

Lushanya/ Tessie Mobley

By Glenda Galvan

Tessie Mobley attended school in Ardmore, Oklahoma and even then she was studying opera and even sang in a contest. She studied piano from the time she was six years old and moved into voice lessons shortly thereafter. After high school, Tessie (Lushanya) attended the University of Oklahoma, University of Georgia and Christian College at Columbia, Missouri. While at the University of Oklahoma in Norman, she made the women's rifle team and held top positions throughout her years there. While living on the farm near Ardmore, she learned how to "break" horses at a time when a woman doing such feats was virtually unheard of.

She was discovered in California by an organist and composer, Charles Wakefield Cadman. He was amazed at her voice; in fact she was called "Songbird of the Chickasaws" during her career. Her first professional appearance was at the Hollywood Bowl as a soloist during the Indian Ceremonials in 1929. Tessie then studied voice and opera from 1931 through 1934 at the Staatliche Akadamische Hochschule fur Musik Berlin, Germany. Her first tour was for the USO to entertain the troops of the United States during World War II. It wasn't long before Lushanya was traveling the world, gaining a new title for herself: the first American Indian to perform at La Scala in Milan, Italy. Within the first three years in Europe she had been presented to King George VI and Queen Elizabeth and she sang at the king's coronation. She was presented to the Royalty of Sweden and to Queen Julia of Holland, too.

Lushanya sang several character roles in different operas in cities around the world. They included Lenora in "Il Trovatore" and "Forza Del Destina", Dedsdemona in "Othello", Mimi in "La Boheme" and the lead in Boito's "M fistofele". In London, her role was most fitting, that of lead in "Hiawatha". Her repertory included "La Gioconda", "Las Tosca", "Madame Butterfly", and "Aida".

In Trieste, Italy, she got so many curtain calls; she refused to come out after three hours and collapsed in her dressing room from exhaustion. Actress Ingrid Bergman and her husband hurried backstage to meet and congratulate her. Emotional Italians in the audience went wild pressing forward to kiss her hands, her feet, or simply to touch her.

Back in the United States was no different for Lushanya. She sang for the 1936 democratic convention in Philadelphia, the Metropolitan Opera Guild Broadcast, the Chicago Opera Company and many other cities such as Los Angeles where she was the soloist for the Los Angeles Opera and Fine Arts Club. She sang for Governor "Alfalfa" Bill Murray and his wife twice. One of those times was an event in Ardmore where Lushanya gave a concert for her parents.

As if her singing career wasn't enough, Lushanya was also introduced into acting where she very well could have been as successful. However, her preference was music. She did have parts in several movies, appearing with Ann Harding in *The Girl of the Golden West*, *Cimarron* and with Eddie Cantor in *Whoopee*.

But wait, there's more to the story about this wonderful, young Chickasaw soprano. She has been painted several times and was reputed to be the most beautiful Indian woman in America. One of her first portraits was purchased by Mr. Robert C. Vose and hangs in the Vose Art Galleries of Boston, Massachusetts. Mrs. Kathryn W. Leighton, known as the "Van Dyke of the Indians" painted three life size portraits of Lushanya and they were quickly bought by an art gallery. She was also painted by several European artists and one of those paintings now hangs in the collection of the Royal Academy of Art in London. In Rome, a sculpture of Lushanya done by Royal sculptor Parisini, hangs in the Quirinal Palace. Many artists deemed her to be the portrait of typical American beauty. Not only was she beautiful to look at, but those who knew her say she was quick to tell her audience she was a Chickasaw from Oklahoma. Lushanya's mother attended school at Bloomfield Academy in Ardmore. Many are the times she would tell of her maternal grandmother who spoke no English while she, herself could speak not only English, but German, French, Italian and Spanish as well as some Russian. She told of the "old ways" from her grandmother's lifetime listening as she told Lushanya about many things such as gathering and drying wild fruits, dried meat and corn and other recollections from her grandmother. She was given a copy of Malone's book titled *The Chickasaw Nation* by (then) Chickasaw Governor Douglas Johnston and was reported to have read the book many times. She had ties to her tribe another way, she was a niece to congressman Charles D. Carter.

Lushanya married Mr. Louis Brave, Osage actor in 1926. This marriage was short lived and the couple divorced in 1931. Lushanya later married a young and handsome baritone named Ramon Vinay. She was singing in Mexico City and fell in love with the young man from Chile and his voice. She immediately told the director of the Metropolitan Opera Company about the young baritone. His career took off like a jet. On one occasion, they actually sang opposite roles in Puccini's "Nanon Lescant".

Their careers kept them apart much of the time and it was the beloved Lushanya who gave up her dramatic career to manage her husband's career. As much as she loved music, Lushanya loved her husband more. The couple never had children which made it easier for them to travel together. They lived in a French chateau overlooking Paris, lived in Spain, and later, the United States. She had twelve exciting years in her own right as the "Chickasaw Songbird" and in 1964; she was summoned to Oklahoma City where she was inducted into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame along with such famous names as actor Van Heflin, baseball player Mickey Mantle, fine arts supporter Mrs. Frank Buttram, civic leader-banker Harvey P. Everest and philanthropist Clarence H. Wright.

She has one other significant piece to her list of achievements. The first north to south air mail carried special cachets showing Lushanya on one side (mail going south) and the San Felipe Church on the other (mail going north). The stamps were about three inches in diameter and bore the words "First Flight air mail route AM 12, POD, Albuquerque, New Mexico, August 1, 1931.

Lushanya and her husband retired in Ft. Worth, Texas where Lushanya died in 1900. Her husband lived another six years but moved to Mexico and it was there, in a retirement center that he passed away in 1996.

Lushanya's sister was generous enough to donate much of Lushanya's collection to the Chickasaw Nation Council House Museum in Tishomingo, Oklahoma where some of the collection is on exhibit.

While we have her personal diary, keepsakes, sheet music, costumes and other pieces, we have no recordings of this beautiful voice so acclaimed by so many throughout the world.