

THE FREEDOM OF THE CHURCH COLLEGE IN OKLAHOMA

By Charles Evans

Education in America has proceeded to build from the top downward. After the periods of discovery, exploration, and settlement in America all the forces that had brought English civilization its higher values were projected into colonial life. While there were few Latin highschools and a sprinkling of grammar schools up and down the Eastern seaboard in even the middle of the 18th century, still there was a formidable influence in education in New England and the colonies to the south. The Puritan influence beginning with the appearance of the Mayflower was the dynamic current that seemingly while below the surface for more than a century and half, still it was the life stream shaping and directing the educational spirit of the colonies. So it was not unexpected when Englishmen who had received their education at Oxford, Cambridge, and Edinburgh finally set up in Massachusetts in 1636 Harvard college, and Yale in Connecticut in 1698. To show that the same impulses were moving the English mind in the south, Virginians developed a center of learning and at Williamsburg, founded the William and Mary college in 1702.¹

Such institutions as these waxed strong and forceful in a few decades and higher education with Latin courses highly accented set a high mark for the sons and daughters of the colonies. The common schools were, in their efforts and developments largely controlled by the universities.

¹Early American colleges founded through the influence of the churches, other than Harvard (1636) at Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Yale (1700) at New Haven, Connecticut, include the following: Brown University (1764) at Providence, Rhode Island, first called Rhode Island College and established by the Baptist denomination as its first institution of higher learning; Dartmouth (1769) at Hanover, New Hampshire, by the Congregational Church; Mercer University (1833) at Macon, Georgia, first established at Penfield by the Baptists; Randolph-Macon College (1830) at Ashland, Virginia, first established at Boydton, Virginia, by the Methodist Episcopal Church and now a part of the "Randolph-Macon System of Colleges and Academies" which also includes Randolph-Macon College for Women (1893) at Lynchburg, Virginia; Transylvania University (1783) at Lexington, Kentucky, established by Legislative Act as Transylvania Seminary with influential Baptists serving on the Board and consolidated about 1865 with Kentucky University which had grown out of Bacon College that had been opened at Georgetown, Kentucky, in 1836, by the Disciples of Christ; Emory University at Emory Post Office, Georgia, established by Legislative Act of 1836 and opened by the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1837; Columbia University (1754) at New York City, first known as Kings College, its original charter providing religious influences yet noted for its non-sectarianism with the naming of ministers of five different denominations as ex-officio governors.—Ed.

The Puritan movement dominated by a strict interpretation and an almost fanatical faith in the Anglo-Saxon Bible gave form and fashion to the educational life of American education until the appearance of the free school movement in the 19th century. The whole school system of America as late as 1870 kept its eyes fastened upon the mark of making all learning religious. The McGuffey readers appearing in the 50's of the 19th century and exercising a pronounced influence in the training of youth in public schools for 40 years or more reveal this religious hold on the American mind.

As America grew richer, as states were added to the original thirteen and as educational ambitions widened, these ambitions took the form of increase in the church colleges. Kentucky, Ohio, Indiana and all across the continent where men and women were aspiring for learning, such colleges as Transylvania, Oberlin, Knox, Randolph-Macon, and Mercer, and other such institutions were set up in great numbers. And in the foundations of everyone of these you found great reverence, allegiance and practical use of religion centered about the teaching of the Bible.

So in Oklahoma after the great run and even before the appearance of statehood in 1908 the first settlers true to the influence of their forefathers, set up religious institutions of higher learning. Of course, many of these had come into being through the missionary spirit of religion, and out of the Eastern colleges came missionaries to offer biblical training to the Indians. Examples of these can be found in the Female Seminary set up at Tahlequah, Armstrong Academy for the Choctaws, Bacone for the Creeks, Hargrove for the Chickasaws, and others like them.

With statehood the church college threw its unreserved and exalted purpose and aspirations into furnishing the youth of Oklahoma an opportunity to secure higher education centering around religious ideals. At Enid, the disciples of Christ developed Phillips University; at Shawnee, the Baptist offered a college that has grown into a tremendous power in this state. In Oklahoma City, the Methodists, directed an institution that is expanding into a Vanderbilt of the Southwest. While the Protestants were doing this, it must be said that the Catholic church was covering the educational field of higher learning with splendid schools.

But along with the church college there came territorial government and state-supported colleges and the University. At this point the stern red line of differentiation in growth, financial income and powers began to appear between the state-endowed institutions and the church college. No organization with a mere support of a few, based upon fidelity to a religious ideal can compete with another organization based upon the taxation of all the people within the confines of the state.

So as statehood grew stronger, richer, and larger, so did the six state teachers colleges, the A. & M. college and the University forming the apex of higher learning in Oklahoma become stronger, richer and larger; just in proportion did the church colleges become weaker, poorer and smaller.

This red line of demarcation was broadened and intensified by a disposition on the part of state laws granting privilege of certification to the state-endowed institutions of higher learning which were withheld or negated in the church college. In 1916, a young man, a graduate of the four-year course in the Methodist University then at Guthrie, asking at the end of a summer term in one of the state Normal schools if he could secure a life diploma at the end of their term, was told by the president he could not, but must take residence work for one full year according to the state laws. Here was a young man, and one of fine personality, asking for a privilege in the teaching world which had been granted to students of less powers and learning with two years less instruction in college work than he then possessed. Because he entered or preferred a church college and completed its four-year course securing an A.B. degree, he forfeited the powers of a certificate to teach and add to his life the values that come from securing needed financial income. In short, the church college student had to run four years in a course of higher learning while a student in the state-endowed colleges made a short cut of two years to reach the same certificate. No wonder that at that time, 1916, the church colleges of Oklahoma were low in enrollment, weak in finances, and had the appearance of folding up as many others of their kind had done.

In order to meet this situation a law was introduced in 1917 in the Oklahoma legislature giving to the church college, the same rights and privileges of certification as state-supported institutions possessed, provided they did equal work.

Strange to say, this bill was fought by the leaders of the state-supported colleges and university with but very few exceptions. This resistance toward the expansion, growth and rights of the church college seemed to stem from egotism, always manifested by the rich, the powerful and mighty toward the poor, the weak and the unfortunate. Those who were mapping out the campaign for securing equality of educational powers for the church college knew that they had an understanding mind and an earnest believer and advocate of the church college and its contribution to the body politic in the Governor of the state, Robert L. Williams.

The Bill of Rights for religious institutions in Oklahoma was drawn up by an able lawyer, Mr. D. I. Johnston of Oklahoma City, who was a trustee at that time, of Henry Kendall College, Tulsa. Governor Williams was approached and the bill and intent of those

who had it in hand were placed before him. He heartily indorsed the movement and so when the legislature in 1917 met, Glen Condon, Representative from Tulsa together with John Rogers also from Tulsa, Tom Waldrep of Shawnee, and J. B. Campbell of Garfield County, introduced the measure. These legislators had little difficulty in having it pass the House but its passage seemed to arouse certain forces of education in the state-supported colleges and through Representatives and Senators close to them they moved down upon the measure and it drifted into a silence akin to death. Nothing more was heard of the bill until in the last days of the legislative session of 1917. The manager of the campaign for the bill for church college rights, and privileges went into the senatorial chamber only two or three days before the session and asked Senator F. E. Tucker of Ardmore representing the counties of Carter, Love, and Johnson the whereabouts of the bill. He replied, "I have not heard of it." Asking Senator Tucker where it might be, he replied that, "It should be in the hands of the chairman of the committee on education in the Senate and by the way, there he is now." Senator Tucker, walking over to him asked him if he knew about the bill and where it was. The chairman replied, "Yes, I know about it, it is here in my pocket." He further stated that nobody is interested in the bill and there is no need for it. Mr. Tucker replied, "That is to be seen; Let the bill come on the floor of the Senate and let the test be made." The gentleman with the bill in his pocket said, "I don't see that that is necessary," or something to that effect. Mr. Tucker said, "You may take the bill on the floor or I will secure enough Senators to sign a petition forcing it on the floor." So, calling a stenographer and dictating the terms of the call he turned at the finish and said, "You say the Governor wants this bill passed." The answer was "yes," then said he, "Go tell the Governor I would like to see him up here a little while," and the man went immediately to the Governor and told him about the situation. Governor Williams said, "I will be up in just a few minutes." In a little while he was in conference with friends of the bill. In a few hours, after very little opposition, the bill became a law and under its operation, the church colleges of the state soon took on a new lease of prosperity and expansion.

With Senator Tucker introducing the Bill in the Senate, was Senator Davidson of Tulsa. The Bill was an amendment to an act passed by legislatures in 1910 and denominated, Section 8017 of the Revised Laws of Oklahoma. The amendment read as follows:

HOUSE BILL NO. 454

AN ACT amending section 8017, of the Revised Laws of Oklahoma, 1910, and providing for the issuance of teacher's certificates to pupils of certain colleges.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE PEOPLE OF THE STATE OF OKLAHOMA:
Teachers certificates—when issued.

Section 1. That Section 8017, of the Revised Laws of Oklahoma, 1910, be and the same is hereby amended to read as follows:

"Any student who shall have completed the full course of instruction in any of the normal schools shall receive a diploma, which shall be signed by the President of the institution and the State Board of Education, and such diploma shall be a life certificate valid in any public school of the State; provided, further, that all the provisions of this Section shall apply to any college organized under the laws of the State of Oklahoma which has a normal equivalent to the course of study provided for the State Normal Schools of Oklahoma, said course to be approved by the State Board of Education upon application to said Board, and the graduates from said normal department or said teachers training course in any such college shall be entitled to said life certificate, and provided, further, that the provisions of this section shall apply to the normal department of the colored Agriculture and Normal University."

The University and the six state teachers colleges are introduced to the youth of the state primarily through the channels of the public schools. This is as it should be. The youth of Oklahoma by the time they have reached the end of the grammar school become informed of what the higher institutions of learning have for him or her. This information is greatly enlarged in the highschools so that upon departure from the highschool at the end of any year the pupil finds an increasingly clear path before him leading to the University, the A & M college and other institutions of higher learning. In this process of path-finding the choice of the student as to what institution of higher learning he or she may enter is tremendously influenced. It naturally follows that every teacher accents most heavily the worth and nature of a school from which she or he have obtained their education. Under this teacher influence it is clearly seen that the flow of pupil life would be toward those institutions of learning that sent out the most teachers in the state. This reveals that the church college wholly handicapped by having nothing or little to offer in teacher training and that little hindered and hedged about by inequalities of certification for teaching in the schools, would find but small attendance.

So, this law affording the church college a right to offer the same courses of pedagogy as found in the state teachers colleges, the Universities and the A. & M. College, permitted it to build up large classes in teachers training; soon the summer terms at Phillips, Baptist University, Tulsa University, and Oklahoma City University blossomed into attendance of hundreds, many reaching over the thousand mark. These went back to their community schools over the state and gave the message of the fine experiences and enjoyable living in the atmosphere of the church college; not only did it continue to compound the enrollments of the church colleges but it increased their income, enlarged their influence, enriched their acquaintance, strengthened their appeal, gave them state and national

recognition and in every way deepened and broadened their privileges and their powers to serve.

It is well to insert here excerpts from two letters; one from Mother M. Agnes, O.S.B., Catholic College of Oklahoma, St. Joseph Academy, Guthrie and the other from Mr. W. T. Short, Registrar of Oklahoma Baptist University at Shawnee. The first letter says:

"The law allowing us to obtain certificates through our college has been of invaluable aid to us. Since we have the only Catholic College for Women in the State it has been the means of making a great number of our Catholic schools meet the requirements for accreditation. It has saved our Community a great deal of expense in so far as our Sisters have been able to take their college work here rather than at the University or Normal Schools. Our College has also obtained certificates for a number of public school teachers from Guthrie, Crescent and nearby rural schools. Because of this our enrollment has increased."

The letter from Mr. Short follows:

"In response to your letter of April 6, I wish to make the following report:

1,107 life teaching certificates have been granted to students of Oklahoma Baptist University since 1916.

237 degrees in education have been granted by Oklahoma Baptist University since 1916.

"I consider that House Bill No. 454, passed in 1917, has been of value to our school. Most communities like to have teachers from the denominations represented by the people of the community. Prospective teachers who are strong for their own faith prefer to go to their denominational school if they can get equal educational advantages there. Baptist communities constantly call for O.B.U. trained teachers, thus giving an advantage to the teacher who has attended the denominational school. As a result, I feel that we have had additional teachers to attend O.B.U."

Too much tribute cannot be paid to the broad vision, sturdy support and high favor of the Chief Executive of the State, Robert L. Williams, as he gave his best strength to the passing of this House Bill No. 454 of the Session of 1917. Dr. McCash of Phillips University rightly denominated this bill, the Declaration of Independence of the church colleges of Oklahoma.