



'Oklahoma! OK!'

— By REBECCA HATTAWAY
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No celebration of Oklahoma's 100 years of statehood would be complete without a rousing rendition of the state's official song — the finale to Rodgers and Hammerstein's musical "Oklahoma!" But even better than just the song is the musical itself with its unforgettable characters, beloved melodies and high-steppin' dance numbers — all with plenty of Western wit and charm. It has been quite an undertaking, but Roosa Elementary third and fourth graders will present the "junior" version of the Rodgers and Hammerstein classic this week in honor of Oklahoma's centennial. In this rendition, the musical is condensed to 75 minutes but maintains the same characters, songs and basic storyline.

"The junior version was actually written for pre-high school students. But we teach these kids that there's no mountain too high. I decided to take on that attitude," said Jill Bradley, who has been the music teacher at Roosa for 10 years. "I knew I had a really talented group."

The cast features nine main roles — including two sets of love-interests, Curly and Laurey, and Will and Ado Annie — as well as Aunt Eller, Jud, the peddler Ali Hackim, Gertie with her cringe-inducing laugh, and Andrew Carnes.

But every third and fourth grade student is involved, making up a chorus of cowboys and farmers, Bradley said.

In order to prepare for auditions, her music classes watched video clips of scenes from the film.

"The majority of the students had not seen the musical, so we really had to start from the ground up," she said. "I wanted them to understand the richness of the history involved in the story."

They talked about the references to Catoosa and Claremore, and what life was like in Oklahoma one hundred years ago.

"I told them there were no telephones or movies back then," she said. "We discussed the conflict between farmers and ranchers, the raising of the schoolhouse ... and the beginning of public education." She also pointed out that the musical was based on the play "Green Grow the Lilacs" by Claremore's own Lynn Riggs.

"They said, 'Oh, we have a street named after him.' It's been thrilling for them to catch the pioneer spirit," she said.

The production is part of Roosa's year-long emphasis on the 100th birthday of Oklahoma.

"A year ago, the faculty and staff began planning toward a 'Centennial Celebration,'" Bradley said. "We all brainstormed ways to be apart."

Bradley said her love for the musical made it a natural choice.

"'Oklahoma!' has always been one of my favorites — even before I was an Okie," she said. "Twenty-three years ago we moved to Claremore on Friday and Saturday I was in Sand Springs at Discoveryland. It's become more special through the years."

Funds to pay for the rights to the musical were provided by a Claremore Public Schools Foundation grant that Roosa received for its centennial projects.

Bradley says the production would not have been possible without the help of many others along the way.

"I tell the people here it takes a village to raise a musical," she said. "There are sets, costumes and all those thousands of details."

But all the hard work and extra hours are paying off, Bradley said, and she couldn't be more excited about the upcoming performances.

"We want it to be a gift to the community," she said. "People will absolutely be amazed at what these students can do."

"Oklahoma!" will be presented Tuesday, Nov. 6 at 7 p.m., and Wednesday, Nov. 7 at 9:30 a.m. and 1 p.m., at the Robson Performing Arts Center. Performances are free and open to the public.

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