

RETURN TO  
TULSA



*Broadway*



NORMA  
JEAN LUTZ

*Return to Tulsa*—Norma Jean Lutz

**Return to Tulsa**  
**The Tulsa Series #4**  
**Norma Jean Lutz**

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## **Return to Tulsa**

ISBN: 978-0-9859571-3-1

*Return to Tulsa* originally published by Barbour Publishing, Inc., 1997.

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**Note from The Author**  
**Regarding the Tulsa Series**

The 4-title Tulsa series has had a long and interesting journey. In the late 1990s, I had just completed the last of four contemporary romance novels for Barbour Publishing's *Heartsong* line. At that time, I was approached by my editor at Barbour to submit ideas to him for historical fiction.

Because I've lived in the Tulsa area for most of my adult life, I knew a little bit about the infamous Tulsa Race Riot of 1921. But honestly, at that time, no one talked much about it. (That later changed as survivors began to speak up.) I knew that that event would serve as the backdrop for my historical, Christian, Tulsa series.

The very same day that my editor asked me for historical fiction ideas, I sat down and wrote out thumbnail sketches for all four titles. He liked the ideas and offered a 4-book contract.

All four, then, were originally published through Barbour's *Heartsong* line where they enjoyed immense popularity. (I still have file folders full of fan letters.)

Later, when the idea of eBooks was in its infancy, an independent group offered to publish my series digitally. As often happens in the publishing industry, the whole thing fell apart due to 1) being ahead of the curve regarding digitally-produced books, and 2) poor business management.

And, yes, yet another group purporting to be an independent publisher, also had their hands in the pie. That too fell apart.

Discouraging to say the least.

The Tulsa Series languished until I recently resurrected them and placed them on Amazon's Kindle. Even with that, little was done to promote the titles.

But this is a new day!

Presently, the four titles are decked out in delightful new covers, plus all will now be available in both print *and* digitally.

I trust as a reader, you will enjoy these stories as much as I enjoyed researching and writing them.

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Chapter 1

A hush fell over the audience crowded into the Oklah Theater as the electric lights slowly dimmed. Clarette hurried up the stairs in the near-darkness to the first balcony. Whispering apologies, she stepped on a few toes and pushed through to her front row seat. Scowling glances shot her way as she fished in her bag for her note pad and pencil. Paper rustled as she flipped to a clean page.

She nodded and smiled at Mr. and Mrs. Jess Overlees in their special box seat, and Mr. and Mrs. Frank Phillips in their box, then turned to glance over at Mr. and Mrs. H.V. Foster in their box. All of the *moneeyed* people of the area had made their appearance for the evening.

The half-rate vaudeville act that was to open the show wasn't worth watching. No one Clarette knew in New York would have crossed the street to watch it. But here in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, the folks were glad to get most anything in the way of entertainment. Case in point was Ruby Darby whom they called the "Queen of the Oil Fields." Though Darby's musical comedy troupe impressed the locals, Clarette didn't even want to review it for the *Courier*, a weekly newspaper, which she and husband, Erik, published.

Erik, ever on the lookout for the least bit of news to garner more subscribers chided her about it. "You don't have to like Miss Darby," he told her in his usual patient manner, "our readers love her."

"She sings as though she were tone-deaf," Clarette protested.

But in the end Erik won out because deep down Clarette truly wanted to see their struggling paper make it. Even if it meant writing good reviews for less-than-mediocre stage stars.

She had to admit tonight would be quite different. Tonight's main attraction was Oklahoma's own favorite son, Will Rogers, which meant standing-room-only in the small theater. Excitement had been building all week as the oil-town population had done themselves proud rolling out the red carpet for the famed humorist.

Remembering the times she'd caught Will's appearances at the Ziegfeld Follies in New York, she knew they were in for a delightful evening. How she wished Erik could have come, but he was busy working at the *Courier* office. And even if he weren't all tied up with ad layouts and copy work, they couldn't have afforded the price of a ticket. Clarette was on the front row of the first balcony only because of her press pass.

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The vaudeville troupe turned out to be just as Clarette had expected. She scribbled notes in her pad in the semi-darkness, barely bothering to look down at what she wrote.

The sight of Will sauntering onto the stage, calmly twirling his lariat, sent the thousand-plus Bartians into a frenzy. They jumped to their feet and nearly brought down the house with thunderous applause and hoots and cheers. Will stopped the twirling, pulled off his hat, scratched his head, and gave his lop-sided grin.

When it was quiet, he quipped, "Think I'll sit down now. I got no guarantee I'll get that response after I'm finished." But the applause broke out again. Local boy makes good. Although Will wasn't from Bartlesville, his family's farm was in the area near Oologah, and Clarette knew the entire state claimed Will as their very own.

She watched mesmerized as he moved from simple rope tricks to the more difficult. Spinning the rope vertically he jumped in and out of the wide loop as he moved across the stage with skill and grace. Two ropes, one spinning in each hand, were passed behind his back, then switched to opposite hands and he never missed a beat.

Will's famous quips and one-liners kept the audience roaring with laughter throughout the performance. He enjoyed poking fun at those who'd gained sudden wealth in the fertile oil fields. Plump Vernon Foster laughed louder than anyone. Clarette studied the two Foster daughters, Ruth and Marie, wondering if they chafed against the phony veneer of wealth as Clarette had when she was younger.

The grand finale of the show consisted of Will spinning a ninety-foot rope out over the heads of those in the audience. They loved it.

Guessing that there might be two or three curtain calls, Clarette closed her notebook and slipped out when the curtain rang down the first time. Again, raising the ire of those who were stomping and clapping and cheering, she edged her way to the aisle, went out the front door of the Oklah, and down the side alley toward the stage door. She promised Erik she'd try to get an interview backstage. They'd received word that Will was catching a train directly after the show, so time was limited.

She was sure someone from the *Magnet*, Bartlesville's daily, would have the same idea, and she was right. Young Joe Barber was standing at the stage door knocking as she approached.

Joe had always been congenial to Clarette, which she appreciated. They met often at events around the Osage country and she appreciated the fact that he never acted as though he were a competitor. She'd told Erik once that when they could afford a reporter she'd like to hire Joe away from the *Magnet*.

"Evening, Mrs. Torsten," Joe said touching his hat.

"Hi, Joe. What'd you think of the show?"

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Joe grinned and shook his head. "Can't nobody make fun of President Harding and congress, and get away with it, the way Will does."

Just then the door opened and the wrinkled face of Borger Linahan peeked out. "Just you two?" he asked. In Bartlesville, Clarette never needed to show her press card, she was known all over town.

"Just us two for now," Joe replied. "But the whole town'll be swarming out here when that final curtain goes down."

"Hurry then," he said, waving them in. He looked out again and then quickly closed the door and slipped the bar down in place. "Can't be too careful," he said giving them a toothless grin.

Covering the news in this small burg was so different than the dog-eat-dog ways of New York, and yet at times Clarette still missed the excitement of her home city.

Backstage was crowded with workers and members of the vaudeville troupe. As the applause continued to reverberate throughout the theater, some of the troupe members, still clad in gaily-colored costumes, peered through the curtains marveling at the reception Will was receiving.

"Ain't he sumthin'?" Borger muttered shaking his head. "Ain't he just sumthin'?" They followed him down a set of stairs to the dressing rooms. "And young Will ain't never forgot where he come from neither. Still just as common as a wore-out boot. Eh, watch your step there."

He paused at the foot of the stairs to direct them to Will's dressing room.

"Will he be easy to interview?" Joe wanted to know. Clarette noted a nervous edge to his voice.

"Pshaw," Borger fairly spat the word. "Ain't nothing a'tall to talk to Will. Not like that puffed peacock Tom Mix. I knowed Tom when we was together out at the old 101-ranch bulldogging calves. Now all this moving-picture nonsense has plum went to his head."

The old man stopped at the door on which a massive garland of flowers hung. Pointing to the flowers he gave another toothless grin and said, "We done it up nice, didn't we?"

"You did just fine, Borger," Clarette assured him. "I'm sure Mr. Rogers is quite impressed."

Pushing the door open, he motioned the two reporters to go inside. "You can wait in here. I figure Will'll be along directly."

"I figure he will," Clarette said, not meaning to mock. She sat down on the overstuffed settee but Joe opted to pace.

"Calm down, Joe."

"I can't Mrs. Torsten. I've never been so nervous."



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"He's just a man."

"Easy for you to say. You've probably talked to lots of stars when you were on the paper in New York. This is all new to me."

"You heard what Borger said—comfortable as a wore-out boot." She chuckled at the apt description. "Why a few years ago, he was practically your neighbor."

"Not mine. I come here from Missouri."

"Still..." Clarette started, but the noise at the door interrupted them. She was concerned that the cub reporter was going to faint dead away. His face took on a definite pallor as the door opened and in walked Will, his hat in his hand and the lariat slung over his shoulder.

"Howdy there," he said giving them a wide grin. As he removed his hat, a shock of hair fell carelessly across his forehead.

Borger was directly behind Will. "I done told them you're in a mighty big rush to get to the train station, Will."

Will nodded and smiled again. "Thanks Borger. You've been a great help."

Clarette was pulling her note pad out of her bag, as Joe nervously fished in his pocket for a crumpled piece of copy paper.

Following introductions, Will pulled a stool over from against the wall and sat down. "Now what can I do for you fine folks?"

Clarette conducted most of the interview as Joe was still beside himself with wonder. She asked all the general questions—

"How does it feel to be home?"

"What are your immediate plans?"

"Where are you going from here?"

"What does the year of 1922 hold for you?"

While Clarette wasn't sure how comfortable an old boot might be, she quickly felt at ease with Will Rogers. They learned he was on his way to Hollywood and hence the short stay in Oklahoma.

"They just keep asking me to make more moving pictures, and I don't aim to give 'em time to change their minds," he quipped.

When Clarette asked a few questions about the *Follies*, Will looked directly at her. "You sure don't sound like you're from around here. You from back East?"

She nodded. "New York."

"What part?"

Clarette hesitated a moment. Very few people in Bartlesville knew she was the daughter of Johannes Vanderpool of the Vanderpool Silk Company. Nor that she

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grew up in Hamptonwood, New Jersey surrounded by opulence. "I lived in Brooklyn for a time," she replied, then quickly added, "And worked as a reporter for the *New York American*."

"Good for you," he said with a chuckle. "That's a pretty fair-minded paper—considering."

Clarette thought back to last summer when she attempted to cover the Tulsa race riot. She had all the first-hand stories and photos, but the *American* refused to carry the scoop she'd uncovered. "Considering," she repeated. Considering that most all newspaper these days were corporately owned and few individual thinkers were involved. Her father had stated that fact to her many times.

Deftly, Clarette guided Will back to answering questions about himself—tidbits that she knew their readers would want to know. Joe mostly listened and took notes. Although Clarette realized she was aiding and abetting the competition, she really didn't mind. In a way it gave her a good feeling to help this young man.

Presently, Joe pulled out his pocket watch to glance at it. "Yikes," he said. Then grew crimson to tops of his ears. "Excuse me Mr. Rogers, but my boss at the *Magnet* said I was supposed to get this back to the office by ten-thirty and it's most nearly eleven."

"Well then, you just scoot along," Will said with a chuckle. "We sure don't want you getting in trouble."

Joe nervously shook hands with Will and made his exit.

Clarette had hoped against hope she'd have a few minutes alone with the star, and now the Lord had perfectly orchestrated the moment.

Presently Will's wife, Betty, came in and was introduced to Clarette. Her rose-beige crepe de chine frock with matching hat and gloves created an unpretentious statement of style. The charming fox collar clasped at the neck completed the ensemble perfectly. Like her husband, Betty Rogers was home folk and was as unpretentious as Will's scrubby leather chaps, which he began unstrapping.

Handing the heavy chaps to his wife, he said, "Mrs. Torsten here used to work on the *American*."

His wife raised her brows. "A New Yorker? My, how fortunate you are to have such a fine career. Women are doing so many more things nowadays than when I was younger."

"Mr. Rogers," Clarette said closing her notebook.

"Will," he corrected. "Mr. Rogers is my father."

She smiled. "Will, I know you've been around New York for years and you know a lot of people." She paused, thinking she must now sound as nervous as Joe. Taking a little breath, she plowed forward.

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"I'm working on a play script that I feel sure would be great for Broadway. I've attended the theater since I was a small child and..." She paused, realizing that wasn't the right tack. Will was looking at her intently with eyes twinkling. How many people came at him for favors each time he performed? "Would you read the first act and suggest a name of someone in New York I might send it to?"

"Will?" Betty pointed to the gold wrist watch on her arm. "The train. It's getting late."

Will sat back down on the stool. "Mrs. Torsten..."

"Clarette."

"Clarette, let me suggest something. I don't want to take your script, for the simple reason I might lose it or forget clean all about it. But why don't you finish your play and produce it right here in the Oklah? Start your own little theater company in this town. These people need what you have to offer. Besides that, there's a great deal of raw material at your fingertips, not to mention a few wealthy people who might be interested and jump on such a project like a chicken on a June bug."

She let his words soak in. It was an interesting thought that had never occurred to her before. "I don't think Jesse Overlees is very interested in serious drama," she said. Jesse owned the Oklah Theater and Clarette happened to know he ran it his own way.

"Well, then," Will drawled, "the town can build their own theater."

The idea went off inside her like nitroglycerine shooting an oil well. She jumped to her feet. "That's a marvelous plan. I might just do that." She shook Will's hand and then Betty's. "Good luck with your next moving picture," she told him.

"Thank you kindly. Hollywood's not all that different from Broadway," he told her, "but at least it's warmer in California."

She thanked him again, and made her way through the now-quiet backstage area. In the alley way, she pushed through the gathering crowd. Hundreds of fans waited to catch a glimpse of their hero before he hurried away to the train station.

Street lights glowed softly overhead as Clarette walked down Johnstone Street past the Avameda Hotel, past Zofness Brothers Clothiers south to Fifth. While Bartlesville was every bit as thriving as Tulsa, the Bartians didn't seem to be as anxious to build tall building as the Tulsans. After being in Bartlesville for nearly a year, Clarette had decided early on that she much preferred Tulsa. But she'd never tell Erik so.

If only they hadn't riled up the Klan in that area. She mentioned to Erik once that the Klan was everywhere in Oklahoma, revealing the barest hint that she'd like to go back to Tulsa. He didn't pick up on it; or *acted* as though he didn't pick up on it. Instead he continually told her how he loved having his own paper to run. And she knew he loved being back where he'd grown up.

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She often heard the story of how Erik's father had come to the small town situated on the horseshoe bend of the Caney River, before the streets were paved, before the automobile arrived, and before the oil had been discovered. In the months since she'd become Mrs. Erik Torsten, she'd learned much about this wild country of Osage and Washington Counties.

Turning off Johnstone onto Fifth, she slowed her steps and studied the small storefront with the sign, Bartlesville *Courier* out front. She considered whether or not to tell Erik her latest plan. She often drove her husband into a tailspin with her wild ideas. At times she wondered if he wished he'd married a small-town girl who could cook and clean and sew buttons on his shirt. Although Clarette was making some effort at doing all those things, her heart was never in it. There were so many other things in life to do.

Now she had yet another delightful project to pursue.

**Read the rest of Clarette's story by**  
**[Clicking HERE](#)**