

OKLAHOMA AGRICULTURAL AND MECHANICAL COLLEGE AND OLD CENTRAL

By James K. Hastings

The Founders' Day session of the Oklahoma Historical Society met in the auditorium of Old Central on Oklahoma A. and M. College campus at Stillwater on May 26, 1949, with President Emma Estill-Harbour in the chair. Some Oklahomans may be interested in knowing something of the interesting history of the College and that meeting place, so some of it follows.

I was homesteading in the west end of Payne County in the summer of 1890 when a neighbor and I came to Stillwater, the county seat, one day in July, I think it was, and learned that a mass meeting of some kind was being held in Swope Hall, at the corner of Main and Ninth, where the present Douglas Building now stands. I was delayed by some business on the street until the meeting had begun, but when I stepped in the door the late R. A. "Bob" Lowry had the floor and was saying "The bars are down." Later it developed that the meeting had been called to advise the one who was to represent Payne County in the coming first Territorial Assembly that the county would work with Logan County in her efforts to get the territorial capital, in hopes that in this way Payne County would have Logan County's help in getting some territorial plum.

Mr. Lowry had made some such motion and it had met opposition, but later carried and was followed religiously. When the question came up later as to what to ask for, the credit should go to the late Hays Hamilton of Stillwater for he it was that suggested the location of the Agricultural and Mechanical College and Experiment Station here.

Original Oklahoma, opened on April 22, 1889, was cut into six counties, Payne, Logan, Kingfisher, Cleveland, Canadian and Oklahoma. In the First Legislative Assembly there was a disposition to grab all of the territorial institutions for these six counties, so when any two like Payne and Logan joined forces, they had considerable power and later traded for more help.

When the First Legislative Assembly met, after much horse trading, the college and station were assigned to Payne County on the condition that the citizens furnish eighty acres and put up \$10,000 with which to build the first college building, later known as "Old Central."

At the next regular election, the question of bonding the county for that sum was voted on and was a flat failure. It got only one

vote in my home precinct and I cast that vote, for I had two younger sisters that must have an education and this seemed the solution. The person that cast that vote was worked over when the vote was counted and when enough had been said, I admitted that I had cast it. We should not judge too harshly the homesteaders of that day for different reasons. Most of them were desperately poor and some emigrants from older states had come from sections that had voted bonds to get a railroad built into their county and had had to pay the bonds though the road was never constructed.

On May 4, 1891, voters in Stillwater approved a proposition to issue the bonds, and they were issued on June 8. A locating committee appointed by the Governor reported on July 11 that of the two sites offered, Stillwater was better than Perkins. Stillwater's bonds were found to be technically illegal and were burned in the presence of the Board of Trustees of the town on January 19, 1893.¹ In the meantime, July 26, 1892, a municipal election was held at which the bonds were voted. They sold for less than par, and after the credit of the town was exhausted, the amount was \$352 short of the sum required. Business men of Stillwater gave their personal security for the \$352 and loaned it to the town.

Then came the letting of the contract for the new building. That day the regents had inspected the farm in the forenoon and had taken luncheon with the farm superintendent, whose home was north of the present power plant. I had business with one member of the board and saw him after their meal. On coming back to town I met eight or ten men with their light coats flung over their arms and one or two with a roll of plans of the proposed building. They let the contract that afternoon. Imagine if possible how much that building would cost if built today. It would be many times the sum paid for it.

The first president of the College was Robert J. Barker of Crescent, Logan County. He was a farmer and a Short Horn cattle breeder, as well as a member of the First Legislative Assembly. The way that he was chosen president was illustrative of the politics of that day. Some one got through a bill which provided that the President of the College should be the President of the Board of Regents. This worked backward as well as forward, so that when the regents had been chosen by Governor George W. Steele and had elected one of their number President of their body, he was automatically President of A. and M. College. As a college president he could be classed as a good Short Horn breeder. Let me explain that even college men of that day had not the faintest idea of the possibilities of the school.

¹ An account, listing contemporary sources on how the \$10,000 was raised, is given by B. B. Chapman, *The Founding of Stillwater*, pp. 141-145.

Instructors chosen before the A. and M. College opened were A. C. Magruder of Mississippi, George L. Holter of Pennsylvania, and Edward F. Clark, a local school man who looked after the student body in a supervisory capacity. The College was formally opened on December 14, 1891, in the Congregational Church with an enrollment which by the end of the first session reached 76 students. The students were about junior high school level. Prior to the completion of Old Central in 1894, school was held in the various churches of the town, but one year or term was about all any one church could stand the wild birds among them. Students were hard on buildings and pews. Magruder was of the family that supplied a General Magruder to the Confederate army in the Civil War. He taught Agriculture, as it was called in that day, but it included Agronomy, Animal Husbandry, Dairying and Horticulture. To add to his chores he was also a lay reader in the Episcopal Church. Later "Alec," as he was called, studied medicine and became an M.D. and practiced in Colorado.

George L. Holter was a precise little chap that we all loved. He came to teach Chemistry and be Station Chemist. He could see farther into the future than the rest of us and bluntly told us, what we later realized, that we were breaking out too much grass land. He it was that brought John Fields to the state.

When asked once if he would take over the teaching of a class in Physics, Holter answered, "I can hold the book." The night after Holter was married some of his boy students brought up a small cannon and parking it on his lawn, fired it, breaking much of the window glass. The next morning when the class met, he handed the boys a bill from the town glazier that quoted the cost of the glass and labor in replacing it. The boys reached pretty deep but found the sum indicated before the class proceeded.

The long lines of milk trucks today waiting to unload their grade A milk at the Stillwater processing plants remind me of Holter's distress when he found a brown sediment in his bottled milk. He spoke to me about it but being unable to enlighten him I suggested that as a chemist he ought to be able in the laboratory to find what caused it.

Pay for faculty members of that day would not tempt a country school teacher in this modern high priced day. One regent, who was a grain and cotton buyer at Guthrie, complained that he could get a good stenographer in his office for \$75.00 a month and he could not see how faculty members should ask more. Also there was not the present tenure in office, for at times then, even the President of the school was hired for a year at a time.

There were some fine men on the faculty in the old days as there are now but there was one purely political appointee who

aspired to shine all the time. He thought that he should be permitted to lead convocation and did but he did not know the Lord's Prayer. So one of the good sort would sit behind him and coach him quietly when he came to a halt. Finally, at the end of the term, the politician was assured that he had better take time out and learn that prayer for he would get no more help on it.

Old Central was begun in 1893 and finished the next year. It is told of a former Governor of Oklahoma, J. B. A. Robertson, that when he was a young man and freighting from the small station of Wharton on the Santa Fe, near Perry, to his home town of Chandler in Lincoln County, in territorial days, that he would of two roads choose the one that would bring him in sight of Old Central for by that road he would get to see a brick college building in the territory.

Mrs. Hastings and I attended a teachers' institute at Old Central in the summer of 1896. The County Superintendent, Miss Olivet M. Thornley, employed two teachers from Central Normal at Edmond and Professor James Means of the Stillwater schools to conduct it. The director was Miss Maude De Cou. She probably taught elocution at Edmond and one evening she gave us youngsters from the prairies and sticks of Oklahoma a real treat, for she gave us Dicken's *Tale of Two Cities*. Fifty-four years have rolled over my head since that evening yet I can still hear the rumble of the trumbils over the cobblestones of the Paris streets and see the old French women knitting beside the guillotine and watching the heads roll into the basket. I might add for the benefit of Oklahoma University that the bell in the tower of Old Central still had its clapper and we did not at that time have to ask the consent of the University if we might ring the bell.

Following that institute, I signed a contract to teach a seven-months school in my home district in the west end of Payne County. I was to draw the magnificent sum of \$30.00 a month. I have many times thought probably that was all my teaching was worth. I might add that in the summer following, a young woman who was later County Superintendent taught a two-months term for the smaller children for the sum of \$20.00 a month in our school building. My old school contract is still in existence and will be placed in the Oklahoma Historical Society.