

Lydie Marland: Oklahoma's Anastasia

The puzzle of Lydie Marland's life haunts anyone who has been captivated by her extraordinary story. Lydie (pronounced Ly-de) has been described as mysterious, eccentric, beautiful, artistic, refined, enigmatic, and troubled. She was called a "Princess" when she became First Lady of Oklahoma and I'm sure she was called many other things—good and bad—by those who thought they knew her. The Marland story is fantastic to the point of unbelievable and Lydie's part in the story is perhaps the most tragic.

Lydie's Ghost is the second novel I've written based loosely on the life of Lydie Marland. I did not become aware of her story until nearly twelve years after her death. The generation that would have known the real Lydie will someday all be gone, and we are left with the legend of this fascinating woman. I have always had reservations when writing about a character that I personally did not know, but Lydie's story has always been too compelling for me to leave alone. As I've talked to various groups in promoting my first fictional novel, *The Broken Statue*, I have witnessed the fascination people have with this remarkable woman. I have always tried to depict her in an honorable and respectful manner. I truly hope I have been able to do that.

Generations come and go, like water moving down a river into history. In the end, what is left is the stories told by those who followed. Most people interested in Lydie's legacy never knew the real Lydie and most that have some memories of her knew an elderly woman that must have appeared somewhat eccentric. Like me, they have learned about the extraordinary woman by the stories told by others.

I have met a few people that actually interacted with the real Lydie Marland. One man I remember particularly came to a book signing I held in Ponca City. The gentleman was older and wore overalls. He did not look like the typical bookstore customer, but he stood in line anyway with his copy of *The Broken Statue* tucked under his arm. When I greeted him, I asked if he was familiar with the

Marland story and he said he was. He went on to tell me that he had met the real Lydie when she was in her mid-twenties—he was eleven or twelve years old at the time. Obviously, I was supremely interested in talking to anyone who had actually witnessed any part of Lydie’s life. The man explained that he was just boy and would see her around town. He went on to say that he had quite a, “crush on her,” as a young boy. I asked the man how long that lasted and said, “to this day.”

The facts about Lydie Marland’s life are well documented. She was born Lydie Roberts in Flourtown, Pennsylvania outside of Philadelphia. The family was middle-class at best. Lydie and her older brother George first came to Ponca City around 1912 to visit and in time became welcome and regular visitors. The Marlands were unable to have children, so Lydie and George were eventually adopted by E.W. and Virginia Marland around 1916 and lived in a large mansion surrounded by eight acres of manicured gardens.

E.W. Marland founded an oil company that eventually became Conoco Oil and later Conoco/Phillips. It is estimated that E.W. Marland controlled 10% of the world’s oil production in the early 1920’s. Lydie became a debutant, attended the finest schools, and had the best of everything life could offer. By the mid 1920’s, E.W. Marland decided to build a lavish mansion on a hill at the edge of Ponca City that would be a showcase for the world. At the time it was the largest single residence home west of the Mississippi River. Virginia Marland battled a long illness that resulted in her death in the summer of 1926. Work on Marland’s great mansion continued even as his grip on control of his company was slipping away.

On July 14, 1928 Lydie Marland had a most astonishing day. She began the day as Miss Lydie Marland, had her adoption of twelve years annulled to become Lydie Roberts, and then the twenty-eight year old Lydie married her former adopted father to become Mrs. Lydie Marland. This extraordinary day was followed by an extended honeymoon. By the time the newlywed Mr. and Mrs. Marland arrived back in Ponca City, E.W. Marland’s oil company was nearly lost. Even before the onset

of The Great Depression, E.W. Marland's dream of living a long and peaceful life in the new mansion he had built began to crumble. By the early thirties, much of Marland's former wealth disappeared.

E.W. Marland was not a person content to live a life anywhere close to ordinary. In 1932 he was elected as Congressman for North Central Oklahoma. The Marlands spent two years in Washington before E.W. Marland became the 10th governor of Oklahoma on January 14, 1935. E.W. Marland with Lydie as First Lady served as governor during the bleakest days of the state's great Dust Bowl and economic depression. E.W. Marland ran for the United States Senate twice, but was unable to win. He and Lydie moved back to Ponca City and in October of 1941 E.W. Marland died leaving behind his forty-one year old widow.

The next chapter of Lydie's mysterious life started her journey toward a life of a recluse. Still a beautiful woman, Lydie more or less assumed a simpler and less public life. Her desire for secrecy erupted in 1953 when she abruptly left town. For nearly twenty-two years, Lydie Marland disappeared and few if any knew anything about her whereabouts. In 1958, the Saturday Evening Post published an article entitled, *Where is Lydie Marland*, that fueled speculation about her location, well-being, and state of mind. Lydie Marland slipped back into Ponca City in the mid-1970s and vigorously protected her privacy.

Lydie Marland passed away in the summer 1987 at eighty-seven years old. Many viewed her as odd, eccentric, or peculiar. Lydie's missing years and life have spawned a myriad of opinions and theories about her motivations, but few, if any, know the real reasons. Some would believe even Lydie did not understand her life. I suspect Lydie did not understand why people were fascinated by her extraordinary experiences.

Like many, I have ideas about what the real Lydie was like without knowing for certain. I do know her story continues to interest people and believe it will for many years to come. I've always thought Lydie probably would have enjoyed a life more ordinary. I believe she loved her husband. E.W.

Marland was a man that lived large and would not have been content with an ordinary life. Lydie's burden was to live her life under his considerable shadow.

I've often thought of Lydie as Oklahoma's Anastasia. Lydie was actually one year older than the Grand Duchess of Russia. Like Anastasia, Lydie disappeared from sight and stimulated years of speculation. As many waited for Anastasia to resurface and claim her rightful place in history, people also anticipated Lydie Marland's return for many years. Unlike Anastasia, Lydie did come home to live out the rest of her life in the hometown that had seen her enjoy good times and bad. Lydie lived out the sunset years of her life overlooking the great Marland Mansion that E.W. Marland had called the Palace on the Prairie. She must have looked at the great house with intense feelings of pride and sadness.

I believe E.W. Marland loved Ponca City, and I have become a great admirer of his accomplishments in business and as governor of Oklahoma. E.W. Marland had many opportunities to take his fortune and go somewhere else, yet stayed in Ponca City to the end of his life. Lydie, I feel, had a love-hate relationship with the place. In the end, I hope she made her peace with her home and her life.

The monuments left by E.W. Marland are everywhere in the city and state he helped form. The image of Lydie found in a statue carved when she was the princess of the Marland Empire was rescued after she had ordered it destroyed. The restored statue graces the entrance to the Marland Mansion to greet visitors that still come to marvel at the remarkable house and story. Lydie Marland always saw E.W. Marland as an exceptional man—we can only trust Lydie understood how special she was.