists, Pamphlet, 1919.
[505] "Tulsa Woman Played for the Boys 'Over There'," *The Tulsa Tribune*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, January 3, 1942.
[506] "K.C. Concert a Success," *Chicago Tribune*, Paris, France, August 6, 1919, 2.

boarded the *La Touraine,* arriving back in the United States on August 21. This return to the United States countered the contract the band had signed in January 1918 to tour Spain, Italy, Australia, and South Africa after the war.[507] It is not entirely known why Cora seemingly ignored their contract, but the *Chicago Daily Tribune* offered one answer.

> Cora Youngblood Corson sailed on the Touraine today. She is C[hief]. D[eputy]. O[rganizer]. of the White Rats, the actor's union. She was to sail to South Africa, but letters and cables from the United States have been received and she is going home to help the actors' fight.
>
> She pulled the first strike of actors in Oklahoma City. She is responsible for the Federal Trade Commission investigation. She has been a big factor in the actors' movement in the United States for the last few years.
>
> It is said she came to England to keep the booking trust from getting its hands on papers they were after and to keep the managers' organization, N[ational]. V[audeville]. A[rtists]., from being taken into the V[ariety]. A[rtistes']. F[ederation]. English Federation. She has little to say about the change in plans for South Africa.[508]

In her absence, the White Rats Actors Union had disbanded by 1919 due to a lack of funds. The strikes that started in 1916 failed and the White Rats went bankrupt during the war. The one small success came in May 1918 when the Federal Trade Commission charged that the Vaudeville Managers Protective Association was an illegal operation which restrained trade by forcing performers to pay the excessive fees and placing acts on their blacklist. The result of that hearing forced the VMPA to drop the requirement for a performer to belong to the NVA to obtain bookings.[509] Although, as a final nail in the coffin, Albee acquired the former White Rats clubhouse in 1919 for use as NVA headquarters.[510] Cora's return came too late to save the White Rats, so she instead turned her attention to returning to the stage in America.

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[507] "Corson's Instrumentalists are Advertising Anadarko," *American-Democrat*, Anadarko, Oklahoma, February 13, 1919, 1.
[508] "White Rats Chief Sails to Aid Actor Strike," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Chicago, Illinois, August 14, 1919, 3.
[509] Russel Sanjek, *American Popular Music and Its Business: The First Four Hundred Years, Volume III: From 1900 to 1984*, (Oxford University Press, 1988), 21.
[510] Anthony Slide, *The Encyclopedia of Vaudeville*, (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2012), 368.

Despite the failures of the White Rats, Cora's success in changing her public image during the war saved her career. She also symbolized the image of American women during the war. Annessa Ann Babic argued that "even social and political mindsets did not give women honor and acceptance. Instead, their actions forced the nation to reexamine the female role and ideal as the drive for change and empowerment began on the grassroots level."[511] In the same terms of Babic, Cora followed the same notion of America's Columbia wherein she evolved "from an "Indian Princess" and slowly developed a central place within American iconography."[512] Cora changed her public association from a fighting unionist to a volunteer patriot. She dressed for war which, like Columbia, symbolized patriotism which was, at that time, "used as a marketing tool" for American publishers.[513]

Cora's service overseas regained her popularity in the public's eye through her performances in Great Britain and connection to American troops. By serving overseas, visiting the battlefields, living amongst the soldiers, and wearing military uniforms bearing service stipes, the Cora Youngblood Corson Instrumentalists had essentially earned the accolades of military service through their contribution to the war effort. By using the war effort to her advantage, Cora had successfully saved her career from following the White Rats Actors Union into obscurity. She successfully shifted the shift public perception of her from a trouble-making socialist unionist, into a patriotic, American veteran of the war through her volunteerism, promotion of American patriotism overseas, and her association with the American soldiers.

[511] Annessa Ann Babic, America's Changing Icons: Constructing Patriotic Women from World War I to the Present, (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2018), 26.
[512] Babic, 36.
[513] Babic, 40.

CHAPTER SIX: The Fall

Within post-war America, a new sense of patriotism and nationalism became the norm as Americans began to closely tie themselves to their state. To rebuild her career, Cora reinvented herself by focusing on her wartime service to create the image of a veteran as a draw for audiences, invested in Oklahoma to reinvigorate attention to vaudeville and the state, and, once she could no longer use her veteran status, reestablished a connection with a Native persona all to salvage her career during the death of vaudeville as an entertainment genre. Cora's evolution echoes the state as it worked to establish itself in the 1920s.

In the 1920s, Oklahomans sought to reinforce their ties to Oklahoma regardless of their location. Enthusiastic patriotism brought pride ride in their native state and offered many people a cultural identity regardless of their current locale. World War I brought a new sense of pride in their country and home state as people discussed their own role in helping their state support of the war effort. This is seen in the formation of Oklahoma themed societies across the country, such as the Oklahoma Society of New York, as individuals looked to reinforce their connection to their home state and its values of rugged entrepreneurship encompassed by their motto "labor omnia vincit" or "work conquers all."

For Cora Youngblood Corson, her return to the United States meant that she needed to find a way to rebuild her career. With the return of "normalcy" in the country, court cases paused during the war continued. This included a case from the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) against the Vaudeville Managers Protective Agency (VMPA). However, her efforts in France and Germany in 1919 left her unable to be a part of the proceedings taking place in Washington D.C. without cutting her engagements in Europe short. In February 1919, Cora reached out to Oklahoma's Governor Robert Williams for aid in her plight.

In her plea, Cora explained that their popularity in Europe offered them the opportunity to travel the world, but she would rather return home. She asked for the governor's support if the V.M.P.A. continued the blacklist against her upon her return stating "I cannot find it in my heart to come home and let that bunch of grafters show the people of the U-S-A that money has beaten me in my fight for right and a square deal."[514] Unfortunately, a response has not survived, but Cora did decide to bring her act back to the United States.

The Federal Trade Commission took on the case against the V.M.P.A. to investigate "unfair methods of competition in interstate commerce" through their use of fees, blacklists, and their monopoly over vaudeville. Despite the evidence and admittance of the existence of the blacklist, the FTC looked at the case through a single question: "Were the performance by vaudevillians interstate commerce as interpreted in the antitrust laws?" Ultimately, the case lasted from February to October 1919 and the FTC ruled in favor of the VMPA. With this ruling, all hope for the White Rats Actors Union faded away and they disbanded as an organization.[515] Cora no longer had a support system to lean on in her fight which caused her to finally relent and seek employment on the Keith circuit.

Unfortunately, her return coincided with the decline of vaudeville as a form of popular entertainment. The growing popularity of cinema as a cheaper and new form of entertainment meant that more audiences opted to attend a silent film rather than a live performance. Many vaudevillians, lured by more pay and less demanding working conditions chose to perform their novelty acts for a few moments of screen time. Some vaudeville stars used cinema to launch

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[514] Cora Youngblood Corson to Governor Robert Williams, February 27, 1919, Box 2, Folder 14a, Record Group 8-C-3-2, Governor Robert L. Williams, Oklahoma State Archives, Oklahoma Department of Libraries, Oklahoma City, OK.

[515] Arthur F. Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars: How the Keith-Albee and Orpheum Circuits Controlled the Big-Time and Its Performers*, (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, NY, 2006) 234-236.

their film careers such as Judy Garland, Abbott and Costello, and Oklahoma's Will Rogers. Movie stars soon eclipsing the fame of their vaudeville peers.

During the 1920's, most vaudeville shows began to include an equal amount of cinema interspersed with live acts. Historian John Kenrick argued that "top vaudeville stars filmed their acts for one-time pay-offs, inadvertently helping to speed the death of vaudeville. After all, when "small time" theatres could offer "big time" performers on screen at a nickel a seat, who could ask audiences to pay higher amounts for less impressive live talent?[516] This meant that theater managers began to cut live performances increasing the difficulty in finding work for Cora Youngblood Corson.

To return to the stage, Cora used her war-time experiences as the new draw for her audience. To them, and to the local papers, their service equaled active service as a veteran of the war. In Cincinnati, Ohio, the *Cincinnati Commercial Tribune* announced that each woman was "a veteran of the war!" They performed across the United Kingdom before forming "the Cora Youngblood Corson's Knights of Columbus Octette, the only woman's organization to entertain the A.E.F. in France and Germany under the auspices of the K. of C." They then entertained the troops from Brest to Coblenz. This impressive feat had made them "the most popular entertainers abroad."[517] This fame would transfer well in the states as Cora could count on the veterans to support her in the theaters.

In Oklahoma, the state proudly claimed its performers served in various ways in the war and worked to put Oklahoma on the map nationally. The *Tulsa Democrat* wrote:

> Although Oklahoma is known in the east generally as a "wild and wooly" country, yet the fact remains that many stars in the theatrical firmament proudly claim this state as their own. Among these might be mentioned Will Rogers, the

[516] John Kenrick, "History of Musical Film, 1927–30: Part II," Musicals101.com, 2004.
[517] "Boys Dare Not Brag of Prowess to These Girls," *Cincinnati Commercial Tribune*, Cincinnati, Ohio, February 1, 1920, 11.

> versatile and original cowboy comedian…Elsie Janis is an Oklahoma City girl, although she has not lived there since she was a school child. "Oklahoma Bob" Allbright, one of the best-known singing performers on the Orpheum and Pantages circuits, lives at Nowata, where his mother operates a hotel to this day.
>
> Perhaps the most widely known theatrical woman from Oklahoma is Cora Youngblood Corson…Miss Corson, who is known as the world's most versatile lady musician…She has appeared in public almost continuously now for 13 years…In 1917, Miss Corson took her nine girl musicians to Europe. For 16 months she toured England, Scotland, and Ireland, appearing in all the leading theaters of those countries. Every day she played for allied soldiers. Then she went to France for the Knights of Columbus. She has the distinction of being the only performer of her sex to play the "Knights of Columbus Circuit" abroad. She played in Paris and at all the big rest and training camps in France…
>
> She is proud of her nativity and always bills herself as "from Oklahoma." Her affections are divided between Tulsa and Anadarko and one city is as much her home as the other.[518]

This positive attention from Cora's overseas tour brought her enough acclaim to return to vaudeville under a new title, the Knights of Columbus Octette.[519] It also allowed her to reassert her connection to Oklahoma to make an attempt at drawing more crowds back to her performances.

Cora's Knights of Columbus Octette advertised itself with their overseas service during the war and at home. On September 10, 1919, they had paraded in New York City for Pershing Day ahead of the Knights of Columbus contingent. "The esteem in which Miss Corson and her associates are held was revealed recently when they were asked to lead the K. of C. section in the parade in honor of General Pershing's homecoming."[520] Advertisements noted that they had been "the only woman organization to entertain the A.E.F. in France and Germany under the auspices of the Knights of Columbus."[521]

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[518] "Oklahoma has Produced Many Theatrical Stars," *Tulsa Democrat*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, September 7, 1919, 42.
[519] "K. of C. Octette at Palace Theater," *Hartford Courant*, Hartford, Connecticut, September 28, 1919, 29.
[520] "K. of C. Octette at Palace Theater," *Hartford Courant*, Hartford, Connecticut, September 28, 1919, 29.
[521] "K. of C. Octet at Grand," *Evening Public Ledger*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, January 10, 1920, 13.

Cora's return to the stage came as a surprise to some due to her public fight against the VMPA. During her time overseas in 1918, the United Book Offices (UBO) became the B.F. Keith Vaudeville Exchange cementing the control of the VMPA over all vaudeville bookings. *Variety* commented on this stating:

> The Cora Youngblood Corson Sextet opened at Poli's Monday…The booking appears to have created some talk among vaudevillians in town…The cause of the talk concerning the Cora Youngblood Corson booking that Variety's New Haven correspondent heard, but could not explain, arises through Miss Corson and her act now playing a house (Poli's) booked through the Keith Agency.
>
> An investigation Tuesday made by a *Variety* representative as to the manner in which the Corson turn happened to be booked in a Poli house through the Keith office revealed nothing unusual. P. Alonzo, the Poli booking agent, said the act had been submitted to him and he had been assured the turn would make good. Acting upon this information he had given it two weeks on his time as a trial playing period.
>
> The booking, however, of the Corson act by the Keith agency, with the booking men understanding that such a contract could not go through unless agreeable to all the powers of the office, seemed to be taken by vaudeville bookers and agents as an indication that though a "blacklist" ever did exist in vaudeville, the last vestige of it disappeared with the placing of the Corson turn in a Keith-booked theatre.[522]

Thus, Cora had finally cut her ties with the White Rats. Her success in using her new identification with veterans to remove herself from the blacklist is also unusual and speaks to her ability to understand the politics of vaudeville. Just three years prior, in 1917, VMPA had agreed to pare down its blacklist, but declared that acts described as hardcore White Rats supporters, such as Cora Youngblood Corson would not be removed from the list.[523] The *Dramatic Mirror* also commented on the new reality for Cora as she played "the "big time" booked through the B.F. Keith Vaudeville Exchange. This is the same Miss Corson who for a long time was a thorn in the side of the Keith (United) bookers and during the White Rats trouble was an active

[522] "Cora Youngblood Corson Now in Keith-Booked Theatre," *Variety*, September 19, 1919, 3.
[523] Kerry Segrave, *Actors Organize: A History of Union Formation Efforts in America, 1880-1919*, (McFarland, 2008), 140.

participant in the "strike" in Chicago. But the war is over, and the peace dove flies throughout the land."[524]

Furthering their association with the war, Cora started her performances with many slides showing the girls in many sections of the war zone and the battle torn countryside which "brought forth considerable applause."[525] One reviewer for *Variety*, named Bell, wrote a positive review of their act, the first since she started her crusade against the VMPA:

> A slide proceeding the act states the K. of C. Octette was the only ladies band to play for the soldiers overseas. Other slides following show the band at Chateau Thierry, Belleau Wood, and other important battle grounds. A drop in one showing the exterior of a Knights of Columbus hut rises, disclosing seven women clad in attractive blue and gold bloomer costumes…The act entertained at the Fifth Avenue, closing the show, and should prove a good draw, through its war record, as a feature in the pop houses.[526]

In drawing upon her service overseas, Cora once again reinvented herself into a patriotic world war veteran. This helped her career find its way back on track just as she had done in the past. By latching onto this new cause and cultural trend of supporting the veterans of the war, Cora successfully convinced potential audiences of the value of her character and performance. This helped audiences, and most importantly theater managers, move past her past troubles as a member of the White Rats Actors Union and allow her acts back on the main vaudeville stages.

During this time, Cora also faced the beginning decline of vaudeville. After the influenza epidemic forced theatres to close, paired with the ever-growing entertainment of movies, theaters like the Orpheum Circuit suffered a financial crisis. Without the large crowds of the past, they could not afford to pay excessive costs for acts. Cora Youngblood Corson, on top of signing to a Keith owned circuit, also shocked entertainers by drawing a salary out of the Western Vaudeville

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[524] "Cora Youngblood Corson," *Dramatic Mirror*, December 18, 1919, 1953.
[525] "At Poli's," *Evening News*, Wilkes-Barres, Pennsylvania, November 11, 1919, 2.
[526] Bell, "K. of C. Octette," *Variety*, Vol. 56, No. 14, (November 28, 1919), 21.

Manager's Association alongside many other White Rats members who had once stood against the agencies.[527] This decline also impacted Cora's ability to secure a long booking in individual theaters. Her frustration grew until she purchased an entire page in *Billboard* to advertise her act and their ability. Using their overseas experience, she claimed that the two and a half million soldiers they entertained had not forgotten them and any time they appeared in a theater "they and their friends and relatives PACKED THE THEATRES." She argued that "at nearly every place we have appeared since our return we have broken all box-office records." She closed with "I say nothing about my act or what it is, but whether it is GOOD or BAD, I PACK THE THEATRES."[528] This attempt signaled the true decline of Cora's career as she fought against not only a tarnished reputation but the decline of her career.

In 1920, Cora Youngblood Corson and her K. of C. Octette no longer headlined the bills nor closed out the evening. But they continued to entertain and play well with one critic commenting "the act gave a very good account of itself."[529] They toured smaller theaters in the east and attracted crowds by calling on their time overseas. Advertisements continued to note that "Miss Corson and her octet of musicians were the only woman organization to entertain the A.E.F. in France and Germany under the auspices of the Knights of Columbus" and that they had "played to more than a million soldiers and sailors."[530] This successfully brought in "hundreds of discharged soldiers" that remembered "Miss Corson and her K. of C. girls while they entertained the boys over there."[531] However, these could not bring her career back up to its previous height. In May, the girls returned to Anadarko to visit family, and it appears they did not leave for the

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[527] "Three-A-Day Policy May Be Adopted by Orpheum Circuit," *Billboard*, Vol. 31, No. 51, (December 20, 1919), 35.
[528] "I, Cora Youngblood Corson," *Billboard*, Vol. 31, No, 51, (December 20, 1919), 51.
[529] "Royal," *New York Clipper*, January 7, 1920, 9.
[530] "K. of C. Octet at Grand," *Evening Public Ledger*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, January 10, 1920, 13.
[531] "There was a time…," *Indiana Daily Times*, March 18, 1920, 7.

remainder of the year.[532] Perhaps a large amount of homesickness partnered with the uninspiring return to the stage created this hiatus.

To fill her time, Cora focused on supporting her home state and helping rebuild an interest in vaudeville. To this end, she began a campaign to establish the Vaudeville Actors' Haven (VAH) as a retirement community for those in the profession no longer able to travel around the country to perform. Cora wanted to make life better for other vaudeville performers who had struggled through the difficulties over the last few years between the war and the influenza outbreak. To accomplish this goal, she attempted to create this retirement community in Oklahoma. She had announced the initial plan in January 1920.

> I have had in mind for the past few years a home for the Vaudeville Actors. One supported by the Vaudeville Actors and the Vaudeville Managers. With this in mind, I have taken up with the Oklahoma representatives at Washington, D.C.., the grant of 160 acres of land to place the home on. I have also arranged for plans and the blueprints of same and am now looking forward to its realization.
>
> This Home will not be like any other for the housing of old and sick actors. It will be built on modern plans; its streets will bear the names of "Men" that have been for vaudeville and those that have done things that have and will benefit vaudeville in the future. It will stand as a monument to those that have done and are doing good deeds, and through this movement their deeds will be perpetuated for all time.[533]

Cora hoped that her haven would help bolster not only the state but also the health and job security for those engaged in vaudeville. She favored her home state for many reasons. Namely, Oklahoma's geographical location, weather patterns, and reputation, that she claimed, as "one of the most healthful States in the union." She also argued that the state provided many opportunities for business that, when taken advantage of, would allow the Haven to be self-

[532] "Miss Graycia Acton," *Anadarko Tribune*, Anadarko, Oklahoma, May 20, 1920, 1.
[533] "Vaudeville Actors Home," *Variety*, Vol, 57, No. 10, (January 31, 1920), 5.

supporting and make money.[534] However, given her past issues with vaudeville managers, her campaign to raise funds only targeted the professionals of her field.[535]

To find suitable land for this endeavor, Cora sent letters to multiple Chambers of Commerce around Oklahoma asking for their assistance such as Perry and Ponca City.[536] Cora estimated that 160 acres and an initial investment of around $100,000 would allow them to build a self-sufficient community with a sizable farm.[537] Cora announced in *Billboard* that she had received letters of offers from ten towns in Oklahoma which she planned to appoint a committee to look over and "by August 15 decide on the town that is to receive the V.A.H."[538]

She outlined her plan for the community as such:

> The V.A.H. will receive 160 acres free and a five-year option on 320 acres, to be paid for in five years. This will give the Haven Society 60 acres for building and grounds, and 420 acres of farm at the start. There are farms of 160 acres that made $10,000 last year, and will do better than that this year, so I figure that the Haven Society ought to pay for the 320 acres out of its income in the first three years, and the vaudeville actors ought to raise the price of building and stocking the farm I the same time. In that case the Vaudeville Actors' Haven Society would have a piece of property worth at least $300,000 in five years, or three times the invested price in 1925.[539]

Cora believed so much in this idea that she had paid for every cent from her own pocket and was "ready to hand it over to a committee or board that may be appointed to take up where I leave off." She wanted to ensure the separation of actor's organizations and managers' organizations from the Haven. Her old grudges against the VMPA obvious as this would make sure that the

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[534] "Cora Youngblood Corson…," *Billboard*, Vol. 32, No. 12, (March 20, 1920), 46.
[535] "The Vaudeville Actors' Haven," *Billboard*, Vol. 32, No. 23, (June 5, 1920), 20.
[536] "Rest Room Discussed," *Perry Republican*, Perry, Oklahoma, July 8, 1920, 1; "Haven for Vaudeville Actors May be Located in Okla.," *Ponca City News*, Ponca City, Oklahoma, July 9, 1920, 6.
[537] "Haven for Vaudeville Actors May be Located in Okla.," *Ponca City News*, Ponca City, Oklahoma, July 9, 1920, 6.
[538] "The Vaude. Actor's Haven," *Billboard*, Vol. 32, No. 31, (July 31, 1920), 20.
[539] "The Vaude. Actor's Haven," *Billboard*, Vol. 32, No. 31, (July 31, 1920), 20.

Haven remained "free from domination or dictation on the part of any other combination of actors or managers."[540]

This utopian society would "house any vaudeville actor or actress, regardless of their belonging to an organization or not, just so long as the board is convinced that they are vaudevillians and are in need of the care of the Haven." Cora appealed to her fellow vaudevillians to show the world that they are willing to do "something for your brother and sister artists of today and in the future."[541] Despite this, the Haven gained no real traction with the vaudeville community. Cora attempted to save it one last time by writing a plea published in *Billboard* wherein she stated:

> I wish those that oppose the founding of the V.A.H. would come out in the open and state what objections they have to the same, or if they have anything to offer that would be an improvement or would in any way help the promotion of the same would give their ideas on same, and I would only be too willing to hand over my part in it, just so long as it would remain out of the hands of any other organization or combination of men that would show favors to anyone.[542]

Unfortunately, it seems that Cora's dream did not pick up enough support and died away after August.

The latter half of 1920 found Cora floundering for some sort of identity or goal as she came to terms with the loss of her high-profile vaudeville career. Strangely, it seems Cora decided to part ways from her band and her work on the Vaudeville Actors' Haven. In October, the *Oklahoma City Times* reported that she had traveled to Providence, Rhode Island where she played baritone cornet in a ladies' band "winning much fame."[543]

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[540] "The Vaude. Actor's Haven," *Billboard*, Vol. 32, No. 31, (July 31, 1920), 20.
[541] "The Vaude. Actor's Haven," *Billboard*, Vol. 32, No. 31, (July 31, 1920), 20.
[542] "Vaudeville Actors' Haven," *Billboard*, Vol. 32, No. 32, (August 7, 1920), 20.
[543] "Cora Youngblood Carson…," *Oklahoma City Times*, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, October 2, 1920, 66.

In November, she wrote to several Chambers of Commerce in Oklahoma again, but this time for the purpose finding "six towns in Oklahoma to promote a girl's band of 25 or more girls in each town." She wanted to organize this large band to compete in a forming organization called the "National Organization of Woman's Amateur Musical Organizations" and she wanted Oklahoma to be represented. She planned to take the top talent from the six bands for competitions and "at the same time have the largest organization in America by combining the six." Ultimately, Cora wanted "put Oklahoma on the map as a musical state."[544] However, it does not appear that anything came of this attempt and Cora returned to Anadarko by December where she would perform for local meetings like the Young Men's Class of the M.E. Sunday School pie supper.[545]

By 1921, Cora picked up with her band once more but dropped the Knights of Columbus Octette and performed as the Cora Youngblood Corson Orchestra. However, they continued to push their popularity with military veterans. Now back in Oklahoma, the band played at various American Legion halls. To advertise their show, the papers called back to their time overseas with comments such as "of A.E.F. fame" and "the same organization which played for the Army of Occupation in Germany."[546] It appears that the band was struggling with finding gigs under Cora Youngblood Corson as they took small, local performances. For instance, in March, the group performed "dances every Saturday night, from 9 to 12, in the Dining Room of the Bryan Hotel."[547] This was vastly different from Broadway.

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[544] "A G.B.C. Special," *Geary Times-Journal*, Geary, Oklahoma, November 18, 1920, 1.
[545] "Pie Supper at M.E. Church," *American-Democrat*, Anadarko, Oklahoma, December 15, 1920, 1.
[546] "Big Dance and A.E.F. Entertainment, *Mountain View Times*, Mountain View, Oklahoma, February 11, 1921, 1; "American Legion Dance," *The Daily Democrat-Chief*, Hobart, Oklahoma, February 24, 1921, 2.
[547] "Dance," *American-Democrat*, Anadarko, Oklahoma, March 30, 1921, 5.

Strangely, in May of 1921, the group returned to playing in theaters, but under a show presented by E. Gracia Acton, who had been a trombonist in the band. On May 8, the Empress Theater in Springfield, Missouri advertised "E. Gracia Acton presents The Girls from the Golden West in Frolics on the Roof in New York." The show was a 20 person "Musical Comedy Company" that headlined Ernie Devoy and Harry Reader and featured Cora Youngblood, "Prima Donna and Musical Artiste Supreme."[548] It is an odd moment in which Cora is no longer in charge of her own group nor the headliner.

On November 11, 1921, Cora once again reinforced her association with the war as part of the ceremonies in New York that coaligned with the opening of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington National Cemetery in Washington, D.C. In Times Square, the center of New York's theatrical district, Cora joined several speakers to remember the sacrifices made by soldiers and non-combatants. She represented the Knights of Columbus and the women who served overseas.[549]

After this event, Cora remained in New York and participated in the creation of the Oklahoma Society of New York alongside ex-Governor Charles Haskell, and other influential Oklahoma expatriates.[550] This group was formed to "preserve the history and traditions of the state of Oklahoma" since so many performers and celebrities had moved out of the state.[551] To accomplish this, the group worked to "aid in compilation and preservation of data, reminisces, photographs, and documents of historical value in the hands of New Yorkers who were among Oklahoma's '89ers' and to aid Oklahoma people whenever they come here to visit or to live."[552]

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[548] "Empress Theater," *The Springfield News-Leader*, Springfield, Missouri, May 8, 1921, 16.
[549] "Times Square Halts to Honor the Dead," *The Vaudeville News*, November 18, 1921, 1.
[550] "Many Oklahoma Millionaires in New York Colony," *The Frederick Leader*, Frederick, Oklahoma, June 21, 1921, 1.
[551] "Oklahoma Club For Metropolis," *Muskogee-Times Democrat*, Muskogee, Oklahoma, November 28, 1921, 2.
[552] "Sooners in N.Y. Are to Form Club," *The Tulsa Tribune*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, June 19, 1921, 21.

This group opened its doors to all former and current residents of Oklahoma, and anyone interested in learning more about the state. Cora's brother-in-law, Glenn Condon, took up office in the organization as Chairman of Press. Finding an opportunity to reinvent herself once more as a Native American to bring interest to her performances, Cora reasserted her false connection to a Native heritage and its coexistence with being an Oklahoman. During the final meeting of the organization, Cora and her sister Eula performed alongside Chief Michael Martin Silvermoon, an artist of the Caddo tribe, also from Anadarko. They performed "an original Indian folk song, in the native tongue." This is the first act of Cora being presented in a Native language alongside a Native performer. Also, during the meeting, Condon delivered an address on the "importance of Oklahoma to the theatrical profession." Among those mentioned were Will Rogers, Cora Youngblood Corson, Buster Keaton, Pawnee Bill, and Bob Albright.[553]

Over two hundred former Oklahomans joined the organization and attended their entertaining gatherings. Many high-profile individuals from Oklahoma came to speak at these meetings such as ex-Governor Charles Haskell, Congressman Joe C. Pringey, Senator James W. Gerard, and



Pittsburgh Press Sun
January 29, 1922

[553] "Oklahoma Club for Metropolis," *Muskogee-Times Democrat*, Muskogee, Oklahoma, November 28, 1921, 2.

more.[554] On January 17, 1921, the society held a "Cherokee Dance" at the Hotel McAlpin in New York City.[555] The main feature of this Midwinter Festival "was Native Indian dances by fully garbed Indian men and women of various tribes. Native Indian songs were enjoyed by the huge attendance of former Oklahomans and others interested in the traditions of the state."[556] Reportedly, more than a dozen "Oklahoma Indians" performed for the Society.[557] Cora was among these performers. An image of her in full Native dress shows two other women similarly dressed in the caption "Cora Youngblood, Cherokee; Miss Chickadee, Sioux; and Mrs. Red Eagle, Indian women in a N.Y. Park."[558] This reveals the first time Cora presents herself as a member of a particular tribe likely emboldened by the acceptance of her act by the society as well as the necessity to revive her own fame.

Cora's performance as an "Oklahoma Indian" marked the acceptance of her Native representation by not only those in New York, who likely knew nothing of actual Native culture, but the acceptance of her peers from Oklahoma. She had once been either Native American or and Oklahoma, but now she fell solidly into the "both/and" category. To those of the audience, she is both a performer and a Native. The acceptance of Cora's Native persona by those both in the audience and those familiar with Native Americans in Oklahoma reveals that the perception of Native representation was possibly not such a concrete idea in the early twentieth century. If Cora claimed a heritage and displayed some intimate understanding of it, it does not seem to have been questioned by the white audience or her peers. Her performance with Native musicians and dancers also seems to show that perhaps they too were fooled by Cora's persona

[554] "Uncles Joe in Big Company," *The Lincoln County Republican*, Chandler, Oklahoma, July 7, 1921, 1.
[555] "The Oklahoma Society," *New York Herald*, New York City, New York, January 15, 1922, 36.
[556] "See Indian Dance," *The Oklahoma News*, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, January 21, 1922, 2.
[557] "Native Indian Dances," *New York Herald*, New York City, New York, January 22, 1922, 34.
[558] "Cora Youngblood, Cherokee…," *The Pittsburgh Press*, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, January 29, 1922.

or perhaps they simply played along for the act. If she could establish some anchor within her newly chosen community, then it appears people believed she had the authority to make her claims of belonging.

Displaying the sense of a dual identity for Oklahoma, three months later, the Society celebrated the "opening of Oklahoma to the white man" with an 89er Dance. To "properly" celebrate the event, the dance began with men and women splitting to the sides of the room and then running to the middle "lay claim to a dancing partner."[559] This dance also featured more Native performers including Princess Atalie Unkalunt, a Cherokee opera singer from Stilwell, Oklahoma. At around 10 o'clock, the band stuck up and Indian song and in through the door "marched a troupe of full bloods, attired in tribal costumes." Chief Sheet Lightning (Walter Battice), a "well-known Sac and Fox performer and activist," the purported leader of this troupe, spoke on the days of the past never to return, and the love the Indian had for the state of Oklahoma.[560] Next, Weather String, a World War I veteran, delivered a speech on "the Indian's affection for his white brethren." The Indians then performed a "war dance" before leaving the room. Poetically, then rushed in a group of cowboys firing their pistols in the air.[561]

The Oklahoma Society of New York's events reveal the societal status of Native Americans within Oklahoma or at the least, within the minds of its citizens. This racial divide places Native Americans in a position where they must make way for the white settler. The speeches of the Native performers also show the expected dialogue between the two groups. The Society did not invite the performers to celebrate Native culture but rather showcase the settler cultures

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[559] "Guns Boom Today in Echo of '89ers' Run 33 Years Ago," *Muskogee Daily Phoenix*, Muskogee, Oklahoma, April 22, 1922, 1.
[560] Chrisine Bold, "Indigenous Presence in Vaudeville and Early Cinema*," JCMS Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*, volume 60, issue 2, 160.
[561] "Meeting was Biggest Event in Sooner-Gotham History," *The Morning Tulsa Daily World*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, May 14, 1922, 26.

assumption of Native America. This perspective also relies on the Oklahoma citizenry accepting the "vanishing Indian" myth prevalent at the time wherein Indigenous people were destined to disappear due to the inevitable and preordained expansion of White America. For Cora, this myth had allowed her career to blossom in vaudeville, but its decline as a form of entertainment meant she would need to find new avenues such as the Society to sell her act. These performances also come at same time the Osage Murders began in Oklahoma. Approximately twenty-four Osage Indians died violent and suspicious death in the early 1920's for control of their oil rights. Despite this violence against Native making national headlines, Cora obviously felt comfortable reclaiming her false heritage.

Despite these performances in New York, Cora and her group were not spared by the decline of vaudeville and experienced many falls from their pedestal, such as the loss of headlining engagements. On top of this, her manager, J. Leslie Spahn began to have public financial troubles. In December 1921, Spahn was sued by Adele Sturtivant for $950, "alleging back salary and break of contract. The plaintiff claims she was booked by Mr. Spahn February 26 for twenty weeks, from April 2, with the act, "The Girls from the Golden West," at a salary of $50 a week, and that on April 30 she was discharged without cause."[562] On February 18, 1922, the magazine also announced that "J. Leslie Spahn…this week filed a petition in bankruptcy."[563]

Despite their manager's problems, by the fall of 1922, Cora had returned to a sextet. With the struggles in vaudeville, Cora looked for other opportunities for the band to perform. She still maintained her farm which provided secure financial backing during this period so she could explore any avenue to return to fame. She found opportunity with the Shriner's Circus with

[562] "Leslie Spahn Sued," *Billboard*, December 31, 1921, 14.
[563] "Spahn in Bankruptcy," *Billboard*, February 18, 1922, 15.

which they signed a two-year contract.[564] With the circus, the group traveled across the country performing for smaller venues, such as a Kiwanis Club meeting in Sioux Falls, South Dakota.[565]

The *Tulsa World* praised Cora's performance at the circus and wrote of her past success stating "the leader of this popular aggregation is a native Oklahoman, who has won fame and fortune in the musical world and who is known from coast to coast."[566] In December of 1922, J. Leslie Spahn announced to *Billboard* that Cora would be leaving the Shrine Circus to perform for Moore's Indoor Circus.[567] During this time, Cora continued to find new opportunities to perform in Oregon and Washington such as a radio. Like the rising popularity of film, the radio also contributed to the decline of audiences in vaudevilles. Music could now be broadcast directly into their houses and no longer did they need to dress up and go to a crowded venue.

In August of 1923, Cora and her group returned to their tried-and-true format of performing at fairs. First performing at the Andrew County Fair in Missouri in the later part of the month. After finishing their gig in Missouri, they moved to perform at the Nebraska State Fair every afternoon and in the evening.[568] Interestingly, it appears that Cora once again focused on a Native American heritage in her act after a performance at the Andrew County Fair in Missouri, alongside a woman named Princess White Cloud described as a "an Indian contralto" who sang popular songs and was purported to be from the Sioux tribe.[569] This adjustment may have come from her return to the Midwest where a Native persona could draw more crowds.

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[564] "Miss Cora Youngblood Corson," *The Anadarko Tribune*, Anadarko, Oklahoma, November 9, 1922, 5.
[565] "County Commissioners Tells S.F. Kiwanis Club of Road Construction," *Argus-Leader*, Sioux Falls, South Dakota, September 20, 1922, 2.
[566] "Cold is no Bar to Shrine Circus," *Tulsa World*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, November 15, 1922.
[567] "With Moore's Indoor Circus," *Billboard*, December 9, 1922, 113.
[568] "At Nebraska State Fair," *Brady Vindicator,* Brady, Nebraska, August 16, 1923, 1.
[569] "Andrew County Fair Crowd" Good," *St. Joseph Gazette,* St. Joseph, Missouri, August 30, 1923; "Music Draws Large Crowd," *Lincoln Journal Star,* Lincoln, Nebraska, September 3, 1923, 5.

It certainly seems to have worked as Performing alongside Princess White Cloud seems to have brought out the old tropes of Cora and her heritage as the *Lincoln Journal Star* announced that "Miss Corson is a full blooded Cherokee Indian."[570] These performances with Princess White Cloud offered Cora an opportunity to revamp her stale act by once-again promoting Native American headliners as she had done early in her career. Cora and her group performed after Princess White Cloud and made quite the impression on guests. Cora played her double euphonium and the saxophone with the sextet, but her signature tuba act stole the show. "Miss Corson was dressed in white and made a striking picture with the gold coils of the instrument wrapped about her body snake fashion as she plays."[571]

From Nebraska, the Cora Youngblood Corson Sextet traveled to Indiana to start a new tour. While on their way to Indiana, Cora and the girls stopped at the Drake Hotel in Chicago to visit Midwest Radio Central Inc.[572] There, their act was broadcasted across the Midwest. Unfortunately, despite their attempts to embrace this new medium for their act, Cora and her acts did not achieve radio fame.

In 1924 Cora continued to adapt the group to stay popular. In January, they performed as "Cora Youngblood Corson and Her Oklahoma Belles" while headlining at the Family Theater in Rochester, New York.[573] In April, the group briefly dropped their unique group act and joined a production called "Giggles" described as a burlesque attraction.[574] Early in Cora's career, the idea of a burlesque show kept her from looking toward vaudeville as a career. However, it seems with the rapid decline of vaudeville's popularity, Cora began to look anywhere she could for a

[570] "Fair Board Visits Rotary," *Lincoln Journal Star,* Lincoln, Nebraska, September 4, 1923, 11.
[571] "Fair Records are Broken," Nebraska State Journal, Lincoln, Nebraska, September 4, 1923, 5.
[572] "Cora Youngblood Corson Sextet Broadcasts Act," *Billboard*, December 8, 1923, 23.
[573] "Family Theater," *Democrat and Chronicle*, Rochester, New York, January 11, 1924, 26.
[574] "Columbia Burlesque," *Billboard*, April 5, 1924, 14.

performance opportunity. Presented by Joseph Levitt Attractions, "Giggles" promised to be a show of "Beautiful Girls, Exquisitely Gowned, Fascinating Music, Wonderful Dancing" and sure to be "frisky, brisky burlesque."[575] Critics praised the comedy and music of the act but claimed it was not top-notch but easily qualified as "a good average burlesque show."[576]

After a short couple of weeks performing in the show, Cora and her group continued on their own tour through April and May.[577] In June, Cora signed her group to be a part of the Frederick V. Bowers' "Kiss Me Again Revue" an "unusual vaudo-musical-song show" that included many different performers.[578] The group toured across the Midwest until July.[579] While touring with this production, Cora and her group were presented as "Cora Youngblood Corson and her Petticoat Band."[580] Another advertisement called them "Cora Carson Youngblood and Her Girls' Jazz Band."[581] During this performance, Cora had adopted popular jazz melodies into their repertoire with their traditional brass and opera selections. They also took their show into the crowd by performing while walking through the seats to open the production.[582]

As 1924 came to a close, Cora and her group continued to perform on their own in the Midwest and northeast.[583] They also picked up gigs at some fairs. In an article sure to have stung Cora's pride, while at the Lake County Fair in Indiana, the newspaper commented on her fall from grace due to her union activism and placed her new surroundings in its context.

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[575] "Giggles Brochure," April 10, 1924, Private Collection.
[576] "Giggles," *Variety*, April 9, 1924, 8.
[577] "Playhouse," *Passaic Daily News*, Passaic, New Jersey, April 19, 1924, 9; "Broadway Reade's," *The Daily Record*, Long Branch, New Jersey, May 7, 1924, 4; "Cora Youngblood Carson," *Pottsville Republican*, "Pottsville, Pennsylvania, May 27, 1924, 4.
[578] "Frederick V. Bowers," *York Daily Record*, York, Pennsylvania, June 9, 1924, 7.
[579] "Bowers' 'Gang' Closes," *Variety*, July 30, 1924, 5.
[580] "Bowers Company Offers Whole Change Last Half," *The Evening News*, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, June 18, 1924, 20.
[581] "At Polis," *The Times-Tribune*, Scranton, Pennsylvania, July 2, 1924, 20.
[582] "At Polis," *The Times-Tribune*, Scranton, Pennsylvania, July 2, 1924, 20.
[583] "Palace Today," *Times Herald*, Olean, New York, October 27, 1924, 20.

> The Cora Youngblood Sextette of girl musicians are the headliners of the vaudeville show. For years Cora Youngblood was in big time vaudeville but since her activities in organizing the performers she has played the fairs.[584]

This unfortunate article showed the extent of her fall because of her attempts to better the lives of vaudeville actors. Ironically, shortly after this performance the band booked a tour on the Keith Circuit which had been owned by on the men who opposed the White Rats so thoroughly.[585]

In November and December, Cora and the girls went to New York to participate in a promotional campaign for C.G. Conn's 50th anniversary. The girls posed for promotional photographs while holding their various instruments. One of these images was made into a postcard advertisement that read "A trip around the World with Conn Instruments. Manufactured at Elkhart, Indiana. Cora Youngblood Corson & Co."[586] On top of the photographic advertisements, C.G. Conn created a large sousaphone to celebrate their anniversary. This commemorative instrument was gold plated with silver highlights and engraved by Conn's master engraver, Julius Sternberg, to depict scenes of company's history. This tuba was claimed to be "the largest and most beautiful tuba ever built" even rivaling Cora's sousaphone.[587] Because of her skill, Cora was invited to play the tuba in New York. Her skill on display showed that she was still one of the world's greatest tuba players.

The public attention likely translated well into her performances in 1925. In January, the group headlined a vaudeville show in Yonkers, New York. The papers declared that the group was "a headliner of considerable prominence and merits a place among the most sought-after of all vaudeville productions."[588] For the next three months, the group toured through New York,

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[584] "County Fair Opened at Noon Today," *The Times*, Munster, Indiana, September 16, 1924, 1.
[585] "Cora Youngblood Corson Gets Keith Route," *Billboard*, November 29, 1924, 18.
[586] Conn Promotional Postcard, 1924, Private Collection.
[587] "New York Conn Co. Puts Over Excellent Publicity," *The Music Trade Review*, Vol. LXXIX, No. 24, December 13, 1924, 111.
[588] "The Unwanted, An English Picture Comes to Proctor's," *The Yonkers Statesman*, Yonkers, New York, January 7, 1925, 7.

Pennsylvania, Connecticut and surrounding states with great success. At this point in their career, they became popular for being "versatile musicians who play everything from opera to jazz."[589]

Indeed, the papers began to be much kinder than they had in years prior. In New Jersey, *The Morning Call* announced that Cora "is one of America's foremost musical conductors. In fact, she was one of the first and undoubtedly one of the most successful women in this artistic calling."[590] Unfortunately, tragedy struck as Cora's mother, Sarah Jane Youngblood died on February 8.[591] In June, Cora's father, Jeremiah Youngblood's health took a turn for the worse and she canceled her tours to return home. On July 8, he died due to heart failure with Cora at his bedside.[592] Owing to this unscheduled return to Oklahoma, when the band began touring once more, they started locally before moving through the Midwest.

They began in Kansas before returning to headline at the Orpheum Theater in Oklahoma City.[593] While in Oklahoma, Cora was interviewed by the *Oklahoma News*.

> Miss Youngblood's first act was a "single," in which she played the euphonium and sang Indian songs. That was the period of "Silver Heels," "Red Wing," and "Rainbow," and in her Indian costume the Oklahoma girl, who is part Cherokee, made a big hit.
>
> Her next step was to organize the United States Ladies Band with 35 girls. Later she took the six best from this band and formed a smaller company. She has directed a small band ever since.
>
> During the war and after the armistice, Mrs. Corson and her band played for the soldiers in France and Germany. The tuba she plays now has a shrapnel hole in the bell.
>
> In London, the band survived eight air raids. During some of these they were on the stage of a theater and played during the bombing.
>
> Mrs. Corson plays the tuba, cornet, saxophone, euphonium, bagpipes, and cello.[594]

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[589] "Ladies Orchestra, Capitol," *New Britain Daily Herald*, New Britain, Connecticut, March 19, 1925, 5.
[590] "Cora Youngblood Carson," *The Morning Call*, Paterson, New Jersey, April 6, 1925, 12.
[591] "Mrs. Youngblood Passes Away After Short Illness," *The American-Democrat*, Anadarko, Oklahoma, February 11, 1925, 1.
[592] "J.M. Youngblood…," *Vaudeville News*, Vol. XI, July 7, 1925, 14.
[593] "Noted Musical Act Coming to Midland," *The Hutchinson News*, September 12, 1925, 5; "Orpheum," *The Daily Oklahoman*, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, September 16, 1925, 5.
[594] "Former State School Girl Directs Women's Band," *The Oklahoma News*, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, September 17, 1925, 4.

This interview reveals the public understanding that Cora was part Cherokee and but by referring to her outfit as a "costume" it reveals the separation between her performance and audience understanding. However, it suggests that it fit the expected stereotype of the early twentieth century during the period that Indian Songs became so popular. At least to this Oklahoma paper, her stereotyped act still contained some Native heritage.

In 1926, the band continued their tour wherein the papers in the Midwest began to describe Cora as a Native American once again. In Saint Joseph, Michigan, she is described as "of the Cherokee race."[595] In Benton Harbor, Michigan she was "a full blood Cherokee Indian."[596] These instances revealed the first time in years that Cora's race had been used as an advertisement but it reveals the trend of Cora using a Native performance in the Midwest where she had previous success with a Native persona earlier in her career. By reinventing herself based on regional preferences, Cora could draw in crowds that wanted to see the expected stereotype of a Native and Oklahoman on stage. In February, the group ended their tour of the Midwest and moved south to Kentucky as a headliner on the Keith circuit.[597]

By 1927 Cora's band was taking its last gasps. Playing as the headliner was no longer the norm. While in New York, the band received what may have been the last article dedicated to their performance. In Johnstown, New York, the *Morning Herald* announced that the bill books at Smalley's Theater would be "the best all-around vaudeville entertainment that has so far been presented this season." Cora Youngblood Corson and her Sextette headlined the bill. The paper announced she would be playing the large sousaphone during their performance and ended with the moniker "this act is America's leading Lady Band." Interestingly, with the rise of movies in

[595] "They Appear Here Tonight," *The Herald-Press*, Saint Joseph, Michigan, January 30, 1926, 2.
[596] "Cora Youngblood Corson…," *The News-Palladium,* Benton Harbor, Michigan, February 1, 1926, 2.
[597] "Starting Thursday…," *Messenger-Inquirer*, Owensboro, Kentucky, February 24, 1926, 2.

vaudeville theaters, in the same advertisement, Smalley's announced their showing of *Corporal Kate*. This film about the "women's side of the World War" details the story of two girls who go to the front as entertainers. Showing an interesting dichotomy to Cora, the story mirrors Cora's in film. The girls decide to support the troops by performing overseas. While there, they have difficulty in finding accommodation. Their performances are generally appreciated by the soldiers but sometimes the crowd goes against the group. Finally, the girls are subjected a German air raid. Fortunately for Cora, no one was killed during her time in Europe.[598]

On May 10, 1927, it appears that Cora and the girls performed together for the last time as a group. Cora Youngblood Corson's Band performed as the Syncopated Bully Girls in Herbert Hall Winslow's comedy *He Loved the Ladies*. This play at the Frolic Theater in New York fared poorly in reviews with once critic, Rowland Field, stating of the performers "there are one or two others in the cast who have their moments in the play, but the assemblage, taken as a whole, is not so good. In fact, there are those who are terrible, if you must have the truth."[599] As for Cora and the girl's performance, J. Brooks Atkinson, another critic, wrote "the Syncopated Bully Girls in harlequinade costume, whom one had been anticipating, are so far backstage that one cannot see them clearly."[600]

With this final review of their performance together, it appears that the group that had toured and performed continuously for twenty years, albeit with a varying cast of ladies, finally decided to retire the act. It is unclear when exactly the band stopped performing together, as one article on September 19, 1928, mentioned the girls of "Cora Youngblood-Corson Concert Band" returning to visit Anadarko.[601] However, I have been unable to find anymore advertisements for

[598] "Vaudeville Bill at Smalley's," *The Morning Herald*, Johnstown, New York, February 12, 1927, 1.
[599] Rowland Field, "The New Play," *Brooklyn Times Union,* Brooklyn, New York, May 11, 1927, 70.
[600] J. Brooks Atkinson, "The Play," *New York Times*, New York City, New York, May 11, 1927.
[601] "Mr. and Mrs. Fred Acton," *The American-Democrat*, Anadarko, Oklahoma, September 19, 1928, 5.

the group in newspapers after 1927. This aligns with the purchase of the Keith-Albee-Orpheum Theatres Corporation and its consolidation into the Radio-Keith-Orpheum (RKO) by Joseph P. Kennedy Sr. from 1926-1928. This hostile buyout brought over 700 theatres under Kennedy's control, which he switched to cinemas.[602] After entertaining audiences around the world adding up to millions of people, this successful and outspoken band faded away from public memory.

Within post-war America, a new sense of patriotism and nationalism became the norm as identities became more closely tied to the land. By drawing upon her service overseas, Cora reinvented herself into a patriotic world war veteran. By latching onto this new cause and cultural trend of supporting the veterans of the war, Cora successfully convinced potential audiences of the value of her character and performance. This helped audiences, and most importantly theater managers, move past her past troubles as a member of the White Rats Actors Union and allow her acts back on the main vaudeville stages during a time that vaudeville began to decline and positions on the circuits became scarce. To rebuild her career, Cora reinvented herself by focusing on her wartime service to create a veteran performance as a draw for audiences, invested in Oklahoma to reinvigorate attention to vaudeville and the state, and, once she could no longer use her veteran status, reestablished a connection with a Native persona all to salvage her career during the death of vaudeville as an entertainment genre.

[602] Ronald Kessler, *The Sins of the Father: Joseph P. Kennedy and the Dynasty He Founded,* (Warner Books, 1996), 53.

CHAPTER SEVEN: Retirement

By 1927, Cora's career in vaudeville had ended and with it, her entire persona as a vaudeville performer. By this time, Cora and her family had moved to Tulsa, Oklahoma leaving behind their farms and any social ties to the tribes of Anadarko. Despite Cora's professional downfall and misfortune, the state of Oklahoma boomed as the largest discoveries of oil reserves occurred in Seminole County in 1926–1927. The state returned to the national stage as one of the largest oil producers in the world. As Oklahoma prospered, so too did the nation and unbridled economic prosperity continued to rise. Cora attempted to find her place in this new era without vaudeville but struggled to establish herself. Likewise, many Native tribes continued to look for a participating role in an ever-changing national identity. Music allowed one such organization formed out of Tulsa, Oklahoma called the United States Indian Reservation Band. Cora Youngblood Corson joined this band and performed as Princess Youngblood. Cora firmly took on a Native persona as part of this band which soared to national and international fame. Cora, as a member of the band, grew to become a representative of a modern American cultural understanding that accepted a national identity of both settler and native through her time in the Indian Reservation Band, performance at the inauguration of President Herbert Hoover and Franklin D. Roosevelt, and the close of her high-profile career as she entered retirement.

Even after vaudeville, the realm of music continued to offer an opportunity for Native performers to express their culture while also engaging the broader American public. Before World War I and the greater acceptance of Native cultural expression, "Indian music" had been associated with "savagery" which meant that "musical performance was considered a critical tool

in the government's agenda."[603] However, the 1920s allowed for an expansion of Native performers to a new level of public awareness. The non-Indian desire for "Indianness" had continue to grow out of vaudeville which provided opportunities for Indian musicians to exploit this in direct contradiction of the federal government's attempt to condemn "Indian music" in the early twentieth century.

According to Katrina Phillips in *Staging Indigeneity*, this correlation to a Native past created a "sense of authenticity" which pushed White Americans to recreate what they, or their audience, considered to be real. The performers would "stage" performances as expressions of "honoring" the Indian past, while simultaneously reframing it in ways that justified their exploitation of it. They zeroed in on what White America saw as the spectacle of Indigenous history and highlighted exaggerated proportions of perceived "Indianness."[604]

The American public's obsession with Native Americans in the early twentieth century came from the "Myth of the Vanishing Indian" which is defined as a self-fulfilling prophecy that paralleled "Manifest Destiny." As territorial expansion by white settlers and violent conflict pushed Native Americans further west, an influential cultural myth took root that Indigenous peoples would likely disappear through conflict, disease, or assimilation. The "growing sentimentalism for the apparently dominated and disappearing wilderness turned Native peoples and places into commodities."[605] This idea not only sparked the interest in Native performers in the 1900s which Cora had used to her advantage when she performed in Native costume. As an example, in 1925 Famous Players-Lasky produced the film, *The Vanishing American* based on

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[603] John W. Troutman, "Joe Shunatona and the United States Indian Reservation Orchestra," in *Indigenous Pop: Native American Music from Jazz to Hip Hop*, ed. Jeff Berglund, Jan Johnson, and Kimberli Lee, (Tucson, Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 2016), 17.
[604] Katrina Phillips, *Staging Indigeneity*, (University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 10-11.
[605] Phillips, *Staging Indigeneity*, 12.

Zane Grey's book of the same name which highlighted the negative portrayal of the American government against Native Americans. In the 1920s, the consumption of Native American material reached a new height as popular culture evolved.

The obsession of White Americans "to consume performances of racial and ethnic differences rendered in musical terms" provided a perfect opportunity for Native musicians.[606] Music became a way to sell the "expectations about Indianness" and Native people "were involved in recording, contesting, affirming, transforming, controlling, and performing those expectations in critical ways."[607] "All-Indian" bands began to spring up around the country and perform popular music genres around the country, and eventually, internationally.

Taking advantage of this opportunity, Joe Bayhylle Shunatona, a Pawnee Otoe bandleader formed the United States Indian Reservation Band, also sometimes referred to as an orchestra, in the late 1920's. Shunatona received his musical education as a student at the Chilocco Indian Agricultural School in northeastern Oklahoma. He excelled on several instruments and left Oklahoma to attend a music conservatory in Wichita, Kansas. In 1918, he graduated in Elocution and Dramatic Arts and moved to New York to study grand opera with baritone Oscar Seagle. Upon entering the musical scene, he could not find footing in the "serious" art music and instead switched toward the "show Indian" trajectory by performing in the Oklahoma-based *101 Ranch Wild West Show*. He followed this with a stint on the vaudeville stage until moving to New York in the late 1920's. In 1929, Shunatona secured a tremendous gig, to take an "all-Indian" band to perform at the inauguration of President Herbert Hoover and Vice President Charles Curtis.

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[606] John Troutman, "Joe Shunatona and the United States Indian Reservation Orchestra," 18.
[607] Phillip Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places*, (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 2004), 188.

The 1928 presidential election saw the Republican Herbert Hoover defeat the Democratic nominee, New York Governor Al Smith. Hoover won in a landslide election with major inroads in the South. For his Vice President, Hoover chose Charles Curtis who became the first Native American to be elected to that office. The selection of Curtis, as a Native American, may have aided in the popularity of the nominees in Oklahoma. In Oklahoma, Hoover carried 66 counties out of 77 with only the southeast portion of the state voting for Smith. It proved to be the first election since its statehood that Oklahoma had voted more Republican than the national average.[608]

Charles Curtis was born on January 25, 1860, in North Topeka, Kansas Territory as a member of the Kaw Nation. His mother, Ellen Pappan, had Kaw, Osage, Potawatomi, and French heritage. At the age of three, Curtis' mother passed away which sent him to live with his grandparents on the Kaw reservation while his father, Orren Curtis, fought in the Civil War. On June 1, 1868, Charles Curtis witnessed a large band of Cheyenne warriors invade the Kaw Reservation. During the skirmish, Curtis accompanied Joe Jim, a Kaw interpreter as they sought assistance from the Kansas governor. He later likely witnessed several more battles and deaths from tribal conflict with the Cheyenne.[609] Due to the violence, Charles was sent to live with his other grandparents in Topeka where he obtained an education in the local schools. In his teens, Curtis rejoined the Kaw nation which had been removed into Indian Territory.

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[608] Allan J. Lichtman, *Prejudice and the Old Politics: The Presidential Election of 1928*, (Lexington Books, 2000), 68.

[609] Debra Goodrich, "From Teepee to Capitol Dome," *Wild West*, (June 2018), 51-53. Deb Goodrich is the Garvey Historian in Residence at the Fort Wallace Museum and has a book on Curtis titled *From the Reservation to Washington: The Rise of Charles Curtis* due to be published in October 2024 by Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Based on his own life experience, Curtis believed in assimilation policies and pushed for the education of Native children. In 1892, as a member of the United States House of Representatives, Curtis sponsored the Curtis Act of 1898. Despite his career support of assimilation, Curtis' election to Vice President brought a new spotlight to Native culture and its acceptance by the federal government. The invitation of the United States Indian Reservation Band provided the opportunity for its members to represent and celebrate the country's Native duality. As John Troutman argues in *Indian Blues: American Indians and the Politics of Music, 1879-1934*, "the practice of music, in a very real sense, provided a means by which American Indian people could strategically deploy their newfound U.S. citizenship – for example, to reinforce their tribal identities – in the face of OIA officials who sought to dismantle that core of their existence."[610]

For Shunatona's "All-Indian" band he searched around Oklahoma and found a group of twenty musicians, with most being from the northeastern part of the state. Financed by William G. Skelly and an associative group of representative Tulsans, Shunatona's Indian Reservation Band started for Washington, D.C. in February 1929.[611] Newspapers heralded this organization as,

> "twenty real, genuine, 100 percent Americans, the kind that wear feather head-dress, beaded head-bands, buckskin-woolen garments, gaudy blankets, and moccasins in their wester habitat…This visiting all-American delegation, a veritable league of tribal musicians representing 16 states and 15 Indian tribes of the western states, is the sensational United States Indian Reservation Band, which only seven months ago was scattered all over the wild and wooly west."[612]

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[610] John W. Troutman, *Indian Blues: American Indians and the Politics of Music, 1879-1934*, (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009), 5.
[611] "Indians Send Orchestra to Inauguration," *Hartford Courant*, Hartford, Connecticut, February 25, 1929, 21.
[612] "Indians Stop in City on Way to Inaugural Ball," *The South Bend Tribune*, South Bend, Indiana, February 26, 1929, 14.

Audiences would be in for a treat to see a representative organization of Oklahoma's tribal nations serve as delegates on a national stage.

Originally, the only woman in the band, Princess Red Eagle who sang "both contralto and baritone" would be attending the inauguration.[613] However, for some unknown reason, Cora Youngblood Corson replaced her. As a member of this organization, Cora assumed a new persona and name to be more Native. This change is another example of her changing herself to sympathize with certain groups for her own reputation and popularity. On their way to Washington D.C., the band performed at several Vaudeville theaters. While in South Bend, Indiana, the paper printed a photograph of the band with the names and tribes of its members. Sitting in the middle of the front row is Cora Youngblood Corson, but the article states "Wildflower, a Cherokee, who punishes on of the largest tubas ever made for any man, and



THEY'RE FULL-BLOODED AMERICANS, EVERY ONE OF THEM.

South Bend Tribune
February 26, 1929

[613] "Indians Send Orchestra to Inauguration," *Hartford Courant*, Hartford, Connecticut, February 25, 1929, 21.

incidentally is a baritone and euphonium soloist."[614] The image and description are undoubtedly Cora.

Not only had she chosen a new name, but she now belonged to a specific tribe. This reflects Cora's loss of self with the decline of Vaudeville. Cora had not publicly claimed to be a member of any tribe. During her career, articles proposed many different tribes, but she did not seem to confirm nor deny their assumptions. During her early career, Cherokee would not have been the most obvious choice due to the tribe's residency in northeastern Oklahoma while Cora lived in Anadarko among the Comanche, Kiowa, and Apache. But, since she moved to Tulsa, Oklahoma in the heart of Cherokee country, she had an opportunity to create a new perception of herself that could afford her a new avenue back into vaudeville. The opportunity to join a local Indian Band for national tours meant that Cora needed to "become" Native if she wanted to get back on stage. Simple ethnic impersonation of just being "Indian" would not be effective in this new environment. Therefore, by firmly assuming Cherokee heritage, Cora could take advantage of the growing popularity of Native performers to return to vaudeville after her career had faded away.

To illustrate this point, Cora chose the name "Wildflower" as her new Cherokee persona. It invokes the image of the stereotyped "Indian Songs" of her early career. In fact, in 1908, E. Ray Goetz and Lou A. Hirsch released the Indian Song, "Wildflower" which featured the stereotypical Indian Maid with a headband and feathers on the cover which Cora emulated during her time with the Indian Reservation Band.[615] However, the name Wildflower did not last long, as the papers switched to another name of Princess Youngblood. Cora even had

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[614] "Indians Stop in City on Way to Inaugural Ball," *The South Bend Tribune*, South Bend, Indiana, February 26, 1929, 14.
[615] E. Ray Goetz and Lou A. Hirsch, "Wildflower," (New York: Shapiro, 1908).

professional photographs shot in New York in her regalia that are labeled "Princess Youngblood." Cora fully embraced this Indian image and chose a title that reflected the stereotypical idea of Native performers. This propelled her back into the spotlight.





Despite the name change, Cora's reputation as a musician proceeded her and the papers continually commented about her skill. Known as the "Oompah Squaw" or "Oompah Princess" in reference to the term that describes the rhythmical sound of a tuba, popular in German music.[616] Carrying her large sousaphone, Cora marched with the band the inaugural parade while blimps and airplanes videoed the procession on March 4, 1929.[617] Alongside their appearance in the parade, the "Indian Reserve Orchestra" performed together with other band in the Rialto Theatre on March 3-4. This multiband performance provided the inaugural visitors an opportunity to stimulate "patriotic pride and lofty idealism."[618] But the presence of the Indian Reserve Orchestra also celebrated "the Native identities that the same government had spent the last fifty years seeking to destroy."[619] As William K. Powers argued in *American Roots Music*,

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[616] "Oompah Squaw," *Daily News*, New York, New York, March 11, 1929, 53; "Oompah Princess," *The Standard Union*, Brooklyn, New York, March 12, 1929, 8.
[617] "Hoover Inaugural Parade to be Filmed from Blimps," *News-Press*, Fort Meyers, Florida, February 25, 1929, 1.
[618] Inaugural Committee, *Official Program: Inaugural Ceremonies*, (Washington D.C., W.F. Roberts Company, 1929).
[619] John Troutman, "Joe Shunatona and the United States Indian Reservation Orchestra," 21.

"for all Natives, music *is* culture, and all musicians are the culture's custodians."[620] Cora and the Indian Reservation band became the representatives of Native culture on a national stage.

After the inauguration, Cora continued to tour with the band on the Radio-Keith-Orpheum circuit.[621] During this tour, the band would perform for radio stations such as WCAE in Indiana, Pennsylvania.[622] While set to perform at the Prospect Theatre in Brooklyn, New York, the local paper commented on the presence of the Indian band at the inauguration stating:

> If visitors at the recent inaugural ceremonies in Washington were curious about recurrent sights of feather head-dress, gaudy blankets, and war paint on bronzed faces, they should have known that beneath these blankets and feathers could be found American clothes of the most modern design. The 'scary injuns' were, in reality, but the members of the United States Indian Reservation Band.[623]

A continual struggle for Native Americans to overcome the stereotypes of "savagery" still plagued public misconception.

The reality is that stereotypes sell. It has taken into the 2020's for some companies to finally remove indigenous characters from their advertising such as Land O'Lakes butter removing the Indian maiden or the Washington Red Skins changing to the Washington Commanders. For hundreds of years, commercialization of Native stereotypes has been used to merchandise and market products. The vaudeville shows at the turn of the century are no different. These Native performances reinforced popular interpretations of race and the place of Native peoples within it. The productions of the shows used stereotypical offensive language to describe the acts such as savage, injun, brave, and squaw. The terms point out the negative view

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[620] William K. Powers, "Native American Music," in *American Roots Music*, Eds. Robert Santelli, Holly George-Warren, and Jim Brown, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001), 147.
[621] "Indian Chief and Band on Big Air Program," *The Morning Call*, Allentown, Pennsylvania, March 12, 1929, 29.
[622] "Radio Programs," *The Indiana Gazette*, Indiana, Pennsylvania, March 12, 1929, 6.
[623] "U.S. Indian Reservation Band Comes to Prospect Theatre," *Brooklyn Times Union*, Brooklyn, New York, March 17, 1929, 65.

towards Natives in, what activist Suzan Harjo calls "an abusive society." She points out that "language is a control mechanism…and words are weapons used to signal status information such as who are the inferior and superior folks."[624] The terms may have some cultural origins in Native languages, but they have been turned into pejorative labels. Compounding this, the presentation of Native peoples through the stereotypical lens of buckskin outfits also promoted the exoticism and difference between Americans and Indian. However, the professional Native musicians within vaudeville continued to enthrall crowds and demonstrate the exceptional ability of Native performers despite the uphill battle against social thought.

The group's musical act entitled "From Camp to Campus" received positive reviews from critics. Chief Roaring Thunder and Princess Youngblood were heralded as the talented entertainment assisting the band.[625] As they traveled along the circuit, they performed at many theatres that Cora had headlined almost two decades prior. This also put Cora's name back into the headliner position for theatre advertisements but this time, under Princess Youngblood.[626] The band would perform jazz, solos, and singing. Will Abel, a critic for *Variety*, commented that the band "sure know their jazzique." He also noted favorably of Cora's performance, stating the Princess Youngblood, "who does 'Old Black Joe' as a Sousaphone solo is announced as being the only woman to master this instrument, in addition to playing the largest of its kind. She clicked."[627] The papers also reflected these reviews of Cora as they commented that she "plays skillfully on a great instrument few women could handle."[628]

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[624] Suzan Shown Harjo, "Watch Your Language!," *Indian Country Today*, July 4, 2001.
[625] "Indian Band on WGBI," *The Scranton Republican*, Scranton, Pennsylvania, March 30, 1929, 17.
[626] "Poli's," *The Evening News*, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, April 4, 1929, 5.
[627] Will Abel, "U.S. Indian Reservation Band," *Variety*, Vol. 94, No. 11, (March 27, 1929), 41.
[628] "Indian Band at the B.F. Keith Memorial," *The Boston Globe*, Boston, Massachusetts, April 9, 1929, 33.

On April 9, 1929, the United States Indian Reservation Band arrived in Boston, Massachusetts for a performance at the local theatre. While there, the band met with local government officials further placing themselves as representatives beyond the stage. First, they met Massachusetts Governor Frank G. Allen where he presented Cora "a gold pin bearing the seal of the Commonwealth." They then went to City Hall where they met with Mayor Malcolm E. Nichols.[629] The next day, April 10, the band traveled to Northampton, Massachusetts where they serenaded former President Calvin Coolidge during a snowstorm. After playing one song, Coolidge shook hands with "Chief Shunatona, leader of the band, and Princess Young Blood, a Cherokee."[630] Once finished, the band continued onward to for more theater performances.



AN OOMPAH PRINCESS greets the former President in front of Calvin Coolidge's ...ce at Northampton, Mass. The princess, Young Blood, plays the biggest horn in an ...dian band which later serenaded the Coolidges at their home.
(Photograph from Pacific and Atlantic.)

Chicago Tribune Sun
April 28, 1929

The popularity of the band continued to grow after the performance for Coolidge and Cora, once more, became the topic of discussion whenever the band found mention. In Brooklyn, one critic for *Variety* commented that the band "gave plenty of color to the finish" of the bill. In

[629] "Indian Band at State House and City Hall," *The Boston Globe*, Boston, Massachusetts, April 9, 1929, 8.
[630] "Indian Musicians Serenade Coolidge," *The Boston Globe*, Boston, Massachusetts, April 11, 1929, 12.

his opinion they were, rightfully, taking advantage of the "bushels of page one publicity" they had received. He also noted that "Princess Youngblood, who plays the giant Sousaphone and is the single feminine member, bears great resemblance to Cora Youngblood Corson."[631] This remark demonstrates an interesting issue with pinpointing Cora's perceived heritage. Obviously, the reporters knew that Cora Youngblood Corson was Princess Youngblood. However, there is no questioning of this name change. Perhaps the reporters knew that it was just an act, or like many of her audiences early in her career, the public had accepted that Cora was a Native American from Oklahoma and therefore her participation in this organization was a natural fit. Supporting this idea is the repeated fact of the group that it was made of "100% Natives."[632] There was no reason to question the name change of a woman who many already believed had Native ancestry.

This poses an interesting question into the perception of Cora Youngblood Corson at the culmination of her career. Did the reporters and white audience know that Cora was not an Indian from the comments made in her past which differentiated her from a Native heritage and just did not care? This is certainly a viable answer given the extent that Indian culture had been exploited for profit by white performers. However, I believe that it is the opposite. Given Cora's popularity and presentation as a Native woman, to the American public, she was Indian. Despite not firmly stating that she is actually Native, she still sold herself in advertisements and stories as being Native. Therefore, I argue that the public had accepted Cora as a Native American which has led to even modern histories still referring to her as such. For instance, M. Alison Kibler's *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville* refers to "Cora

[631] Bige, "Albee," *Variety*, Vol. 95, No. 1, (April 17, 1929), 50.
[632] "Indians Stop in City on Way to Inaugural Ball," *The South Bend Tribune*, South Bend, Indiana, February 26, 1929, 14.

Youngblood Corson, a Native American."[633] It had become an accepted part of her "self" to the public and history recorded her as such.

As the band continued to tour, the papers announced the band's scheduled performance at the Palace Theater in Chicago, Illinois on April 28. The article noted that "featured with the band is Princess Youngblood (Cora Youngblood Corson)." It also noted that "Miss Corson for several years had her own band."[634] However, her false Native heritage did not come into question in this professional publication either. Though, when entering the Midwest, more disparaging rhetoric regarding natives replaced the praise of the act in the papers, especially about Cora. On August 11, 1929, the *Cincinnati Enquirer* commented:

> Even in their theatrical endeavors the Indians cannot get away from the idea that the squaw should be allotted the heavy duty. The heaviest feature in their routine as the Indian Band, permits the redskins to shoulder onto Princess Young Blood, their feminine star, what is said to be one of the world's largest tuba horns.[635]

The paper also commented that the band would perform "jazz played by real savages" and that Cora was "an 'original' American prima donna."[636] This act in Ohio appears to be the final performance of Cora with the United States Indian Reservation Band in 1929 as she does not appear in anymore advertisements moving forward.

After her departure from the band, Cora reformed her own group as the Cora Youngblood Corson Band composed of ten women. Beginning on August 22, 1929, advertisements announced the Cora's "world famous band" would be performing at the Cuming County Fair in

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[633] M. Alison Kibler, *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville*, (University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 14.
[634] "Indian Band Booked for Palace, Chicago," *Billboard*, Vol, 41, No. 17, (April 27, 1929), 12.
[635] "Even in their theatrical…," *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, Cincinnati, Ohio, August 11, 1929, 64.
[636] "Albee," *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, Cincinnati, Ohio, August 11, 1929, 61.

West Point, Nebraska from August 26 to 29.[637] Her band then performed at the Thurston County Fair at Walthill, Nebraska on August 30.[638] After this performance, Cora and her new band disappear from the newspapers. It is not known if they continued to tour but Cora did return to Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Sometime between 1929 and 1930, Cora met a man named Frank Barsanti in Tulsa. Born on August 9, 1895 in Pisa, Italy, Barsanti immigrated to the United States on April 3, 1907 and became a naturalized citizen on January 10, 1919.[639] He moved to Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1929 and quickly gained a reputation as a leading turkey grower in eastern Oklahoma.[640] On June 24, 1930, Cora Youngblood Corson married Frank Barsanti.[641] Cora joined him in poultry farming and became co-owner of the Tender Broiler Hatchery.[642] In returning home, she appears to have dropped the moniker of Princess Youngblood once she left the headlines of the newspapers. She is only mentioned in terms of connection to Barsanti. In the meantime, Shunatona took his U.S. Indian Reservation Band to perform at "countless national engagements and was featured at the International Exposition in Paris, where it played at the American Building."[643] The band had not only become a symbol of America's native culture at the inauguration, but they now represented a part of the country's identity on an international level.

Just a couple of years later, the 1932 presidential election would once again bring Cora Youngblood Corson, and with her the performance of Princess Youngblood, out of retirement for

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[637] "Cuming County Fair," *The Beemer Times*, Beemer, Nebraska, August 22, 1929, 6.
[638] "Official Program," *Bancroft Blade*, Bancroft, Nebraska, August 22, 1929, 6.
[639] *Naturalization Petitions for the United States District and Circuit Courts, Northern District of Illinois and Immigration and Naturalization Service District 9, 1840-1950 (M1285)*; Microfilm Serial: *M1285*; Microfilm Roll: *22,* National Archives and Records Administration (NARA); Washington, D.C.
[640] "F.A. Barsanti Rites Pending," *Tulsa Daily World*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, August 24, 1950.
[641] *Oklahoma, U.S., County Marriage Records, 1890-1995*, Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com.
[642] "Illness is Fatal for Tulsa Woman," *Tulsa Daily World*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, July 13, 1943.
[643] "Two Famous Bands to Vie at Inaugural," *The Washington Post*, Washington, D.C., February 7, 1933, 16.

another stint with the U.S. Indian Reservation Band. With the backdrop of the Great Depression, Franklin D. Roosevelt easily defeated Herbert Hoover whom many people had blamed for the economic state of the country. On the event of his inauguration, the United States Indian Reservation Band was once again invited to play at the presidential inauguration alongside the Philadelphia Harmonica Band. Some papers reported that John F. Kroutil, president of The Roosevelt-Garner Club of Oklahoma, sent the Indian Reservation Band to D.C. for the event.[644] The two groups would perform on March 4, 1933, at the inaugural ball as its "twin musical attractions."[645] This tradition of having a charity ball had been broken by President Woodrow Wilson but revived under Roosevelt. The papers noted that members of the band, namely Chief Roaring Thunder and Princess Youngblood, would be on hand for this performance as they had four years prior.

This time around, the band was announced to be "made up of 20 full-blooded Indians representing 18 tribes…in full Indian regalia" and led by Chief Big Mountain of the Blackfoot tribe.[646] The papers also mentioned that "all the members of this band are university or college graduates and many of them have studied abroad."[647] The newspapers finally mentioned the education and success of the performers, rather than just their outfits. This mention likely affirms the progress of assimilation which had switched from annihilation to assimilation of Native Americans through education in 1900. The *Washington Post* provided an interesting look at these two bands stating that "representatives of families who can trace their lineage several centuries back of the Mayflower invasion will vie with first generation Americans in providing music for

[644] "Novelties Feature Inaugural Ball," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, February 26, 1933, 34.
[645] "Indians to Inaugural," *Radio News-Guide*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, February 11, 1933.
[646] "Three are Appointed," *Evening Star*, Washington, D.C., February 3, 1933, 17; "First Lady Guest at Inaugural Ball," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, March 5, 1933, 12.
[647] "Most Spectacular in History," *Evening Star*, Washington, D.C., February 7, 1933, 19.

the inaugural ball."[648] As in 1929, Cora and the other members of the band represented the Native side of the American identity on a national level.

The country celebrated a new acceptance of Native culture. Katrina Phillips pointed out in *Staging Indigeneity* that the "growing sentimentalism" that had turned "Native peoples and places into commodities" evolved into a "desire to save, to preserve, and to keep Indigenous cultures for posterity."[649] This came with a nostalgia for the West which can be seen in the popularity of western novels and films in the 1920s such as *Riders of the Purple Sage* in 1925, also based off a Zane Grey novel. The nostalgia continued healthily into a peak in the 1950s with music and radio shows also promoting an obsession with the West and its wild, untamed characters. A deep interest in the West pairs with Philip Deloria's argument that this romanticization of Indianness "helped lay the foundation for a modern American identity."[650] Simply, the idea of the "Vanishing Indian" combined with the fact that American identity had been linked with its proximity to Indians and Indianness, left the nation looking for a new, modern identity. The peaceful blending of the Native representation and the new federal government provided a glimpse into a blended future wherein the settler and Native identity could exist in one entity on a national scale. Gary Gerstle best illustrates this identity as a "civic nationalism" that evolved from a Rooseveltian idea of American identity in the 1920s.

Gerstle argued that Theodore Roosevelt believed that the forging of Americans came from "the conquest of the Indians and the winning of the West." The commonality of facing against Natives formed "Americans" out of various European backgrounds in North America.[651]

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[648] "Two Famous Bands to Vie at Inaugural," *The Washington Post*, Washington, D.C., February 7, 1933, 16.
[649] Phillips, *Staging Indigeneity*, 11-12.
[650] Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places*, 191.
[651] Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century*, (Princeton University Press, 2001), 20-21.

This idea of conquering Indians brought the American process of attempting to annihilate or assimilate Natives into White society at the turn of the century. After the Indian Wars, the American identity suffered a crisis as they no longer had a common foe on the continent. This issue found a solution with American expansion across the seas to face natives of new lands. After service in World War I, Native Americans finally earned their place in American society as citizens thus ending the "adversary or foe" question.

However, the aftermath of the war created new racial and social issues within the United States. The Red Scare caused paranoia among communities fearing a communist revolution. The Red Summer of 1919 led to a series of racial violence across the country culminating in the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre. But it also created novel changes for American rights. The suppression of free speech during the war created organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union. Many Americans, especially immigrants and minorities began to engage in politics in what Gerstle terms "civic nationalism" wherein they fight for an America that "encouraged the free exchange of ideas and that made no distinction on the basis of race, creed, or religion. Citizenship and the equal rights that came with it meant that minorities and Native Americans "strengthened their ties to a nation that had stigmatized them as racially inferior."[652] An America, while still heavily leaning toward the racist notions of dominance of the white race ideology, could be shifting into a more open and welcoming identity that brought groups together for a common cause. The United States Indian Reservation Band took that place on the national stage as the representation of America's return to an identity that included Native American without the completely adversarial relationship.

[652] Gerstle, 115.

Due to her past popularity, Cora quickly became the topic of the papers when discussing the Indian Reservation Band. The *Cincinnati Enquirer* noted "the matter of the Indian Reservation Band is not one to be dismissed lightly, for in that band is Princess Youngblood. Most of the time she runs a chicken ranch in Oklahoma, but just let an inauguration or a parade come along, and the Princess quits chicken ranching and plays the tuba."[653] The papers also stated as fact that Cora "is a full-blooded Cherokee and plays the largest tuba in the world."[654] Her successful ethnic impersonation of a Native woman on this national level successfully convinced the press of her false Native heritage.

This time around, Cora's popularity led to interviews with local papers and radio stations. However, one interview revealed Cora's new image with bewildering statements that seem to be meant to enhance her "Indianness." The article begins with a discussion of her ability and her "gold tuba" that traveled with her all over war zones in the World War. "In fact, that tuba has three gold patches" because "it was hit in air raids." The article explains that Cora grew up in Oklahoma and "loves her prairies too much to leave them very often." She would occasionally play with the Indian band but spent most of her time overseeing "the four farms she owns." Cora also told the reporter some of her "most vivid childhood memories about Geronimo, the famous Apache chieftain" to authenticate her new heritage.

> We'd watch him coming down the street and beg him for a story. He was a very old, wrinkled man and very kind. Indians are noted for their kindness to children, you know. If he had some change, he would buy us candy and then tell us stories. His favorite one was about his war blanket. It had 19 scalps attached to it. But to be a true war blanket it should have had 20. Poor Geronimo! He felt so badly that he didn't have that twentieth scalp which would have meant honor to him according to his ancient philosophy.

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[653] Harry Ferguson, "Shall it be Hey-Nonny?" *Cincinnati Enquirer*, February 26, 1933, 17.
[654] "Oklahoma Indians and Dancers Fill Program," *Washington Post*, Washington, D.C., February 26, 1933, 6.

The article also mentioned that at the inaugural ball, Cora would be wearing "the dress of her ancestors – soft buckskins trimmed with fringe and beads."[655] It should be noted that the dress in question still survives in the author's possession, and it is in fact secured by snap buttons on both the dress and moccasins like a costume. This confirms that her presentation of a Native woman was an act fully dressed in costume. Cora was also interviewed as part of a national radio broadcast by the Greater National Capital Committee. They asked Princess Youngblood, a "well-known Cherokee Indian" to describe her reactions to Washington on the eve of the inauguration.[656] These stories prove Cora's attempt at ethnic impersonation by highlighting the failure of using her knowledge and experiences with Native people in Oklahoma. There are several issues with her statements. For example, Geronimo lived as a prisoner of war at Fort Sill, some forty miles south of Anadarko, from 1894 until his death in 1909. These statements show Cora attempting to cement her fraudulent Native heritage with anecdotes that harken to her imaginary youth on an "Indian reservation."

At the Inaugural Ball, the U.S. Indian Reservation Band performed to a crowd of almost 8,200. Unfortunately, President Franklin Roosevelt did not attend, but the first lady, Eleanor Roosevelt did. The band performed well, but only Cora received special mention in the papers for being the only woman and having "aroused much interest with her playing of the largest tuba used in any such organization."[657] The band received praise for being "the most interesting" of the performances due to their ability and regalia.[658] After the inauguration, the United States Indian Reservation Band continued to perform at theaters in the Northeast. However, it is not

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[655] "Indian Princess is to Play Tuba at Inaugural," *Dayton Daily News*, Dayton, Ohia, March 1, 1933, 13.
[656] "WRC Broadcasts Reaction of Visitors," *Evening Star*, Washington, D.C., March 3, 1933, 4.
[657] "First Lady Guest at Inaugural Ball," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, March 5, 1933, 12.
[658] Dorothea J. Lewis, "When in Washington Do as Democrats Do," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, March 6, 1933, 4.

clear if Cora continued with the band or if she returned to Oklahoma after the inaugural performance. Regardless, this became Cora's final major performance as she is absent from the papers for the next decade unless associated with her farming enterprise.

After her final work as a performer, Cora returned to retired life and began to raise quail as a hobby. However, she quickly became so successful that Barsanti took them over as a business. He built specialized cages for the birds and raised 600 in 1935.[659] This is not to say that her musical career had been forgotten. To the contrary, in 1938, an article in *The Tribune* of Scranton, Pennsylvania contained a "Musical Quiz" by Dr. D.E. Jones. He asked the reader "Who was the Indian girl who sang in a Scranton Concert? Cora Youngblood Corson, young Indian soprano was soloist with the United States Ladies' Military Band at Luna Park, August 4, 1907. After singing several songs, Miss Corson played instrumental solos on the euphonium and bass tuba."[660] This shows the impression of Cora's ability to convince her audience of her false Native heritage and speaks to the public's obsession of Native performers as rare commodities. Her performance remained in the public memory twenty-one years later.

As Cora continued raising her quail, rumblings on the other side of the world would soon thrust her back into the world of entertainment. Throughout the 1930's, Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan made aggressive moves to expand their national powers. On September 1, 1939, Nazi Germany invaded Poland starting another world war, which would last for the next six years. America held a stance of neutrality after recalling the horrors of World War I and the failure of the Treaty of Versailles. They did not want to intervene in another European war.

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[659] "The Sportsman," *Miami Daily News-Record*, Miami, Oklahoma, May 6, 1936.
[660] "Musical Quiz," *The Tribune*, Scranton, Pennsylvania, April 27, 1938.

On December 7, 1941, this neutrality shattered when the Empire of Japan launched a surprise attack on the United States Naval Station at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. This attack killed and wounded thousands of Americans and destroyed or crippled much of the American Pacific Fleet. The next day, the United States declared war on Japan and entered World War II. Angered by this surprise attack, the American people rallied behind the war effort by enlisting or doing what they could to support the troops. Cora, like many others, used her skill to provide entertainment for the American soldiers in Oklahoma.

Although she had stopped performing, Cora joined with her brother-in-law, Glenn Condon, as the first woman involved in the work of *Hey Rube, Inc.*, "a non-profit organization of civilians whose function is to present entertainment for civilian defense workers and soldiers in army camps." Created in 1942, following the attack on Pearl Harbor, the organization quickly grew from organizing "mainly lines of dancing girls" to establishing a regular lineup of acts.[661] The group soon attached itself to Camp Gruber near Braggs, Oklahoma and continued to entertain the camp until the end of the war.[662]

Given her experience with the past World War, Cora was interviewed by *The Tulsa Tribune* on her experiences. She commented "War? Yes, I know war. It isn't nice. To see all those young men one day playing and laughing and singing as though they hadn't a care in the world, and to see them dead, the next!" The article said she had been "one of the world's most famous entertainers in the early part of the century." She pointed to a dented sousaphone saying "We were playing in London in '18 when this happened. The theater had a glass roof, and we

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[661] "Show Troupe is Formed at Tulsa," *The El Reno Daily Tribune*, El Reno, Oklahoma, March 2, 1943; "Hey, Rube, In. Will Play at Glennan General Hospital," *Okmulgee Daily Times*, Okmulgee, Oklahoma, November 3, 1943.

[662] "Hey Rube to Celebrate Second Anniversary," *The Gruber Guidon,* Camo Gruber, Oklahoma, February 16, 1945.

were just leaving the stage to play beneath the first balcony when a burst of shrapnel was hurled through the roof." Inexplicably, perhaps part of the nature of show business and the created life she had made, the article contains many incorrect details about Cora's life. Such as "at 10 she was in her father's band at Anadarko, Ok. At 14 she was a member of Miss Ruth Mae Butler's United States Ladies' band. In 1905 she had formed her own 30-piece band." and "At war's end, the band was booked into South America and Australia, but ships were too crowded, and the band returned to America."[663]

Unfortunately, a year after this interview, Cora took ill and after a two week-long illness, died on July 12, 1943, at the age of 57, in the home of her sister, Eula Condon.[664] She is buried in Rose Hill Memorial Park in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Frank Barsanti remarried and moved to Skiatook, Oklahoma where he died on August 22, 1950, after a cerebral hemorrhage while attending a theater.[665] He is buried in Memorial Park Cemetery in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Following her death, the obituaries attempted to capture Cora's life in a brief description. In *Billboard* it acknowledged her achievements, such as holding "the only honorary life membership in [the] Actor's Equity Association ever awarded [to] a woman." It also stated that she "won fame as the only woman ever to play triple-tongue solos on the tuba and won competitions on the Scotch bagpipes."[666] The *Tulsa Daily World* noted that her death came "on the eve of the annual reunion of the Rainbow Division Veterans association in Tulsa" which

[663] "Tulsa Woman Played for the Boys 'Over There'," *The Tulsa Tribune*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, January 3, 1942.
[664] "Illness is Fatal for Tulsa Woman," *Tulsa Daily World,* July 13, 1943.
[665] "F.A. Barsanti Rites Pending," *Tulsa Daily World*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, August 24, 1950.
[666] "Cora Youngblood Corson," *The Billboard*, July 24, 1943, 31.

"remembered her well for the many hours of entertainment she provided for them 25 years ago in France and occupied Germany."[667]

However, like the 1942 interview, these also inexplicably contain incorrect information, furthering the mystery of her life. One such claim appeared in the *Billboard* obituary that stated, "Mrs. Barsanti began her professional career as conductor of a woman's band at the St. Louis World Fair."[668] The *Tulsa Daily World* claimed that Cora had performed at the funeral of President William McKinley and at the inauguration of President Warren G. Harding. It also incorrectly explained that she had "entertained President Woodrow Wilson at his own request" during World War I.[669] The inconsistencies could be attributed to the nature of her career, in which she created her image through her various performances. The obituaries also left out any mention of her Native performance. Perhaps showing that when not on the stage, her perceived heritage did not provide a draw for readers. Or perhaps it shows an acceptance that she was Native, and the paper did not need to point out the obvious. Regardless of this, the full life of an influential woman is difficult to surmise without the ability to see the full scope of her impact.

The final years of Cora's career found Cora attempting to find her place in a new era without vaudeville. She struggled to establish herself without the profession she had dominated for almost twenty years. Likewise, Native performers continued to look for a participating role in this ever-changing national identity and popular consumer culture. Her role in the U.S. Indian Reservation Band provided Cora and opportunity to be a part of representing America's "Indianness" and its acceptance as part of a national identity. Their performances at the inauguration of President Herbert Hoover and President Franklin D. Roosevelt helped to publicly

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[667] "Illness is Fatal for Tulsa Woman," *Tulsa Daily World*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, July 13, 1943.
[668] "Cora Youngblood Corson," *The Billboard*, July 24, 1943, 31.
[669] "Illness is Fatal for Tulsa Woman," *Tulsa Daily World*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, July 13, 1943.

showcase a new modern American identity that accepted a dual identity of both settler and native.

CONCLUSION:

After such a storied career with many different identities, one question remains. Who is Cora Youngblood Corson? Is she a rugged settler from the plains of Oklahoma? Is she a Native performer on the vaudeville stage? Is she elegance and wealth on display? Is she a tough, no nonsense union leader? Is she a fearless veteran of the world war? Is she a struggling performer in a dying field? Or is she an ethnic impersonator? She is all the above and yet not defined by one. The same reasons that kept her interesting for audiences create an uncomfortable discourse about race and ethnic identity because we cannot put her firmly into a specific box.

Certainly, Cora exploited her ethnic and familial connections to adjust her performances to stay relevant within vaudeville. This constant change in her performances used accepted stereotypes to appear authentic to her audience. In doing so, Cora became a symbol of whatever image she attempted to portray. This caused people to rethink their perceptions of race and class to find interest or connection with Cora. In *Slippery Characters: Ethnic Impersonators and American Identities*, Laura Browder argues that "the power of individual testimony can help reshape public thinking and public discourse about race. While race may be a construction, it wields tremendous power in the lives of most people, for whom racial and ethnic categories are far from abstractions…These new autobiographies of racial unmasking can help Americans rethink the meaning of racial and ethnic categories."[670] By unmasking Cora's many personas, we can begin to understand the malleability of racial performance of self in the early twentieth century.

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[670] Laura Browder, *Slippery Characters: Ethnic Impersonators and American Identities*, (University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 277

Cora's success in portraying a Native American illuminates the larger obsession White Americans had with consuming perceived Native culture in the form of stereotypical exaggerated proportions of perceived "Indianness."[671] Early in her career, the idea of Native peoples as commodities helped sell Cora's performances in the northeast as audiences did not have the slightest inclination of actual Native culture. When returning to Oklahoma and the Midwest, the importance of Cora's created Native heritage faded in favor of a more refined act to oppose the rugged, settler environment of her upbringing in Oklahoma. When faced with troubles as a union leader, Cora reinvented herself as a simple, humble, hardworking Oklahoman who sought support from her fellow Oklahomans. With the outbreak of war, Cora fully embraced her patriotic duty and billed herself as soldier who braved submarines and air raids, traveled through war-torn Europe, and served overseas for a year and a half. After the war, with no union to fall back on, Cora adopted the persona of a veteran to appeal to a new audience but still suffered in the decline of vaudeville. Finally, Cora firmly created a Native heritage to perform at presidential inaugurations as a symbol of America's new modern identity.

Cora Youngblood Corson's life exemplified the fluidity of performance in the early 20th century as she continually reinvented herself by manipulating racial, national, and class perceptions to remain unique in vaudeville. It also highlights the ease at which Native imagery became exploitable in the fledgling state of Oklahoma as non-Indians poured into the territory at the turn of the century. By using the observational knowledge gained from proximity to Native peoples and exploiting stereotypes, White performers like Cora were able to convince their audiences of their assumed race. Cora, however, took this a step further by using the same ideas to meld into a variety of personas to assist her career.

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[671] Katrina Phillips, *Staging Indigeneity*, (University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 10-11.

Her success in performing different identities brought her international fame. Her name regularly appeared in newspapers and magazines around the world, and she was a fixture on the concert stage and vaudeville circuits. As a euphonium and tuba player, she was praised as being one of the greats of her time. She was a woman of high class who became independently wealthy from her farm in Anadarko and income from performances, moved in the rarified world of celebrities, and her endorsements drove sales of musical instruments. Performing in full tribal regalia as a Native American she subverted cultural stereotypes by portraying Natives as modern entertainers rather than people of the past. Her musical ability astounded her contemporaries who were shocked to see a presumed Native *and* a woman outperform white men on the tuba and euphonium. Crowds flocked to theaters to see this Native woman who grew up on the plains of Oklahoma perform Indian songs, opera, and jazz with skill unmatched by any other.

Cora accomplished these feats using "passing" to use another culture as a representation of herself. Cora's ability to use "passing" allowed her to weave through a male-dominated world and draw support for her career and personal causes through identification with larger constituencies or groups. She continually looked for a way to connect herself to a cultural trend or cause to better market herself to the public. Marcia Alesan Dawkins states in *Clearly Invisible: Racial Passing and the Color of Cultural Identity*,

> Passing is a strange thing…it is a way for us to be seen and not to be seen…Passing shifts our social positions amidst social limitations. Constant movement is what makes passing so easy for us to wonder about and so difficult to understand. Translation: passing demands that we think hard about issues of identity and rhetoric, of the public and the private, in ways that most of us are privileged enough to ignore if we so choose…Passing forces us to think and rethink what exactly makes a person black, white, or "other," and why we care.[672]

[672] Marcia Alesan Dawkins, *Clearly Invisible: Racial Passing and the Color of Cultural Identity*, (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), xi.

While primarily used as a discussion for passing between black and white identities, Cora's use of a Native heritage fit well into the definition.

Cora's use of different identities helped keep her popularity in vaudeville for almost twenty years. This phenomenon is not uncommon. Historian Laura Browder argued that "ethnic passage from one identity to another is not an anomaly. Autobiography, with its valorization of individualism and its emphasis on self-fashioning, is a form peculiarly suited to American national mythologies."[673] Cora's changing image was "ambiguous and changeable" offering her the ability to present one persona while "another one lay behind it, and behind it another one." This example of passing, "introduces a different concept of depth in which identities exist simultaneously and contingently."[674] Cora was able to succeed in this because most Americans did not know what an "authentic" Native should look, talk, sing, or act like. Therefore, it was not difficult for Cora to convince the American public that she had Native heritage. As long as she played into their stereotyped knowledge and provided a convincing backstory, Cora could be anyone she wanted.

This is the uncomfortable part of the discourse into Cora's fame. One could argue that she is playing a con-game on an ignorant and uncaring audience by exploiting the interest in Native performers. Which is true. However, she is also a resourceful woman who is using the materials available to her to break into the world of vaudeville. The impact of her act as a Native American can also not be understated. Until my research began in 2019, no one had concluded that Cora did not have a Native heritage. She had been written into history as a successful Native woman who succeeded in her career and became an example of the feats of Native performers in

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[673] Laura Browder, *Slippery Characters: Ethnic Impersonators and American Identities*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 2.
[674] Marcia Alesan Dawkins, *Clearly Invisible: Racial Passing and the Color of Cultural Identity*, (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), 36-37.

the early twentieth century. The audiences believed that she was an American Indian and therefore their perceptions of Natives were shaped positively by her performances. Is this acceptable behavior in today's discourse on race? No. But just because we do not agree with her methods does not mean that it did not have some positive outcome.

Cora's ability to convincingly portray Native culture came from her time spent in Oklahoma which allowed her to draw upon her knowledge of Native people she lived alongside. Oklahoma is not completely a state of isolated ethnic communities, as it has many blended communities such as Anadarko. In the early twentieth century, Oklahoma formed as a state and the cultural perception of those who claim to be Oklahoman was formed by people in the public eye, such as Cora Youngblood Corson. As anthropologist Charles Nuckolls argued, people like Cora represented "in extreme form values and attitudes strongly "selected for" in a culture. Serving as a benchmark against which people judge their conformity to accepted ideals, it stands out and attracts attention." Studying these popular celebrities "reveals the values that are most salient to the formation of cultural identity."[675] Their reputations reflected the state and created the image of Oklahoma culture to a national audience.

However, Oklahoma history provided a variant of settler colonialism wherein the indigenous inhabitants of the territory could not be removed, killed, or easily assimilated due to their sheer numbers, influence, and peaceful existence within the confines created by the United States government. Therefore, settlers had to live side by side with the Indigenous populations. With such issues to settler colonialism, Oklahoma becomes a unique region that can be described as a "contact zone" as defined by Mary Louis Pratt in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. She states these are "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and

[675] Charles W. Nuckolls, "The Cultural History of an Oklahoma identity," in *The Culture of Oklahoma* by Howard F. Stein and Robert F. Hill, (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), 106.

grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination." This left plenty of room for a settler narrative that needed to be adjusted to absorb the Native American culture.

To this end, Oklahoma served as a *frontier* as defined by Louis Owens in *Mixedblood Messages: Literature, Film, Family, Place*. Owens describes *frontier* as a place "wherein discourse in multidirectional and hybridized." It becomes an "always changing zone of multifaceted contact within which every utterance is challenged and interrogated." Although the term does bear the implication of Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis of a "discourse grounded in genocide, ethnocide, and half a millennium of determined efforts to erase indigenous peoples from the Americas," Owens argues that it "is a particularly apt term for the transcultural zone of contact."[676] This contact between different cultures allowed Cora to learn the facets of Native culture and reproduce them on the stage or in her stories.

The popularity of acts like Cora come directly from the interest of White audiences. Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr. wrote in *The White Man's Indian* that "white interest in the American Indian surges and ebbs with the tides of history."[677] At the beginning of the twentieth century, this became apparent thanks to the myth of the "vanishing Indian." Berkhofer points out that "the *Indian* was a White invention and still remains largely a White image, if not stereotype." This stereotype "denies or misrepresents the social, linguistic, cultural, and other differences among the peoples so labeled."[678] The larger issue of performing as Indian is the projection of the stereotype. By boiling down Native existence into an amalgamation of what is "Indian" thereby removed the individuality of the tribes and created, to white Americans, the idea of a singular

[676] Louis Owens, *Mixedblood Messages: Literature, Film, Family, Place*, (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 26.
[677] Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *The White Man's Indian*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), xiii.
[678] Berkhofer, 3.

people. The image of these peoples, as Berkhofer points out, comes from the "Western formula" produced after the Civil War as American civilization pushed west.

In the late 1800s, the image produced by the popularity of westerns and dime novels created a certain image of Native Americans based around the Plains tribes. Novels achieved new levels of fame such as Karl May's *Winnetou* which became a best seller that told of wondrous adventures in the American west. Alongside the novels, Wild West shows and circuses like Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show capitalized on the popularity and drew heavily on a stereotyped plains tribal image. They thrilled audiences with living representations of their favorite novels. Native performers would dress in the stereotypical headdresses and buckskin and ride around on horseback to thrill audiences.[679] The American public became set that authentic Native culture included eagle feather headbands, beads, and war whoops.

This new perception of what a Native American and the popularity of Native imagery in the early 1900s led to a rapid increase in White Americans donning a costume and presenting themselves as Native. The reasoning for this varies from fame, popularity, land possession, or an escape from social constraints of the time. Playing Indian is, as Philip Deloria argues, "a persistent tradition in American culture, stretching from the very instant of the nation big band into and ever-expanding present and future."[680] The act of misrepresenting Native heritage became surrounded with the idea of power. Cora's use of Native costume allowed her to drop the facts of her life, especially as a woman in a male-dominated field, and perform as someone new and interesting. Her performances later evolved into a representation of national identity with her time in the Indian Reservation Band.

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[679] Berkhofer, 95-101.
[680] Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian*, (Yale University Press, 1998), 7.

For most Americans in the early 1900s, except in certain regions of the West and Southwest, "living natives were visible to non-Indians mainly as performers: feathered and painted "savages" in the immensely popular Wild West shows, picturesque figures in the landscape presented to tourists by enterprising companies in the Southwest and in the Great Lakes region, "primitives" on display at world's fairs such as those in Chicago, Omaha, and St. Louis."[681] This popularity in drew crowds to vaudeville that wanted to see their imagination made manifest on stage. Native performers used this to their advantage to build careers and present a new image of Native Americans to the public. Alongside these indigenous performers, non-Indian ethnic impersonators also took advantage of the popularity of Natives to advance their own careers.

Cora Youngblood Corson followed this same path by adopting a Native persona, joining a growing number of White individuals in the early 20th century such as Archie Belaney, an Englishman who became known as Grey Owl or Sylvester Long known as Chief Buffalo Child Long Lance. This phenomenon is not uncommon. Historian Laura Browder discuss these figures in her book *Slippery Characters: Ethnic Impersonators and American Identities* by focusing on those who wrote autobiographies to sell their new identities.[682] This idea of using a Native persona eventually evolved for Cora into actively announcing that she was of Cherokee descent. She did this to reinvent herself in a field where not evolving equates with the end of a career. She used this "profoundly American idea of self-fashioning, the notion that it is possible to reinvent

[681] Alan Trachtenberg, *Shades of Hiawatha: Staging Indians, Making Americans 1880-1930*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004), 170.
[682] Laura Browder, *Slippery Characters: Ethnic Impersonators and American Identities*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 2.

oneself" to pass as a Native woman in vaudeville. As Browder puts it in chapter eight of her work, "to pass is to survive."[683]

According to S. Elizabeth Bird in *Dressing in Feathers: The Construction of the Indian in American Popular Culture*, "once Indians were no longer a threat, they became colorful and quaint."[684] The end of the 1800s saw the final days of the Indian Wars and the influx of tourists who wanted to view "authentic" Native American culture. Many left angrily after finding indigenous communities not dressed in feather and half naked. In the 1890s, a satirical writer named Bill Nye wrote that he was disgusted because he could not find "true Indian princesses."[685] This perception of what Native performers should look like shaped how many non-native performers looked for the perfect look for their act, the stereotypical image of an Indian became the norm.

Of course, this idea of stereotypes becoming the defining image of a monolithic "Indian" people causes a debate, especially in discussions of cultural appropriation, because there is no consensus. Modern arguments point to the stereotypes as harmful representations, while others argue that the popularity they offered provided a way to reappropriate the imagery. In vaudeville, and subsequent forms of entertainment, Native performers also graced the stage and performed stereotypical "Indian songs" in buckskin outfits adorned with beads and feathers. For instance, the Muscogee singer Tsianina Redfeather Blackstone or "Princess Tsianina" performed around the world in vaudeville in the stereotyped outfits and name.[686]

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[683] Browder, 231.
[684] S. Elizabeth Bird, *Dressing in Feathers: The Construction of the Indian in American Popular Culture*, (Westview Press, 1996), 4.
[685] Bird, 4.
[686] Bird, 7.

Some historians, such as Shari M. Huhndorf, argue that the idea of "going Native" expresses the cultural desire to "adopt" Indian personas allows non-Natives to escape a "degenerate and corrupt white world."[687] To the audiences, seeing Native performers allowed them to envision Native peoples as "idealized versions of themselves, as the embodiments of virtues lost in the Western word."[688] This perspective creates part the reason why White audiences packed the theaters to witness Native and non-Native performers. This exoticism drew crowds that wanted to see something only told in stories. Crowds in the East, especially, sought to view Natives since most had been pushed out of their states a century earlier. This is particularly apparent in Cora Youngblood's time performing in Iowa when the advertisements focused on her supposed Native heritage and the virtues of her life on the plains.

In the same vein, Philip Deloria wrote about Native performers who performed alongside the ethnic impersonators in *Indians in Unexpected Places*. He argued that some "Native people engaged in the same forces of modernization that were making non-Indians reevaluate their own expectations of themselves and their society."[689] The white performers pulled from the popular genre of "Indian plays" but, as Deloria argued, Native performers "surely set and reinforced white expectations concerning Indian gesture, custom, and appearance, but, by and large, their material seems to have emerged from Native cultural practice rather than the fictions of the Indian play."[690] Unfortunately, this aided in the confusion that continues to this day on who is Native as white audiences could not differentiate between the authentic and the impersonation.

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[687] Shari M. Huhndorf, *Going Native: Indians in the American Cultural Imagination*, (Ithaca, Cornell University Press: 2001), 5.
[688] Huhndorf, 6.
[689] Philip Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places*, (University Press of Kansas: 2004), 6.
[690] Deloria, *Unexpected Places*, 57-58.

Since both types of performers presented themselves as authentic, audiences unfamiliar with Native American culture accepted both as an amalgamation of true Native performance.

On top of the cultural reasonings for performance of Native heritage, Katrina Phillips' created the idea of "salvage tourism" wherein people use "American Indian history to help rescue regional economies."[691] This is used in the same region that gave birth to Cora Youngblood's career as the same economic benefits drew many non-Native performers to "play Indian" on the vaudeville stage.

The growth of this phenomenon of Native performers corresponded with the growth of vaudeville in the early 1900s as Americans flooded the theaters to see new professional and exotic acts every week. The increasing popularity brought forth a new spectacle of "Indian vaudeville" which presented Native and non-Native acts on the stage. Indigenous and "indigenous-identifying" performers "appeared at all points on the hierarchy from big- to small-time houses and on global routes from North America to Oceania, some fleetingly and others for long stretches of their careers."[692] The popularity of Native performances drove Cora Youngblood Corson to present herself as a Native on stage and drove her ever-changing performance of herself to retain her popularity.

However, Native American performers also began to conform to the representations imposed by non-native perceptions. As Louis Owens claimed, "Hollywood and every savvy Indian fund raiser knows, there is nothing like traditional regalia and a drum to get the cash flowing."[693] In the early 20th century, the audience "knew" what Natives were supposed to be

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[691] Phillips, *Staging Indigeneity*, 7.
[692] Christine Bold, "Vaudeville Indians" on Global Circuits: 1880s to 1930s, (New Haven, CT; Yale University Press, 2022), 41.
[693] Owens, 13.

like, how they dressed, and how they spoke. The first four decades of the 1900s were the stage for this reclamation of heritage by Native Americans. The representation of their cultures in popular culture became the tool they used to counter the policies and negative ideas that Euro-Americans had of Natives. In this period, Cora Youngblood Corson exploited this Native strategy and used a Native persona to further her own agenda on the national scale allowing her to break out of her own societal boundaries as a woman from a settler town in Oklahoma.

At the heart of this discussion, Cora constantly reinvented her image to fit the context of her performance while subverting social norms. Sometimes she is a settler from the Great Plains, a Native woman from a reservation, a masterful musician, or a proud Oklahoman. Her persona changes closely mirror the changing perceptions of Oklahoma and therefore serves as a look into the fascinating changes that the state's image underwent in the first half of the 20th century.

During the founding of Anadarko, Oklahoma Territory, settlers began to form their identity through a shared culture. With a large Native population, the settlers had to contend with another culture within their environment which ultimately formed a shared culture that celebrated Native and settler ideals. To firmly establish the culture of Oklahoma, individuals like Cora Youngblood Corson helped to define their representative state by representing it on the local and national stage. She defined Anadarko's cultural expression by undermining gender norms to become a celebrated musician that took part in representing Oklahoma at the World's Fair in 1904. Cora did so by using an image of a sophisticated, yet rugged, woman on the frontier who sought to bring culture to the plains. She also married a Native man, Charles Corson, which highlighted the blending of cultures within Anadarko.

During her rise into vaudeville. Cora began to understand the malleability of self-image in earnest. Her popularity with Helen May Butler's Ladies Military Band gave her an

opportunity to perform on a national level. She quickly became the leading female musician with a euphonium which vaulted her onto the vaudeville stage in 1907. In this period, her Manager J. Leslie Spahn helped her create a Native persona wherein she performed as a Native American singing popular "Indian Songs" while dressed in traditional outfits. Like many other ethnic impersonators, Cora's observational knowledge of Native culture and use of stereotypical tropes allowed her to become a national star as a Native American, musical prodigy from the plains of Oklahoma. Cora represented the state of Oklahoma on a national stage, thus providing a glimpse into Oklahoman culture. To the masses that came to see her perform or read about her life in the newspapers, she was their image of the fledgling state. She not only enforced stereotypes but also overcame them providing the idea of a rugged, independent territory whose people are a mix of Native and settler ideals. With her growing fame, Cora became one of the first national stars to represent Oklahoma. Therefore, her image as both a rugged, western woman and a Native American became what many assumed Oklahomans to be even before statehood. Her use of a Native American persona helped to give her a unique edge over her competition in vaudeville and demonstrated that she could stay popular if she adjusted herself to fit the audience as needed.

From 1905 to 1907, Cora Youngblood became a national star as a Native American, musical prodigy from the plains of Oklahoma. She outshined and outperformed all others. Her growth and career trajectory formed through her presentation of a Native American performance, which reflected in the public opinion of Oklahoma's cultural heritage. During the height of her career in vaudeville from 1907 to 1916, Cora evolved her performance of a Native into a Western image by shifting her act to remove the stereotypical Indian themes and costumes. This adjustment made her Native image no longer contingent on the performance of Native

stereotypes, but instead just a part of her overall heritage as an Oklahoman; proud, daring, Native, and settler.

In this period, Cora's motives are interesting in that she chooses to point out her rugged and wild past in a profession that looked for elegance and refinement for women. To project her image, Cora used her assumed Native persona to find her place on the stage. While traveling outside of Oklahoma, Cora's assumed Native image drew audiences that wanted to get a glimpse of the "vanishing race" for themselves. The malleability of "Indianness" became obvious as Cora needed only to showcase a stereotypical personality while using her interactions with Native peoples to build her credibility with the audience. Once established, she could drop the stereotypes and focus on other perspectives of her act.

During Cora's fight against the Vaudeville Managers Protection Association (VMPA), she became blacklisted from the major theaters she had performed at for most of her career. Losing the life of a star on the big stage caused Cora to retreat to Oklahoma and create a new version of herself that would appeal to audiences there. Perhaps due to the proximity of most Oklahomans to Native Americans, her Indianness did not appeal to the crowds. Instead, she invested in her reputation as a union activist for the White Rats Actors Union who fought against unfair business practices. In the more socialist Oklahoma, this change found support and became the stage for her fight as she led multiple strikes in Oklahoma City and Tulsa. As Oklahoma began to see the rise of unionism, Cora emerged as a leader and national example. Just as she had connected with a Native and Oklahoma image to increase her popularity in vaudeville, she reinvented herself to appeal to a working-class audience. Her response to the public blacklisting, call upon the support of Oklahoma, and strikes with the White Rats highlighted the ease in which Cora could reinvent her image within Oklahoma to appeal to the working-class audiences.

Furthermore, Cora's big push within the state increased her popularity and public recognition which would keep her in public memory within the state as a popular Oklahoman and a Native.

While World War I raged in Europe, Cora looked to find a way to both support the war effort and get her career back on track after the failures of the White Rats battle against the VMPA. Volunteerism served to help Cora reinvent her image during the war. Political and social change in the country provided a new opportunity for Cora to once again change the public perception of her to increase her popularity. During the war, Cora Youngblood Corson exemplified the national change as she used the war to reinvent herself from a trouble-making socialist unionist, into a patriotic, American veteran of the war through her volunteerism, promotion of American patriotism overseas, and her association with the American soldiers.

After the war, Cora used her experience in the war to rebuild her career. She reinvented herself by focusing on her wartime service to create an image of a veteran as a draw for audiences, invested in Oklahoma to reinvigorate attention to vaudeville and the state, and, once she could no longer use her veteran persona, reestablished a connection with a Native heritage all to salvage her career during the death of vaudeville as an entertainment genre. In this decade, she changed herself multiple times by calling upon the observational knowledge she had of certain groups to convince audiences of her uniqueness in vaudeville, as it decreased in popularity as a form of entertainment.

Finally, as Cora entered the later years of her life, she retired from performing and returned to Oklahoma. However, the loss of her persona as a vaudeville performer caused her to look for new ways to return to the stage. Now living within the Cherokee nation, Cora took on a Cherokee heritage as "Wildflower" and "Princess Youngblood." She joined the Indian Reservation Band becoming part of a modern American identity of civic nationalism that

accepted a dual image of both settler and native as they performed at the inauguration of President Herbert Hoover and Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Cora Youngblood Corson's life illustrates the malleability of performance in the early twentieth century as she continually manipulated racial, national, and class personas to remain unique in vaudeville. In her life, her proximity to Native cultures in Oklahoma allowed her to perform her own version of "Indianness" on the national stage, becoming a famous Native performer. Her success, and the success of other ethnic impersonators, hinged on the usage of stereotypical behaviors but also an observational knowledge of the group they wanted to become. The audiences of the time did not have any in-depth knowledge of groups outside of their purview. Therefore, celebrities, performers, or anyone looking for fame could simply adjust their image if they could convincingly portray it for their audience. While this has been discussed in more modern contexts, the idea of ethnic impersonation is not always one that directly comes from selfishness, nor does it always cause harm. Cora's life not only showcases the ease of changing the performance of self.

But where does Cora Youngblood Corson fit within this history? She is, after all, a performer presenting a persona up on the stage. Her story follows the same trajectory as many ethnic impersonators but provides a unique perspective of this typically under-discussed method of defrauding Natives by culturally appropriating their culture for the benefit of an individual. By placing her into the historiography of performance, the story of Cora Youngblood Corson represents a story of vaudeville performers were able to change the public perception through performance to gain popularity.

This popularity created many issues in the public's understanding of Native American heritage. Even today, this issue continues with many people believing that they carry some Native heritage. For instance, the 2020 census nationally showed 9.6 million people claiming Native heritage which is a significant jump from 5.2 million in 2010. In Oklahoma, many people hold true to a Native heritage without any definite proof which includes my family. So how does Cora Youngblood Corson play into this idea in the performance of self on stage?

I argue that an individual does not need to be an "authentic" Indian to be worthy of study in a Native context. Ethnic impersonators can tell us something about the understanding of race in popular culture. This research has revealed that Cora is not a Native American but instead chose to represent and exploit a Native persona for her own success within vaudeville. It is a form of Native exploitation which has not garnered much attention. But it is also something that should be understood in the context of the time as she is a woman entering into a field that is male-dominated. Her performance allowed her to break out against the constraints of social thought about women.

Cora Youngblood Corson's life provides an interesting look into the exploitation and acceptance of a Nativity within the state of Oklahoma in the early twentieth century. Her ability to create a new image of herself whenever it suited her illustrates the popular culture of the time, social misunderstanding of race, and, ultimately, the problem with untangling the problem of understanding Native affiliation in modern Oklahoma. In fact, Cora's life is still within living memory. For instance, my great aunt is still living, and she personally knew Cora for many years of her early life. The generational memory of ethnic impersonators like Cora speaks to the psychology of early Oklahoma regarding racial understanding and how it has continued through

our shared memory. Early celebrities formed the national and local opinion of what an Oklahoman and Indian looked like, regardless of authenticity. This twisting of perception by celebrities, paired with early legal definitions of tribal affiliation and disagreeing views of identity within the Native community, helped to create the modern confusion that continues to plague many Oklahomans who believe they have Native heritage.

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Daily Record, Long Branch, New Jersey

Daily Republican-Register, Mount Carmel, Illinois

Daily Times, Davenport, Iowa

Daily Times, Dubuque, Iowa

Dayton Daily News, Dayton, Ohio

Democrat and Chronicle, Rochester, New York

Des Moines Register, Des Moine, Iowa

Detroit Free Press, Detroit, Michigan

Dramatic Mirror, New York City, New York

Dubuque Telegraph-Herald, Dubuque, Iowa

Edmond Enterprise and Oklahoma County News, Edmond, Oklahoma

El Reno Daily Tribune, El Reno, Oklahoma

Employer, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

Evening Capital, Annapolis, Maryland

Evening Journal, Delaware

Evening News, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

Evening News, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania

Evening Public Ledger, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Evening Star, Washington, D.C.

Evening Times, Tulsa, Oklahoma

Evening Tribune, Anadarko, Oklahoma

Fall River Herald, Fall River, Massachusetts

Fort Scott Daily Tribune and Fort Scott Daily Monitor, Fort Scott, Kansas

Fort Smith Times, Fort Smith, Arkansas

Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette, For Wayne, Indiana

Frederick Leader, Frederick, Oklahoma

Gadsden Daily Times-News, Gadsden, Alabama

Geary Times-Journal, Geary, Oklahoma

Gruber Guidon, Camp Gruber, Oklahoma

Guthrie Daily Leader, Guthrie, Oklahoma

Hamilton Evening Journal, Hamilton, Ohio

Hartford Courant, Hartford, Connecticut

Helena Herald, Helena, Oklahoma

Henry Republican, Henry, Illinois

Herald-Press, Saint Joseph, Michigan

Hutchinson News, Hutchinson, Kansas

Indian Country Today, Phoenix, Arizona

Indian Helper, Carlisle, Pennsylvania

Indiana Daily Times, Indianapolis, Indiana

Indiana Gazette, Indiana, Pennsylvania

Indianapolis Star, Indianapolis, Indiana

Inter Ocean, Chicago, Illinois

Iola Daily Record, Iola, Kansas

Iola Daily Register and Evening News, Iola, Kansas

Jefferson City Post-Tribune, Jefferson City, Missouri

Joliet Evening Herald-News, Joliet, Illinois

Journal Gazette, Mattoon, Illinois

K*alamazoo Gazette*, Kalamazoo, Michigan

Kansas City Globe, Kansas City, Kansas

Kansas City Star, Kansas City, Missouri

Kentucky Irish American, Louisville, Kentucky

Kingfisher Times, Kingfisher, Oklahoma

La Crosse Tribune, La Crosse, Wisconsin

Lawton Constitution, Lawton, Oklahoma

Lawton News, Lawton, Oklahoma

Lawton News-Republican, Lawton, Oklahoma

Lincoln County Republican, Chandler, Oklahoma

Lincoln Journal Star, Lincoln, Nebraska

Logansport Journal, Logansport, Indiana

Los Angeles Express, Los Angeles, California

McAlester News-Capital, McAlester, Oklahoma

Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, Kentucky

Miami Daily News-Record, Miami, Oklahoma

Miami Republican, Paola, Kansas

Missoulian, Missoula, Montana

Missouri Breeze, Chicago, Illinois

Montfort Mail, Montfort, Wisconsin

Morning Call, Allentown, Pennsylvania

Morning Call, Paterson, New Jersey

Morning Herald, Johnstown, New York

Morning News, Coffeyville, Kansas

Morning News, Wilmington, Delaware

Morning Tulsa Daily World, Tulsa, Oklahoma

Mountain View Times, Mountain View, Oklahoma

Muskogee Daily Phoenix, Muskogee, Oklahoma

Muskogee-Times Democrat, Muskogee, Oklahoma

Nebraska State Journal, Lincoln, Nebraska

New Britain Daily Herald, New Britain, Connecticut

New York Clipper, New York City, New York

New York Herald, New York City, New York

New York Sun, New York City, New York

New York Times, New York City, New York

News-Journal, Mansfield, Ohio

News-Palladium, Benton Harbor, Michigan

News-Press, Fort Meyers, Florida

Oklahoma City Times, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

Oklahoma Federationist, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

Oklahoma News, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

Oklahoma State Capital, Guthrie, Oklahoma

Oklahoma State Register, Guthrie, Oklahoma

Okmulgee Daily Democrat, Okmulgee, Oklahoma

Oregonian, Portland, Oregon

Passaic Daily Herald, Passaic, New Jersey

Perry Republican, Perry, Oklahoma

Philadelphia Inquirer, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Pine Bluff Daily Graphic, Bine Bluff, Arkansas

Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Plain Dealer, Anadarko, Oklahoma

Ponca City News, Ponca City, Oklahoma

Pontanezen Duckboard, Brest, France

Pottsville Republican, Pottsville, Pennsylvania

Province, Vancouver, British Columbia

Pythian Times, Perry, Oklahoma

Radio News-Guide, Tulsa, Oklahoma

Red Man and Helper, Carlisle, Pennsylvania

Rock Island Argus, December 22, 1906

Salt Lake Herald-Republican, Salt Lake City, Utah

San Antonio Sunday Light, San Antonio, Texas

Scranton Republican, Scranton, Pennsylvania

Scranton Truth, Scranton, Pennsylvania

Seattle Daily Times, Seattle, Washington

Seattle Star, Seattle, Washington

Sedalia Democrat, Sedalia, Missouri

Shreveport Journal, Shreveport, Louisiana

South Bend Tribune, South Bend, Indiana

Spokane Chronicle, Spokane, Washington

Spokesman-Review, Spokane, Washington

Springfield News-Leader, Springfield, Missouri

St. Joseph Gazette, St. Joseph, Missouri

St. Louis Globe-Democrat, St. Louis, Missouri

St. Louis Post-Dispatch, St. Louis, Missouri

St. Louis Star and Times, St. Louis, Missouri

Standard Union, Brooklyn, New York

Star Tribune, Minneapolis, Minnesota

Sun, Coffeyville, Kansas

Tahlequah Arrow, Tahlequah, Oklahoma

Time Dispatch, Richmond, Virginia

Times- Democrat, New Orleans, Louisiana

Times Herald, Olean, New York

Times, Munster, Indiana

Times-Picayune, New Orleans, Louisiana

Times-Tribune, Scranton, Pennsylvania

Tribune, Scranton, Pennsylvania

Tulsa Daily World, Tulsa, Oklahoma

Tulsa Democrat, Tulsa, Oklahoma

Tulsa Tribune, Tulsa, Oklahoma

Tulsa World, Tulsa, Oklahoma

Vancouver Daily World, Vancouver, British Columbia

Vancouver Sun, Vancouver. British Columbia

Vaudeville News, New York City, New York

Vermont Union-Journal, Lyndonville, Vermont

Victoria Daily Times, Victoria, British Columbia

Vinita Weekly, Vinita, Oklahoma

Washington Post, Washington, D.C.

Waterloo Evening Courier and Reporter, Waterloo, Iowa

Week's Review, Anadarko, Oklahoma

Wichita Beacon, Wichita, Kansas

Wichita Daily Eagle, Wichita, Kansas

Wichita Eagle, Wichita, Kansas

Wisconsin State Journal, Madison, Wisconsin

Yonkers Statesman, Yonkers, New York

York Daily Record, York, Pennsylvania