

## EARLY HISTORY OF ARMSTRONG ACADEMY

By James W. Moffitt

In 1842 a forward step was taken when the Choctaw Council made provision for a comprehensive system of schools. Spencer Academy was opened in 1844 near Doaksville under the auspices of the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions. In that same year the Methodists established a school at Fort Coffee near Skullyville. Two years later they opened a school for girls called New Hope, also near Fort Coffee. The Council provided money for the support of the Goodwater, Pine Ridge, Wheelock, and Stockbridge schools, which had been founded earlier by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>134</sup> Leupp said: "The idea of placing two children at the two wheels is to avoid any foundation for suspicion or collusion or favoritism shown to one band or faction over another. If one child simply drew names from the wheel, and those names were given a relative position on the preference-list in the order in which they were drawn, someone might raise the objection that the child had been instructed how to outwit the lottery in favor of his family's faction as opposed to the other faction. If the children were chosen from divers groups of Indians and make [made] to work simultaneously in the way I have indicated, the opening for suspicion on that head would be reduced to a minimum."

<sup>135</sup> Hitchcock to Com. Ind. Aff., Nov. 7, 1906, OIA, Land 97,838—1906. was given definite instructions in regard to carrying it into execution.<sup>136</sup>

<sup>136</sup> Larabee to Osage Allot. Com., Nov. 9, 1906, OIA, *L. Letter Book 910*, pp. 53-56.

<sup>1</sup> Angie Debo, *Rise and Fall of the Choctaw Republic* (Norman, 1934), 60-61.

In 1844, when the Choctaws decided to establish a school for boys in the western half of Pushmataha District, the Reverend Ramsay D. Potts was selected to take charge of it. The American Indian Mission Association agreed to bear a third of the expense, while the Choctaw Nation made up the remainder of the cost of operation. In a letter to Captain William Armstrong under date of September 1, 1845, Potts described the school as being located "two miles south of the road leading from Fort Towson to Fort Washita, fifty-five miles west of the former and thirty east of the latter. It is near the dividing ridge of the waters of Boggy and Blue river and twenty miles north west of the nearest point of Red River."<sup>2</sup>

This school was given the name of Armstrong Academy in honor of the popular agent of the Choctaws, Captain William Armstrong.<sup>3</sup> It was destined to become an outstanding center of the educational life of the Choctaws for a number of years. The academy really did not get under way until December 2, 1845, because the buildings were completed late.<sup>4</sup> For the support of the school the Choctaw Council appropriated \$2,900 and the American Indian Mission Association \$1,000 annually.<sup>5</sup> The school operated under the following trustees: Major William Armstrong, P. P. Pitchlynn, George W. Harkins, Thompson McKenney, and Robert M. Jones.

It was originally planned that the school should take care of thirty-five pupils, but because of the late start on account of the unfinished buildings it was not filled the first year. Of the thirty-three who were enrolled at the opening, twenty-four were full bloods. In their classes eighteen of them began with the alphabet, four with two letters, four with easy reading, three in McGuffey's *First Reader* and two in in the *Second Reader*. The school was attended only by boys and the manual labor plan, which was stressed, consisted chiefly in clearing and cultivating the farm which provided largely for the support of the school.<sup>6</sup>

Armstrong Academy had a good teaching staff: Potts was Superintendent; Mrs. Potts, Mr. and Mrs. P. P. Brown, Jr., and Miss Tabitha Chenoweth were the teachers; and H. V. Jones, was the director of the farm. Eventually, several native assistants were added to the staff. This school had as its objectives the Christian-

<sup>2</sup> O. I. A., School File, A 2148 (The National Archives, Washington). This site is about three and one-half miles northeast of the present town of Bokchito in Bryan County. There was sufficient wood available and a good spring of water, items that were important factors in the choosing of sites in the early days. A small stream flowed through the grounds with enough volume of water to run a grist mill a large part of the year. W. B. Morrison, "Ghost Towns of the Choctaw Nation," *The Daily Oklahoman*, March 22, 1936.

<sup>3</sup> Ramsay D. Potts to Isaac McCoy, Providence, Choctaw Nation, December 11, 1844, *Proceedings of the Second Annual Meeting of the American Indian Mission Association* (Louisville, 1844), 22f.

<sup>4</sup> Frank Allen Balyeat, *Education in Indian Territory* (Ph. D. Dissertation, Leland Stanford, Junior, University, 1927), 128.

<sup>5</sup> Grant Foreman, *The Five Civilized Tribes* (Norman, 1934), 70.

<sup>6</sup> Balyeat, *Education in Indian Territory*, 128.

izing and civilizing of the Choctaws on the manual labor plan. In an interesting report under date of September 11, 1849, Brown gives a graphic account of the academy:

In accordance with the instructions of the Board, I submit the annual report of the literary department of the Institution.

NUMBER OF PUPILS.—The whole number which have attended this session, including day scholars, beneficiaries, those boarded by their parents, and the various changes that have taken place from different causes, is sixty-five. The average attendance has been about fifty-five, which makes our number considerably larger than it has ever been before.

Of the number,

- 5 studied Algebra;
- 11 studied Emerson's arithmetic, 3d Part;
- 24 studied Emerson's arithmetic, 2d Part;
- 18 studied Emerson's arithmetic, 1st Part;
- 22 studied Fowle's Geography;
- 5 read in McGuffey's Fourth Reader;
- 30 read in McGuffey's Third Reader;
- 7 read in McGuffey's First Reader;
- 4 read in Webster's Spelling Book
- 54 attended to writing; all to spelling;
- 7 were day scholars;
- 6 were beneficiaries;
- 2 were boarded by their parents.

The others were all appropriation pupils, or pupils selected by the Trustees. Our regular number of appropriation pupils is forty five, and is never to exceed this. In this report I include all who have attended any portion of the session. Several changes have taken place: some from death, some from boys leaving school and not returning, and some from expulsions.

Order of Daily Exercises.—During the fall and winter, the first bell rang at 4 o'clock, A.M. for the boys to rise, whose duty was to build fires and sweep out the sitting room. At 5 o'clock all rose, and fifteen minutes after the roll was called. Breakfast took place at 6, after which the boys went to work. At 8 o'clock the bell called the boys together to wash themselves and prepare for school, which convened at half past 8. At 11, fifteen minutes recess was given for rest and recreation. From 12 to 1 an intermission took place for dinner. At 3 o'clock, P.M. another recess of fifteen minutes occurred, the same as in the morning. At 4 school closed, and the boys went to work until supper, which generally took place a little before sunset. After supper the boys assembled in the school room to prepare the morning lessons.<sup>7</sup>

The activities of the Armstrong Academy were directed by the Reverend A. S. Dennison, who succeeded Potts as Superintendent under the appointment of the American Indian Mission Association in 1854. Moffat continued to teach in the academy, serving at the time as pastor of the Philadelphia Baptist Church nearby.<sup>8</sup>

The young and inexperienced Dennison apparently gave up his school work after a brief period and was succeeded by Moffat as Superintendent. An insight into the life of this interesting academy

<sup>7</sup> Letter from P. P. Brown, Armstrong Academy, Sept. 11, 1849, *The Indian Advocate*, (Louisville), IV (1849), 2.

<sup>8</sup> *Proceedings of the Eleventh Annual Meeting of the American Indian Mission Association* (Louisville, 1854), 19.

during this period is gained from the following letter written under date of August 20, 1855:

Dear Sir: It affords me great pleasure to lay before you and the general government the condition of our academy and station for the past year. Pleasure, for a gradual improvement among our pupils and the people under our charge is perceptible from year to year, but more especially the past. Indeed it remains no longer an unsolved question but that the aborigines of our country, with proper management, can be elevated high in the scale of civilization and moral intelligence.

Since my last report, no material change has taken place in our mission affairs. The mission family consists of myself, wife, and Miss Tabitha Chenoweth. Our school and mission affairs have been carried on by us three, assisted a short time by a young man. I acted the part of superintendent, principal, teacher, and farmer.

During part of the winter our school was vacated for the purpose of repairing our buildings. One large building was re-covered. We are now having new chimneys built for two of our buildings. We contemplate building a new house for the use of teachers and other laborers.

The average number of pupils in attendance was forty-three, who were fed and clothed, and four day scholars. All the pupils, with one or two exceptions, made commendable progress in literature. The books studied were as follows: McGuffey's First, Second, Third and Fourth Readers; Webster's and Fowle's spelling books; philosophy, Smith's arithmetic; English grammar; elementary algebra and geography, writing and composition.

During a part of each day all the pupils labored on the farm. We raised about three hundred bushels of wheat, all of which was cut and threshed by the pupils. We planted about sixty-five acres of corn, which we think will yield, at the lowest calculation, fourteen hundred bushels. The oat crop was almost an entire failure.

Besides my labors at the academy, I have tried to impart religious instruction to the people around. As the fruit of my labor in this sphere, I have baptized thirty-six, on a profession of their faith in Christ, and have constituted one church. Our meetings are unusually well attended, and perfect order prevails.

Our mission affairs in the nation have been transferred from the American Indian Mission Association to the Domestic Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, located at Marion, Alabama. As soon as the domestic board can arrange the transfer, it will pay off all past debts, and send a sufficient number of laborers to conduct the affairs of the institution.

I cannot say that I believe that the present school system adopted in the nation is the best, but as considerable money has been expended in the erection of buildings, &c, it may not be better to advise any change in what has been done. But should the national government establish other schools, I would certainly advise the nation to make a change for the better, especially as this is an age of improvement.

All of which is respectfully submitted.

General D. H. Cooper,

A. G. Moffat, *Superintendent.*

*Agent for the Choctaw Indian Nation.*<sup>9</sup>

Later that year Armstrong Academy was turned over to the Cumberland Presbyterian Board of Foreign and Domestic Missions, under whose auspices it was conducted until the outbreak of war in 1861.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *Report of Commissioner of Indian Affairs* (Washington, 1855), 164-165.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph B. Thoburn and Muriel H. Wright, *Oklahoma A History of the State and Its People* (New York, 1929), I, 214. For the subsequent history of this interesting academy see Morrison, *Military Camps and Posts in Oklahoma* (Oklahoma City, 1936), 134-135.