

AN EARLY ACCOUNT OF ORAL ROBERTS' HEALING TESTIMONY

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Abstract

The story of Oral Roberts' healing is well documented. However, recently a discovery was made of an early testimony in the *Eastern Oklahoma Conference News* of the Pentecostal Holiness Church that provides new details about the early years of his life and ministry. This testimony from 1939 includes details from the first few years of his evangelistic ministry and a different account of both the nature of his sickness and the circumstances of his healing. This article will also explore the possible factors that contributed to the differences in this testimony from his later accounts.

This edition of *Spiritus* is dedicated to new research on the impact Oral Roberts has made on the global Spirit-empowered movement. A volume like this might warrant a biographical sketch of Roberts' life, although his story is well documented. However, while doing research for this volume, the authors discovered some previously unknown information on Roberts' early ministry in the *East Oklahoma Conference News* of the Pentecostal Holiness Church, held in the Holy Spirit Research Center.¹ As a young evangelist in Oklahoma,

Roberts contributed several articles to the paper and was featured as an evangelist prior to becoming the pastor of the Shawnee Pentecostal Holiness Church. To our delight, we discovered that he also served a year as the editor of the paper (September 1943 to September 1944) while he was the pastor in Shawnee.

In 1943, Roberts was asked to step in as editor for Rayford Bullard, who was called away to work at the publishing house in Franklin Springs, Georgia.² During his year as editor, Roberts often wrote about issues taking place in the denomination and continued the tradition of highlighting evangelistic works taking place in the conference,³ including that of his parents.⁴ Shortly after Bullard returned to resume his duties, Roberts decided to leave his pastorate in Shawnee for evangelistic meetings in North Carolina in August of 1945.⁵ From there, he spent a short time as a pastor in Toccoa, Georgia, before returning to Oklahoma to pastor in Enid and enroll in Phillips Seminary in 1946.⁶ A year later, Roberts made the decision to launch into full time healing ministry.

Below is a reprint of an article in the *East Oklahoma Conference News* from October 5, 1939, in which the editor, Oscar Moore, asked Roberts to give a short account of his testimony to introduce himself to the readers.⁷ This account is the earliest known telling of Roberts' early life and gives several details of his early career as a rising evangelist. He reports that in the first few years of his ministry in early revivals in Texas, Arkansas, and Oklahoma, he preached a staggering 600 times and recorded over 400 salvations.

EDITOR'S NOTE: In keeping with my announced plan I am giving you a brief life story of another one of our young ministers. This month I introduce Rev. Oral Roberts, who I believe is the youngest Ordained Minister in the East Okla. Conf. I have asked him to write the story for me, here it is.

I was born Jan. 24, 1918, in a little log cabin fifteen miles N. W. of Ada. I met a cold reception for the day was blustery. The day of rejoicing was soon over, however, and I settled down to the regular routine of life.

There is nothing eventful in my life until the day of my conversion and call to the ministry—except a few things which led up to it. At the age of fifteen, I felt as if I wanted to leave home and try life alone—so against the advice of my parents I went with my old High School Coach to Atoka to play ball and go to school. All was well for the first seven months but one night while in the second game of a basketball tournament, I took the flu, my health broke, and I had to go back home—a sick boy.

For sixty days death hovered near and had it not been for the love of a merciful Savior I could not have lived through the suffering. Fearing my hour of death was near, I called in my school mates and gave them my books, and at the same time told them good bye, meanwhile my parents were praying for me—even whole churches—and at last I opened my heart, prayed with all the earnestness of my soul, and God saved me.

My strength returned and with it came the call from God to the ministry. I really intended to preach, but I began an association with a number of unsaved boys and girls and soon lost my experience.

In 1934, after my parents moved to Stratford, I started to school there but at the end of the 6th week I had a nervous breakdown and had to quit. I stayed in bed for five months. Those were lonely days for all of us, but on the 7th of Feb. during family prayer, I called on God in my distress and suffering, and God heard my earnest cry and saved me again. A call came the second time to enter the ministry—and immediately, I began to mend.

In the month of August 1935, I preached my first sermon in Homer School house five miles east of Ada. Three were saved that night.

In 1936 I was licensed to preach by the Conference and entered full time ministry—since my father was sent to pastor the Westville church. Since then I have been preaching the glorious gospel in my humble and simple way, and have seen numbers of souls come to God.

On Christmas day, 1938, I was united in holy wedlock with Evelyn Lutman Fahnestock, who had been teaching school for the past three years.

During this time I've written a thirty-two page book entitled "Salvation by the Blood" and a four page pamphlet on "Character Building."

It has been my pleasure to conduct revivals in the following places: Gainesville and Weslaco, Texas; Rogers, Ark.; Memphis, Tenn.; Ada, Westville, Wagoner, Sand Springs, Okmulgee, Muskogee, Braggs, Konawa, Seminole, Fox, Okemah, Cromwell, Sulphur, Durant, and Okla. City in 2nd church in Oklahoma.

I have preached approximately 600 times, 400 have been saved, 125 sanctified, 98 received the Holy Ghost, 187 added to the church, 69 baptized in water, and I have performed 5 wedding ceremonies.

In conclusion let me say that life with this glorious Pentecostal Experience is a happy one, and I can see greater things ahead, if I stay true to Christ.

What is noteworthy about this biographical sketch is the way he tells the testimony of his healing. In Roberts' later autobiographies, he describes the details of his collapse during a basketball game, being diagnosed with tuberculosis, and being bedridden for months.⁸ During this time of sickness, he had two significant experiences that led to his recovery. The first took place when at his weakest point his father prayed all night at his bed. Because of these prayers, Roberts received salvation and God gave him strength to stand up for the first time in months.⁹ A few weeks later, after his parents moved to Stratford, Oklahoma, he attended a tent revival where he was prayed for by Rev. George Moncey.¹⁰ After Moncey rebuked the sickness, Roberts testified that power touched his lungs and he was instantly healed of tuberculosis.¹¹

In this previously unknown 1939 account, Roberts tells a somewhat different story. He curiously describes his illness as only "a flu" that

“broke his health,” but does not mention it was tuberculosis. The diagnosis by the doctors that it was tuberculosis is a significant part of his story considering his family history and Native American heritage.¹² There is no doubt that he was fully aware that it was tuberculosis. In later accounts, Roberts recalls, “I began to think of all the Indians I had seen with tuberculosis, of those I had seen die as I accompanied Papa on his preaching tours among the Indian people.”¹³ Yet, in the 1939 account, Roberts says he recovered from his “broken health” after his father prayed for him and he received his first salvation experience before moving to Stratford. He goes on to claim that after they moved to Stratford, he had a second salvation experience wherein he would “begin to mend” and was called to ministry. Furthermore, Roberts’ testimony in the July 11, 1935, edition of the *Advocate* indicates he was still struggling with sickness despite having been saved, sanctified, and called to preach.¹⁴

It is also noteworthy that there is no mention of his healing experience with George Moncey in the tent revival near Ada, Oklahoma.¹⁵ The only healing he reports is recovering from a “nervous breakdown” that kept him in bed for five months. Later accounts describe the agony of his suffering during the sickness, but do not mention such a mental episode.¹⁶ Instead of one sickness (tuberculosis) that was healed during the process of two experiences (salvation and healing) by two individuals (his father and George Moncey), Roberts describes recovering from two separate issues (flu and nervous breakdown) by means of two salvation experiences by the same individuals (family prayer).

What should we make of these additions/omissions in this early account? Why would Roberts downplay a central piece of his story that would later establish him as America’s leading healing evangelist? First, this account demonstrates that Roberts learned early in his life to tailor his testimony in a way that would lend credibility to his ministry. For decades, Roberts used his story of healing from tuberculosis as a way of validating his ministry as a healing evangelist. His healing ministry was motivated by his healing testimony. As David Harrell comments, “Roberts’s view on healing depended not so much on an ideological base but on experience. Over and over he traced his passion for healing

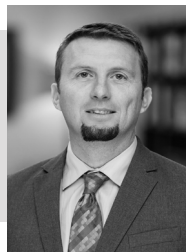
back to the enchanted moment when he himself had experienced God's touch."¹⁷ In the same way, in order to validate his evangelistic ministry, Roberts placed the majority of his focus on how his salvation experiences were instrumental in his call as an evangelist. The way he carefully constructs his story, coupled with the impressive reports of the number of salvations in his revivals, suggests he designed his testimony in a way that would lend credibility to his ministry as an evangelist.

Another possible explanation for the differences may come from Roberts' traumatic experience of sickness within the context of a Pentecostal environment. While he was suffering with tuberculosis, Roberts testified that nearly every Sunday someone from the church or the community came to his house to pray for him, but at the same time would declare that it was God who put sickness upon him. Roberts notes that during this time, many Pentecostals not only questioned if healing was possible, they often felt it was "sacrilegious to call on God to help them individually."¹⁸ This left Roberts with feelings of bitterness and resentment towards his church. He recounts, "One Sunday afternoon, I got mad. The room was crowded with people and they were all trying to get me saved while in the same breath they were telling me God had afflicted me." Roberts finally sat up and said, "I don't believe it. I don't want to hear any more of it."¹⁹ Roberts resented the fact that during this time his faith community saw sickness as a sign of disobedience and judgment from God and he refused to validate those assumptions. Roberts' belief that God was a good God who wanted to heal people did not fully develop until nearly a decade later.

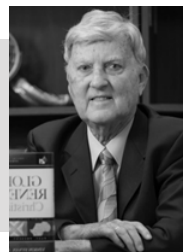
A final explanation may have to do with the nature of the illness itself. Roberts' unwillingness to divulge his illness could be due to the stigma that came with tuberculosis, especially as a Native American. Roberts had contracted tuberculosis during a time in history when the disease was associated with social problems and class distinctions.²⁰ When the diagnosis came from his doctor, Roberts expressed fear that he would be confined to a sanatorium or left to die and blamed "his mother's people" for passing that gene on to him.²¹ Although he later fully embraced his Native American heritage, it is possible that at this time he was uneasy about publically admitting this aspect of his story out of fear of how it would affect his popularity.

Whatever the reasons for this differing account, this fascinating early version of Roberts' story provides a unique summary of his early life and provides an interesting addition to what we know about this giant in American religious history.

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Notes

- 1 David E. Harrell, Jr., *Oral Roberts: An American Life* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row), 43, notes that Roberts wrote articles for the *Pentecostal Holiness Advocate* as early as 1937, but was not aware that he also wrote in the *East Oklahoma Conference News* (EOCN from here on).
- 2 Rayford Bullard, "Back Again," *EOCN*, September 1944, 4.
- 3 "Can Our Solider Boys Be Saved?," *EOCN*, May 1944, 2–3; "Will God Repeat the Upper Room Revival?" *EOCN*, November 1943, 1, 7; "Suggestions for the P. H. Y. S. Rallies and Young People's Work," *EOCN*, January 1944, 2–3.
- 4 *EOCN*, October 1943, 1, 7; *EOCN*, July 1944, 3.
- 5 "Former Editor Goes East," *EOCN*, August 1945, 3.
- 6 Oral Roberts, *Expect a Miracle: My Life and Ministry* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 56–57.
- 7 *EOCN*, 5 October 1939, 1.
- 8 Roberts wrote five autobiographies: Oral Roberts, *Oral Roberts' Life Story as Told by Himself* (Tulsa, OK: Oral Roberts, 1952); Oral Roberts, *My Story* (Tulsa, OK: Summit Books Co., 1961); Oral Roberts, *My Twenty Years of a Miracles Ministry* (Tulsa, OK: Oral Roberts, 1967); Oral Roberts, *The Call: An Autobiography* (Garden City, N.Y.:

Doubleday, 1971); Oral Roberts, *Expect a Miracle: My Life and Ministry* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1995).

9 Roberts, *Oral Roberts' Life Story as Told by Himself*, 46.

10 Roberts, *The Call*, 34; Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, 32–33; E. M. and Claudius Roberts, *Our Ministry and Our Son Oral* (Tulsa, OK: Oral Roberts, 1960), 58–59.

11 Roberts, *Oral Roberts' Life Story as Told by Himself*, 50. Roberts testified that following Moncey's prayer, his lungs began to tingle, he saw a light above him, and he ran on the stage declaring "I am healed! I am healed! I am healed!"

12 Based on his later accounts, Roberts clearly understood the nature of his illness, having testified that his doctor and his parents told him that it was tuberculosis. Roberts, *My Story*, 16–17. Roberts knew that tuberculosis was common in Native American communities and his Cherokee mother's father and sister had died of the same illness. Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, 32, also recounts that Moncey encouraged him, "An Indian boy was healed here a few nights ago." To which he commented, "I suppose that someone had told him I had Indian blood."

13 Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, 24.

14 "Testimonies," *The Advocate*, 11 July 1935, 14. Roberts' account of his testimony notes, "I have been bedfast for 130 days, and I praise God for it. During this time I have been saved and sanctified. I have had several doctors, medical and chiropractic, but they seem of no avail. It seems that God is the only one that knows my condition . . . I feel the call definitely, but before I recover and enter into the work I must have the abiding Comforter, the Holy Ghost, to comfort and help me to overcome my infirmities." It is unclear exactly when Roberts visited Moncey's tent meeting and was healed, but it would presumably be after this testimony. Nevertheless, this account further contradicts the 1939 testimony, which places this event in February.

15 Roberts, *The Call*, 34; Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, 32–33; E. M. and Claudius Roberts, *Our Ministry and Our Son Oral*, 58–59.

16 Roberts, *Oral Roberts' Life Story as Told by Himself*, 36, says nothing of his mental state except, "During those 163 days, I never had a good day." It is also possible that he refers to this episode when he describes his mental anguish from tuberculosis in his 1952 account. He says, "I lived in a state of unreality except for the suffering in my body. My mind was in a shadow and it felt as if I was away off from normal things . . . A stupor engulfed me and at last it was as if I didn't see or hear anyone." Roberts, *The Call*, 30–31.

17 Harrell, *Oral Roberts: An American Life*, 449.

18 Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, 29.

19 Roberts, *Oral Roberts' Life Story as Told by Himself*, 18.

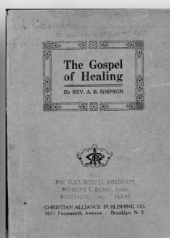
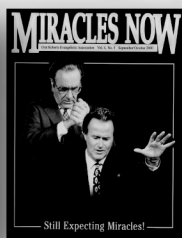
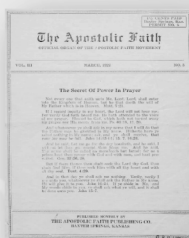
20 For example, *The American Review of Tuberculosis* 2 (1918–1919), 234, notes that tuberculosis was seen as a lower-class disease. The journal describes the fate of infected workers who miss work in order to spend months in a sanitarium, only to be barred from work when they returned because of its "consumptive" nature and "danger to his fellows."

21 Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, 26.

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