

Donation of the Month

Object: Tom Morgan's Desk & Chair
Catalog #: 1987.12.4 & 5
Donor: Vera Key Estate



His gravestone in the Rogers Cemetery says simply, "Tom P. Morgan, Writer, Humorist, Philosopher." But in his day, Tom Perkins Morgan (1864-1928) was a nationally known writer and magazine contributor whose work appeared in almost every major publication in the country, including the *Ladies Home Journal*, *Life*, and the *Saturday Evening Post*.

Born in East Lyme, Connecticut, Morgan moved with his family to Garnett, Kansas, at the age of 10. In 1890 Morgan, his parents Joseph P. and Mary A.

(Perkins), and his brother Harry all moved to Rogers to the old Stroud home at the southwest corner of Third and Walnut. In his youth Morgan traveled with both a circus and a dramatic company called the Payton Comedy Company. His performances were later remembered in a 1915 newspaper article:

He did funny parts on the stage, had a good Uncle Hiram kind of monologue, a song and a dance, and doubled on the bass drum in the band. It was good to meet up with Mr. Morgan, for he is an entertainer of rare potency, and can tell stories in the Arkansas language which are funnier than a bushel of monkeys but which must be heard to be appreciated.

Morgan gave up traveling and began to write for various small town newspapers. Writing in the dialect of the "mountain folk," he based his stories on hillbilly life and daffy people. Soon the audience for his humor expanded, and his stories were published in *Country Gentleman*, *Youths' Companion*, Frank Leslie's

Illustrated Newspaper, and many other periodicals. Downplaying his talents for writing he once joked, "It took me 15 years of solid contributing to kill *Puck*."

Morgan also contributed quips- short, humorous conversations - for use as filler between newspaper articles.

"*Mawney is a pretty useless sort of chap, isn't he?*"

"*Well, frankly, I don't see how he could be utilized to any advantage unless his head were taken off, put on a stick, and used as a rattle-box to amuse the children.*"

Country Cousin (taking in the sights) - Wal, I'll be gosh durned!

City Cousin (showing him around) - What is it, Joash?

Country Cousin (pointing to a basket of coconuts) - Jest look at them pertaters with hair on 'em!

Morgan's fictional characters included Constable Slackputter, J. Fuller Gloom, Alkili Ike, Heloise and Claudine of the Rapid Fire Restaurant, Ted Festus Pester, Jig Fiddlin' of Clapboard Springs, and Gap Johnson of Rumpus Ridge whose family consisted of 14 children including "least boy Bearcat" who was pretty wild.

Between 1912 and 1928 he wrote a daily column for the *Kansas City Star* under the pen name Tennyson J. Daft. Of Daft's rhymes, Morgan proudly boasted that they were "the poorest in the world." In "The Back-Yard Farmer," Daft wrote, "You ought to see my sweet-corn crop!/Oh, you would never guess/That if I'd twice as much I'd have/Enough to make a mess!"

Despite his success as a writer, Morgan was best known in Rogers for the newsstand which he opened in 1893 and operated for nearly 25 years. Originally located in the old post office lobby at the northwest corner of First and Elm, the store sold cigars, schoolbooks, tablets and pencils, and the largest line of postcards in Benton County, which Morgan published himself. In 1918 he sold the business to F.H. Duff in order to concentrate on writing.

The store was a great place for Morgan to get ideas for his stories. After a customer left Morgan might pull out a little notebook to record an interesting thing or humorous tale he had heard. He once wrote, "The folk who live in the Ozark Mountains have a viewpoint that is different from that of the rest of the world and the fund is inexhaustible. All a writer has to do is keep his ears open and his eyes peeled."

Like many of the people who populated his stories, Morgan was a character, well remembered by the folks of Rogers. His friend, newspaper editor Erwin Funk, called him a "peculiar, eccentric sort of fellow. . . he had but few intimate friends. If Tom liked you, he was willing to back you to the limit; if he didn't like you, he didn't know you was alive." Funk once wrote about Morgan, "His stock explanation of his confirmed bachelorhood was that he 'already had a phonograph and a mean disposition, so why would [he] want a wife?'"

Edith Erikson, who worked for Mr. Duff as a young girl, once recalled that Morgan "rolled his own cigarettes, using Bull Durham tobacco, spilling most of it and coming out with a slim, limp, messy cigarette." She also remembered that he said "that when he came home at night he put his conscience under the front step and could sleep well."

Jay Iden, another Rogers friend who wrote for the *Kansas City Star*, once wrote, "Mr. Morgan is a very mild little man, with manners of a court gallant and why he should be always creating characters who snar and bite and shoot up towns is not known, even to the elect."

Morgan never married and had only a few close friends. But his newsstand allowed him to know almost everyone in town. Among those he met was young Betty Blake. Through her Morgan became acquainted with Will Rogers, and the men became life-long friends. Rogers referred to Morgan as his "booster" because Morgan promoted Rogers' career to Betty, who at first had severe misgivings about a life in show business.

Rogers and Morgan shared a similar tradition of rural humor. Indeed, Rogers may have been influenced by Morgan, for Betty sent Will some of Morgan's material for possible use on the vaudeville stage. Certainly the two shared a skeptical view of politicians, an affection for the average man, and a suspicion of "city slickers."

In 1924 Morgan suffered a severe stroke which impaired an arm and a leg. Faced with the need for round-the-clock care he said, "Well, if there has to be someone here, send for Vera Key, she can stand the gaff." Vera was a Rogers girl who had served as a nurse in France during World War I.

During her several-months stay at the house Vera observed many things about Morgan. He had few furnishings - just an iron bed, a bedside table, and a rickety dresser in his bedroom. In the front parlor, which he used as his office, he had an 1890s oak roll-top desk and leather-seated swivel chair (pictured) where he wrote his stories. He was credited with bringing the first "graphophone" (phonograph) to Rogers in 1897, giving several small concerts with it in his home and yard. Vera later recalled that the Victrola stood in the front parlor and Morgan's favorite tune was "Turkey in the Straw."

Morgan didn't have any hobbies but he enjoyed reading, especially the newspapers. His great respect for women meant that he'd rather Vera find a man to dust his bare rooms rather than her. He disliked lazy people but was always willing to help folks who made an effort to better themselves.

During his illness his friends Will and Betty Rogers sent numerous telegrams and plenty of flowers, leading Morgan to quip, "Gee, that's what I call a friend; fill the bathtubs with flowers so we don't have to take baths."

While Morgan was bedfast he kept on writing. In order to keep from disturbing him, Vera would busy herself in the yard by pulling weeds. Amused, he would tell visitors that he paid for a nurse but got a gardener instead.

Before his stroke he usually ate every meal at a nearby restaurant, sticking with the same menu of coffee, steak, French-fried potatoes, and pie. After all, "it was good, and he liked it, and why not eat what you like best?"

But he did have an electric hot plate which he used to heat canned food.

After his stroke his doctor prescribed better nutrition, so Vera brought meals from her mother's home a few blocks away. After he was able to live on his own again, Vera arranged for him to eat at her mother's house.

Morgan never really recovered fully from that first stroke and five years later he had a second one. Vera Key returned home from her nursing school in Missouri to care for him, for Morgan did not want anyone else in his home but the woman whom he had come to consider like a daughter. But a week later he was dead and Vera soon learned that he had willed her \$1,000, his house at 108 South Third, and his collection of writings in gratitude for her friendship and care. Shortly after Morgan's death, Will Rogers wrote in his weekly newspaper column:

He died as I think he would have liked to. He saw all he wanted to see. He did what he wanted to do. He had his life, he had his laughs, he was satisfied, and when you are satisfied you are successful. For that's all there is to success is satisfaction. Now you kids all know Jackie Coogan [early 20th-century child film star]. But you old time readers will always remember the name Tom P. Morgan. We've lost A Humorist.

Vera Key held on to Tom Morgan's legacy for many years, eventually donating his scrapbooks containing the newspaper clippings of his stories to Special Collections at the University of Arkansas. After her death in 1987 she left the contents of her house to the Museum and her church, the First Church of Christ Scientist, of Rogers. Through this arrangement Tom Morgan's desk and chair came to the Museum,

along with a few other personal effects and three oil paintings depicting stories that he written for the Curtis Publishing Company.

Tom Morgan and Vera Key's house was eventually purchased by the what was then the Central United Methodist Church, and later by an individual who had it moved to a piece of property along the Frisco railroad north of Avoca.

CREDITS

"Meeting Old Friends," *Howard (Kansas) Courant* (5-20-1915); "As Jay Sees Tom P.," *Rogers Democrat*, (5-31-1917); "Tom P. Morgan" (obituary), probably written by Erwin Funk, *Rogers Democrat* (7-12-1928); "Tom P. Morgan Well Known for Short Stories" & "'Talking Machine' Concerts Given by Tom Morgan," *Rogers Daily News* (7-1-1950); Vera Key, "Memories of Tom Morgan," *Benton County Pioneer* (August 1956); Billie Jines, "Mystery of Tom P. Morgan is Resolved," *Northwest Arkansas Morning News* (5-3-1987); J. Dickson Black, compiler, *Short Stories and Wit of Tom P. Morgan*, circa 1987-88; unpublished letter from Edith Erikson, circa 1989; and Gaye Bland, "Morgan Holds Place in Rogers History," *Rogers Hometown News* (12-27-2000).