

Transcript of *What'sHerName* Episode 42: [THE FARMER Cherokee America Rogers](#)

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Olivia Meikle: Hi, Katie!

Katie Nelson: Hi, Olivia!

OM: I need to take off your historian hat for a minute...

KN: Okay?

OM: ...and put on a regular regular person hat.

[laughter]

OM: Let's just pretend that you don't know all the things that you know.

KN: Oh, okay.

OM: So wearing your regular person hat...

KN: It's very stylish.

OM: Yes, it's charming.

KN: Thank you.

OM: I want you to picture a Civil War battlefield.

KN: Okay, got it.

OM: What does it look like? Who's there? Who's fighting?

KN: So there's, you know, gatling guns on these giant wheels up on the hillside, and there's mist-

OM: You're already too 'historian hat.'

KN: [laughter] Oh. There's big things on wheels, and there's mist, and there's people in blue and people in gray, and Abraham Lincoln is there, and they've got bayonets on their rifles. And I mean, really, what I'm picturing is the movie *Glory*.

OM: Ah, there you go. Okay so then these people in blue and grey - what do they look like?

KN: Ah. Well they're men obviously. And since I'm picturing the movie *Glory* Denzel Washington is, you know, front and center. And they've got mustaches, most of them.

OM: Oh yeah, yeah. So they're mostly white?

KN: Yeah, mostly white. Except for—

OM: But there's some Black men there.

KN: Yeah, fighting for the Union.

OM: Okay and where is this battlefield?

KN: Well, it's Gettysburg. Obviously.

OM: Oh, alright.

KN: Even though Denzel Washington wasn't at Gettysburg. You say Civil War battlefield and I picture a gun on the hill of Gettysburg, for some reason.

OM: Hmm.

OM: Okay, so we've got a battlefield on the coast.

KN: Yeah.

OM: And we've got mostly white men, a few Black men.

KN: Right.

OM: And that's what the Civil War is, really.

KN: Oh, yeah. That's what the Civil War is.

OM: So we've talked in this podcast, I think about the [problem of the 'single story.'](#) That we have 'one story' about things. So, I would say just in that little vignette, you've given us a couple of stories. We have the 'Northern Story,' we have Abraham Lincoln, and the 'guys in blue.'

KN: Yeah

OM: And then, we have the guys with the mustaches fighting for the South.

KN: Right.

OM: So, we have those two, but now we've added the extra story of the Black men also involved in the Civil War.

KN: Right, yes.

OM: Good for us! [laughter] But - there were so many more people involved in, and affected by the Civil War.

KN: Were there? I'm shocked. [sarcasm]

OM: There were!

[music]

OM: I'm Olivia Meikle

KN: And I'm Katie Nelson

OM: And this is What'sHerName.

KN: Fascinating women you've never heard of.

[music]

OM: We're gonna move, first of all, far away from the coast.

K: Oh?

OM: To a place where I, personally, have never thought about the Civil War happening.

KN: Oh, okay.

OM: So to set the scene: We are going to go to Cherokee Territory, in modern-day Oklahoma.

KN: Okay.

OM: And we're going to learn a little bit about how the Civil War affected the Cherokee Nation, in order to understand the woman that we're gonna meet.

KN: Okay.

OM: But we're going to do this backwards. So first, we're going to meet our guest. [Margaret Verble](#) is a novelist, and she's also an enrolled citizen of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma. Her first novel [Maud's Line](#) was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. Her new book is set in the Old Cherokee Nation West, and it's this amazing multi-generational saga that tells the story of this entire community in the decades after the Civil War.

So first, we need to track down where the story begins, in order to understand how the Civil War affected the Cherokee Nation and Cherokee territory, we need to understand how the Cherokee *get* to Indian territory at all.

I think most of us who grew up in the U.S., hopefully, know the story of the [Trail of Tears](#), and the forced removal of the Cherokee Nation from their lands to the lands designated as Cherokee territory and the infamous horrific forced march across the nation where thousands of Cherokee people died.

KN: Yeah.

Margret Verble: the Cherokees had been moved - removed - from Oklahoma in 1838. As soon as they got there they started doing things like building schools, and farming, and having a newspaper, and establishing - reestablishing - their government. And they had gotten all that up and running and were prosperous, and **more** prosperous than the white people and surrounding states, and then the Civil War broke out. And the first thing that President Lincoln did was that he withdrew the troops from Fort Gibson, and from the other forts out there, to take them back east to fight. This was a problem for the Cherokees because the army was out there to protect them from the [Osage](#). So this caused a great deal of bitterness in the Cherokee Nation. And the removal money was held in southern banks. So they had two primary reasons: 1) they'd been betrayed by the U.S. Government...

06:16 - 11:38

MV: ...and 2) the southern banks situation. They had two reasons, really, to side with the South. And a small group of Cherokees also owned slaves. But those factors caused the Cherokee Nation first to side with the North, and then to side with the South, as soon as the implications of the betrayal by Lincoln and other things became clear. And the other southeastern tribes who'd been removed did the same thing.

OM: Then, some Cherokee, especially the leader of the most famous military unit from the Cherokee Nation, [John Drew](#), are eventually persuaded that they are on the wrong side and that they should be fighting with the Union. And so Drew and [Chief Ross](#) appeal to Abraham Lincoln to fight with the Union once again, which he grants. So even within the Cherokee Nation itself, there's this divide and this confusion about which side will best safeguard Cherokee interests, and which side the Nation should be supporting.

So as confusing and contradictory and stressful as is all of this must have been, even more devastating is the fact that the war is going back and forth across Cherokee land.

MV: Everything out there was just destroyed. The farms were burned. The crops were ruined. It was just a wasteland. It was just desolate. And, in fact, the desolation was so great that I think, and I'm not alone, that the Civil War was harder on the Cherokee Indians than the Trail of Tears was. So they had to rebuild everything again. So after the Civil War the United States imposed treaties on these Indians, the Treaties of 1866, and essentially what they did was that they used those treaties and used the fact that the Indians had sided with the South in order to take more Indian land away from them. And this caused pretty extreme bitterness in the Cherokee Nation.

KN: You don't think of the Civil War as happening all over Oklahoma.

OM: Exactly. I think we have decided where it happened, and we think about it as 'over there.' It had never occurred to me to think about how Native Nations would have been affected by this conflict, which is ridiculous because of course they were.

It's so hard to rebuild from this, right? You've already put all your resources into rebuilding once already. And now it's all gone again. And of course, none of the Reconstruction dollars that the South is seeing are coming to the Cherokee Nation. So it's in this moment in 1876, ten years after the end of the war - when the Cherokee Nation is still very much rebuilding and trying to recover from this experience - that we meet the woman we're talking about. Her name is Cherokee America Rogers.

KN: What?!

OM: Best name ever.

KN: Cherokee America Rogers?

OM: Yes.

KN: Wow. That is the best name ever!

OM: Isn't it fantastic?

KN: Yes.

OM: And it is *because* her name is so fantastic that Margaret Verble found her.

MV: I found Cherokee America in a graveyard. I was visiting my grandfather's grave one time and I came across this large dark marble stone that looked like it was - it didn't look like other stones in that graveyard. It looked like it belonged to someone who had a lot of money, or who had had a lot of money in life. And I walked toward it and I found a husband and wife buried there, and the wife's name was Cherokee America Rogers. And I was just taken by that name, I thought "what a fabulous name this is."

OM: And I do this too, I troll graveyards for names for my writing, because there's just so many great combinations that I could never come up with, when you find these names in the graveyard. And so being a writer, of course she was struck with this and thought, "Oh, filing that away. That's the perfect name."

MV: So at night, that night, I went home to my grandmother's farm, and it was - she and I were alone. We were in the kitchen and eating dinner, and I told her - she knew of course had been to see Granddaddy's grave - and I told her that while I was there, I had come across this fabulous name on this gravestone, and told her it was Cherokee America Rogers. And she laughed and she said, "Well you found Aunt Check!" And I was amazed. I said, "You knew her?"

11:38 - 15:01

MV: She said, "Oh, yes, yes." She did know her, and then she told me the story. She said that when her father and her uncle first came to Indian Territory as orphans of the Civil War, that Mrs. Rogers took them in when they didn't have anything. They'd lost their parents. They'd lost any inheritance they might have had, any property they might have had. They were just really destitute looking for a new life. And she took them, and employed them, and they married Indian

women, and became successful farmers and raised large families. And so Cherokee America really gave them *lives*. And my grandmother was very grateful to her and felt very warmly toward her, even though she had been dead for decades by the time she and I had that conversation.

OM, to MV: So this character becomes the inspiration for this character in your new novel, but I'm really fascinated with how much - how much do we actually know about her life?

MV: We don't have a lot of sources about her actual life. Yesterday, I spoke with her step-great-granddaughter, who does not have any children, and is the last remaining person, I think, that is associated with her. And she has a picture of this woman and is going to try to find it for me. She's ninety years old and the picture is somewhere in a box, and I'm hoping she can find it. And there's a firsthand account of her that's written, that says she was a small woman, that she had an extraordinarily forceful personality, and that she often got her way, and that she really *ruled* over a large family, but was well loved. That everybody called her Aunt Check - whether she wanted them to or not - and because she always went around doing good deeds and she was sort of a doctor and she would - somebody gets sick and she'd make up a concoction of something, and go out in her buggy and administer some medicine to them, with surprisingly good results. My grandmother knew her, and I still have a living relative who knew her son, Connell Rogers, or Connell Singer in the book. And he features both in *Cherokee America* and in my first novel *Maud's Line*. He's an old man in *Maud's Line*, and a young man in *Cherokee America*.

OM: Which is such a reminder of how fresh the Civil War really is, that we are not that far removed from what seemed, as a kid, to me, like ancient history.

14:56 - 16:20

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[music]

[music]

OM: Just from the few stories told about her, we can get a pretty comprehensive picture of her character. Cherokee America Rogers was a very small woman. Which is unusual, because Cherokee people are generally very tall. But in that very small woman was an extraordinarily forceful personality. Aunt Check was running a huge potato farm in Cherokee territory and employing tons of people, had one of the most productive and well-respected farms, and was a very important figure in Cherokee territory.

OM, to MV: You'd have to be a pretty forceful personality to run a huge farm like that?

MV: Well. I think there are two or three things that feature in that. One, that she was widowed and she was left with eight children and a very large farm. So she didn't have much choice. She had to be strong. Also she came from a very prominent family in the Cherokee Tribe. The men in her family have been well written about. Her father was Gideon Morgan, who led the Cherokees against the Creeks at the battle of Horseshoe Bend in 1814. Won that battle for Andrew Jackson. Her great uncle was Chief Lowery who was so influential, that when Sequoia was trying to get his syllabary adopted by the Cherokees it was Chief Lowery that made that possible. Her great grandfather was [John Sevier](#), the first governor of Tennessee. Her grandfather was Joseph Sevier who is a Revolutionary War hero. So, she comes on both sides of her family from very strong and very *bright* people. And the third thing that would contribute to her dominance and to her forceful personality is the Cherokee Nation is matriarchal, and matrilineal.

OM: So, at this time Cherokee women have way more freedom, way more education and a lot more rights than white women in the U.S. would have had. They own property, they inherit property. They are fully in charge of their own lives and their own decisions, and there's no expectation of submission to men.

KN: Wow.

MV: Cherokee America lived in the upper echelons of society. There were other women like her: Alabama Bushyhead, for instance, another character in the book...

OM: Another wonderful name!

MV: Yes [laughter] it is. She went by Elizabeth, but Alabama really was her name. And there was a whole group of these women, who dressed as white women, which at the time of course was Victorian garb. You know, they were smart. They were literate. They had been educated. And they were used to power.

My guess is, and I'm only guessing here, we don't know, she felt that it was her obligation as someone with resources, to minister to people who didn't have a lot of resources. And she was surrounded by people who were less fortunate than she. And Cherokee society is a lot different in many respects from the world that I live in on an everyday basis, and I suspect that you live in.

13:30

MV: There's a deep sense of community. It's in the Cherokee Nation today. You can see it everywhere in the Cherokee Nation and it's not other places - a lot of other places - and there's a deep sense of, you know, we're all in this together. We have to care for each other. And so that would be a value that she would be carrying inside her, and would have carried inside her. She wouldn't know any other way to operate in the world.

OM: So, I just love this idea that there are so many new stories that we have never even thought about, let alone heard, but what I love the most about the story of Cherokee America Rogers is how her story complicates all of our generally accepted narratives of this time: about the West, about what U.S. history actually is. What the Civil War was. What Indian Territory looked like. She's an Indian who dresses like a Victorian. Girls on the Cherokee Nation are getting a high school and sometimes college education, when most girls in the country are barely finishing elementary school. And the legacy going forward of these relationships, that Aunt Check's gravestone is the most prominent one in the cemetery - and that triggers the new story and this new understanding, and this new work of art. The *new* voice from the *same* place.

MV: Well, the novel is set in 1876, it is about the entire community around her. I think when you're writing about Indians that it's important to write about the community, because that's the way Native Americans see themselves, as embedded in a group of relationships. That's the way they are in the world, not as lone people, who are out to, you know, make a mark for themselves. That is really frowned upon in many respects by Native Americans. It's the deep sense of community, and relationship, and kinship, that is important in their communities, that it's really very difficult to write about Indians unless you do that. But I think that's a very important thing and that's something that I was trying to do, because just to write about a single person alone, if they're a Native American, that is misrepresentation of who they are.

OM: What I find the most interesting about the story is that from this one gravestone and just a name, Margaret Verble uncovers the life of this amazing woman, and then turns that into this amazing piece of fiction, that though it doesn't correspond to the exact details of Cherokee America Rogers' life - that by creating Cherokee America Singer, Margaret Verble taps into this vein of truth, that even though it's fiction, it's more 'true.'

KN: Yeah.

OM: That it captures all of the [zeitgeist](#) of the time, and really *what it was like* to live in Cherokee Territory at this time as a woman. The experience of Cherokee women at this time, the experience of the community, and the interactions between all of the people in that community, and the wider community around it of white settlers.

KN: Yeah. That's one of the beauties of historical fiction that you can draw in all kinds of different strands of the human experience and tell them in one single story, just because it didn't all happen to one person doesn't mean that they didn't happen.

OM: Yeah, and I think partially because she's such a brilliant writer, but also just in the way that it brings all of these stories into one communal story, really opens up for me, a way that I had not had access to thinking about this time period, and this place. So I really—I highly recommend the book. It's amazing.

KN: Cool.

25:05 - 25:59

[music]

OM: Thanks to our guest Margaret Verble whose books *Cherokee America* and *Maud's Line* are available wherever books are sold and on our website at whatshernamepodcast.com. Thanks also to our Patreon sponsors for this episode, Chawntelle Oliver, Catherine McKay, and Jesse Bray Sharpin. If you'd like to become a patron, visit our website at whatshernamepodcast.com and click donate. There patrons can choose from a variety of great prizes and thank yous including a shout out in a future episode.

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