STATE PROTECTION OF HISTORICAL CENTERS

By Berlin B. Chapman

At the annual meeting of the Oklahoma Historical Society at Tahlequah on May 7 there was a round-table discussion on the preservation of historical centers, one of the most urgent problems confronting persons interested in Oklahoma history. The following excerpts from the discussion give light on the problem.\(^1\) An introduction was given by Dr. J. Stanley Clark, Director of Research of the Oklahoma Planning and Resources Board, who said:

Our agency is charged with the responsibility of maintaining certain state memorials and therefore works closely with the Oklahoma Historical Society. Outstanding is this society with its wonderful museums; also the Will Rogers Memorial at Claremore, and the reconstructed Fort Gibson Stockade. The Oklahoma Planning and Resources Board inherited the stockade from the Fort Gibson Commission and is charged with the maintenance and keeping of the property in repair. Our agency, too, maintains the Sequoyah Memorial but the land is still owned by the Oklahoma Historical Society.

There has just been completed the Panhandle Historical Museum at Goodwell, which was erected by matching funds obtained by state appropriation and private subscriptions. Through joint state-federal action the Robert M. Jones Cemetery in Choctaw County has been preserved for the society. A project in joint state-federal cooperation is the Museum of the Southern Plains Indians at Anadarko. There are certain federal institutions worthy of mention, such as the old museum at Fort Sill, the Church at Wheelock, and other Indian schools.

Not many, but some private or municipal centers have been developed and are maintained: the Philbrook Museum at Tulsa, the Gilcrease Foundation near by, Woolaroc at Bartlesville, St. Gregory near Shawnee, the Creek Museum in Okmulgee, the Osage Museum in Pawhuska, and museums or collections at institutions such as Bacone, the University of Oklahoma and Chilocco Indian School.

There are others such as Tobakai Court House near north McAlester, presented by the Okoyohoma Club; the Choctaw Capitol at Tuskahoma; the Chickasaw Capitol at Tishomingo; the Jefferson Davis Memorial of the United Daughters of the Confederacy at Fort Gibson; the Mason Hotel gun collection in Claremore; and places such as the Allen Wright home at Old Boggy Depot, the Quanah Parker home at Cache, and the governor John Brown home near Sasakwa that deserve preservation.

After Dr. Clark thus outlined procedure and attainment, Colonel George H. Shirk called attention to the perishable nature of

\(^1\) This article is the report of a round-table discussion led by Dr. Berlin B. Chapman, Department of History, Oklahoma A. and M. College (Stillwater), during the morning session on May 7th, at the Annual Meeting of the Oklahoma Historical Society held at Tahlequah this year. The following topics were considered during the discussion: (1) Protection of historical centers in the state, (2) Junior historical societies, (3) How can Oklahomans be made history conscious (See Program, 55th Annual Meeting of the Oklahoma Historical Society, May 7th and 8th, 1951, Tahlequah, Oklahoma).—Ed.
present opportunities to preserve unmarked historic sites, at nominal cost. Colonel Shirk said:

A program for the acquisition of historic spots is of vital importance. I urge this group to give it serious consideration. In the last several years I have visited a number of places where there was formerly located a mission, early school, or some other historic point. Invariably, I would talk with the landowner and feel out the possibility of the purchase of a small tract covering the exact site. Very often the owners would show interest and would indicate that the small piece needed could be purchased at a nominal figure.

I do not have in mind the purchase and development of large historic enterprises or projects that require upkeep, maintenance, custodian services and the like, such as the Will Rogers Memorial. These are wonderfully fine and are now one of the primary assets of our state, but as far as the group here is concerned, I feel that other agencies are available to give them primary consideration.

There are perhaps 75 or 100 locations throughout the state where once there was located something now of vital historic concern. The location of Union Mission in Mayes County is an example. Nothing whatever of the original buildings remain,—just a cemetery. Those interested in Oklahoma history would be remiss if the title to sites such as this were not secured and the exact location dedicated to and reserved for posterity.

Very often the exact site of an early day mission, school, or the like can be found today only by a well or cemetery. No other visible evidence remains. Often the cemetery is overgrown and is adjacent to or a part of a field or other agricultural tract. Naturally, there is a strong temptation to the owner to plow the spot and incorporate it into his other acreage. Once this is done the exact spot is lost forever. If title to that small area, perhaps not more than an acre, could be acquired and placed in the name of the Oklahoma Historical Society, that tendency would of course be lessened. Moreover, the exact location is then and there pinpointed with its exact legal description. The question of maintenance is not involved.

There is not too much time left. Those of you who have visited any of these old pitifully overgrown cemeteries or crumbling masonry footings know that in another generation or two they will be gone and the last vestage of anything definite will have then disappeared. I urge that each in his own locality check on possible sites or acquisitions of this nature; and that an overall coordinated program be instituted to place these titles in the name of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

After the urgency of the situation and a practical course of action were set forth by Shirk, General W. S. Key called attention to the wide-spread responsibility of the work of preserving historic sites. He called on all members of the society to rededicate themselves in an effort to develop opportunities in their respective communities. He called attention to the great number of military sites, and also urged a more extensive marking of non-military locations.

Dr. Emma Estill-Harbour pointed out that although the Oklahoma Historical Society has purchased land, it now has no state funds for that purpose. She said the society needs the help of organizations and individuals.
Doctor Clark carried the idea further by showing the unfortunate tendency to rely mainly on state acquisition and protection of historical centers. He noted that the prime motivation must come from local groups. Clark said:

It is a false premise to place full responsibility on a State agency and all the expenses associated with the care, maintenance, and interest in such properties. As an illustration, we may note that in 1947 citizens in the Tahlequah vicinity came to Governor Turner and persuaded him to approve the legislative appropriation of $15,000 for the purchase, care, and maintenance of the George M. Murrell home at Park Hill, known as the "Hunters' Home." This should be used as an "Historical Shrine and Indian Art Center." All kinds of fancy promises were made the Governor in regard to what the local citizens would do in cooperation with the state. The appropriation was made and "lo and behold" we found that the cost of the property amounted almost to the total sum of the appropriation. Our agency is meeting today with the local citizens to find out at this late date if it will be possible to revive some of the enthusiasm expressed by them so notably a few years ago when they had the State to take over.

As another illustration, I refer to a project of some years ago in which I had the fortunate association of General Key and Dr. Grant Foreman. Dr. Foreman and I visited many cemeteries in Indian Territory. I recall two trips made to the place where Alligator, Seminole leader, is buried between Okay and Gibson Station. Last summer I wanted to get a picture of the tombstone, but was unable to find the spot because of the snarl of weeds and sprouts.

I was present in the mid-thirties when Dr. Foreman dedicated the beautiful marker near the falls of the Verdigris at Okay. I hoped to get a picture of it last summer but the Johnson grass was higher than the monument. I mention these examples in earnest solicitation, for local pride and interest must be fostered and maintained in the preservation of historical centers.

In order to gain state support for the preservation of historical spots, it is necessary to appear before the legislative council and convince a legislative committee of their importance. Then if the local senator and representatives are interested, they can add their weight to the desires of the local groups and help steer a bill through the legislature providing for state maintenance.

Miss Muriel H. Wright observed that in a state-wide program to arouse public interest in the preservation of historic sites, there is much to be considered. She said:

We might lose ourselves in the mere discussion of all these angles and overreach our aims in this meeting because our Oklahoma program covers a wide region—450 miles from northwest to southeast with many places that should be preserved. While we should think about all the ways to arouse interest, and we should keep the state-wide program in mind, I think that we should here decide definitely on the preservation of a few points to get the program started.

We are all proud of what has been done by legislative appropriations, state and federal, in preservation of noted places in northeastern Oklahoma—Ft. Gibson, Sequoyah's cabin, the Murrell home—yet four places come to mind about which something should be done at once. I think of Ft. Towsen, Ft. Washita, Ft. Arbuckle, in southeastern and southern Oklahoma; and old Ft. Nichols near the Oklahoma-New Mexico line in the Panhandle.

A limited acreage should be purchased at each of these places to preserve the remaining ruins there.

Among many old cemeteries or burial plots on privately owned property, that should be preserved, some should have attention immediately. Among these are the old Worcester cemetery at Park Hill, the old Spencer Academy burial plot, and the old Ft. Coffee graves. Some of these places doubtless would be donated to the State for historical purposes, or can be purchased at small cost. There need be no immediate expense for rebuilding or erecting monuments at these places. Such can be a part of our program in the future if necessary, but the sites mentioned should be acquired without delay or they will be lost to the state—the remaining stones carried away, perhaps the land plowed or the sites otherwise destroyed.

The matter of maintenance of these places should be a part of local, patriotic projects through aroused interest of local patriotic societies, of Boy Scouts, of service clubs and of civic clubs. Some of these organisations would undoubtedly take pride in supporting a move in their local communities to set aside and preserve the historic sites either by securing the donation of the sites by the owners, or by raising funds for their purchase. Such local activities mean the life of the program that we are discussing. But the first thing is to make a definite move and concentrate on a few very important sites to be preserved.

Mr. Thomas J. Harrison, of Pryor, stressed the matter of local interest in marking and maintaining historic sites, and reviewed the fine work that has been accomplished in Mayes County, in his remarks:

All of the things that have been said are good except I feel that we are not stressing local responsibility enough and I am sure if we undertake the question too much as a State project, it will have a tendency to lessen our local interest along all phases of the question we are discussing, to-wit: 1. State protection of historical centers; 2. Junior Historical Societies in the State; 3. How can Oklahomans be made historically conscious.

I feel that in a small way we have at least endeavored to take care of the condition in Mayes County locally. It is true that there are some centers and some projects that are state-wide in scope and need cooperation and assistance through our various state departments but even then the interest must be initiated locally and we can not state too strongly the question of local activity.

It is physically impossible for the state to undertake so many historical interests throughout the various counties of the state and, of course, funds are not available for such a vast program.

The State has very wisely placed markers in various parts of the state and I hope will continue to place more of them as they are rendering a real service and there will be an increased need and demand for more markers. There are other events and places that need and, I am sure, will receive state assistance through our organization, the State Planning Board and the Legislature. But the program proper, as I see it, must be local in scope.

In our county, Mayes County, we have endeavored for many years to create interest in our historical background and to some extent we have been successful. It was purely a local interest that placed a marker at the grave of Nathaniel Pryor, southeast of Pryor; it was local interest and local funds that purchased part of the site of the old Union Mission, southeast of Pryor, and by so doing the Historical Society actually owns
the burial site of the Reverend Epaphrus Chapman's grave and the location where was situated the first printing press and school that were connected with the Union Mission site. We do not own the land on which the Mission proper was located with the various cabins that once surrounded the ground.

We cooperate with the public school and at every opportunity we offer assistance to the boys and girls interested in historical essays and other historical matter. We constantly are on guard to suggest interest in American and local history as a patriotic undertaking. We do likewise through the Public Library of the City, both for boys and girls and adults.

We had the pleasure of aiding the Senior Class last year wherein they published their High School Annual around the historical places and historical characters of this county and this part of the state. And, to some extent, this idea will be carried into the annual of this year. We, at all times, endeavor to have some information in our office and in our public library to supply the historical needs of the public. Just the past week it was our pleasure to assist perhaps fifteen or twenty essay writers of our school system and we find in doing so, we very often became better acquainted with the history of our locality ourselves.

Again, I was Mayor of Pryor a number of years during the W.P.A. days in which towns and localities were carrying on projects in cooperation with the Federal Government. I found then that we would always fare much better if we showed more interest in such projects and had some funds of our own to put into them, and Pryor still has projects that will be with us for years to come. They are substantial and useful and speak for our local interests.

Whatever we may do, I would say create as much local interest as possible, encourage as much local expenditures as possible, calling on the State for cooperation in projects that are more of a state-wide nature both for State influence and State funds are needed in keeping with the importance of a State nature.

I fully believe that each county and each locality will be able to receive cooperation through the various State offices to the extent that we are interested and manifest a real enthusiasm for the project at hand.

The Twin Mounds Battlefield, the chief project of the Payne County Historical Society, was reviewed as follows by Dr. Berlin B. Chapman:

Two acres of the first Civil War battlefield in present Oklahoma were donated to the Payne County Historical Society on December 30, 1950, for the erection of an historical monument. The site is sixteen miles east of Stillwater on State Highway 61. There on November 19, 1861, a force of 1400 Confederates under Colonel Douglas H. Cooper attacked about 2,000 loyal Creeks, who under Opoth-le-yoho-la's leadership were en route to Kansas.

The historical evidence concerning this site is given by Doctor Angie Debo in The Chronicles, summer, 1949; and a summary of the evidence is in The Chronicles, winter, 1950-51. Local interest is evidenced by the cooperation of the Daughters of the American Revolution and the United Daughters of the Confederacy. Professor Dwight E. Stevens of the architecture department of Oklahoma A. & M. College prepared a sketch of the monument, and the horticulture department will landscape the site. In June the third annual program will be held, dating from the letter of Doctor Grant
Foreman in 1948 stating he was satisfied that the battle site had been “correctly located.”

When the question arose as to various means by which local interest can be stimulated for the preservation of historical centers and for other purposes, Dr. Anna Lewis said:

The Oklahoma Historical Society should sponsor a junior historical society to encourage high school students and other young people to become interested in our state history. There is no better way to get young people interested in history than for them to see how it is made. They should visit historic spots, write articles concerning pioneers who live in their community, and there should be a Junior Magazine in which their articles could be published. I urge the Oklahoma Historical Society to appoint a committee to see what can be done in fostering and working with a junior group that will later be the feeder of the older group.

Dr. Charles Evans, who had chosen three topics for this program, and was most interested in the junior historical societies, said:

As early as 1946 your present Secretary of the Oklahoma Historical Society set up a very pointed and broad program for developing Junior Historical Societies through the State. As one who had met as many high school youths as any man within its confines, he knew that the last year of Junior High School and the succeeding years of the Senior High School held the best and the most genuine citizens of Oklahoma and America. High school students, wherever he met them, were addressed as Oklahoma citizens because they were not only faithful workers in civic affairs, but also the very substance of those regiments that on the battlefields defended America with their blood.

This junior historical society plan was based upon bringing the youth in the high schools close about the Oklahoma Historical Society in developing in such cities as Guthrie, El Reno, Kingfisher, Norman, and others, well-organized historical groups which would receive immediate and concrete assistance from the Society throughout the school year. A set of by-laws and regulations were given over into the hands of the organized junior historical society and they were examined and were accepted after discussion by each junior unit.

Of course, one of the very strongest centers of the program was the sponsorship to be selected by the City Superintendent of Schools. He could call one of the teachers of history, the principal, or any able citizen to act as leader. It was very true that the very life of a junior historical society in the public schools must rest upon the high and zealous interest displayed by the superintendent of city schools and the high school principal in these groups.

It may just as well be said here that in the effort that was carried on by the Society for a year, it was revealed that the city school systems were impregnated with the ancient slogan and crystallized view that the curriculum made out by those authorized to make such curricula in the State needed very little, if any, assistance from any outside forces or powers as to the substance of the curriculum and the manner of approach to it. This, of course, has been the bane of all historical development since the Middle Ages.

8 The site of the “Battle of Round Mountain” has not been definitely and officially determined under the auspices of the Oklahoma Historical Society (June, 1951), since the exact location of this first battle of the Civil War, within the boundaries of Oklahoma, is still controversial among some leading historians and investigators.

—Ed.
The Society went into the archives and developed new and vital history of each city, town and the whole county of many of the surrounding cities, towns, and counties of Oklahoma.

The project was given closest care and faithful effort by the Secretary, even to the point of several personal trips, but the project faded away because of the crystallized forms of education found now in the American public schools.

Dr. Angie Debo spoke of the pleasure and profit she had received on a visit to Dr. and Mrs. Grant Foreman, noted historians, with residence in Muskogee. Dr. Debo stated that the one thing that seemed to be a very important obsession of the mind of Dr. Foreman in his octogenarian years was to urge the Oklahoma Historical Society and all the leading centers of history in Oklahoma to recognize that their largest aim should be the gathering of important history resting now in the hidden places over the state. These must be found and time is of the essence. Dr. Debo read before the round-table conference the following important paper written by Dr. Grant Foreman:

Mr. President and Members of the Oklahoma Historical Society:

I am very happy to participate in the round-table discussion assigned to this meeting. I am taking the liberty of casting my part of the discussion in the field in which I am best acquainted, that is, the discovery and preservation of historical material calculated to preserve records of Oklahoma history to be made available for research by persons interested in Oklahoma history.

Over a period of nearly fifty years, I have pursued a study of this field and I have some very definite ideas about it. Primarily, that there is a vast amount of historical material sequestered in many places where it is likely to be destroyed by fire if it is not secured and placed in a fire-proof repository such as this Society offers to the public. Time after time in my research I have quizzed people whom I have suspected of unconsciously harboring such material only to receive this reply, "Yes we had some old papers that grand-dad had saved but when the house burned they were destroyed." For a concrete illustration, I might mention that something like twenty years ago I located a daughter of Jesse Chisholm, named Mrs. Thomas, living a mile or two south of Prague, Oklahoma. I asked her if Jesse Chisholm left any old papers when he died. She said, "Yes there was a trunk full that we kept in the house for many years until the house burned and they were destroyed." There is almost no limit to the widely scattered places where historical material may be found to reward the searcher for Oklahoma history. Even in far off London I located items identified with the American History. In the British Museum, I found letters written by English emigrants describing their new surroundings in Illinois, Wisconsin and Iowa, which the publishers of their Historical Magazines were grateful to me for preparing for publication.

I was reminded a few days ago of the destruction of valuable historical material, by the visit of Mr. Jim Porter, grandson of the late Creek Chief Pleasant Porter, recognized as one of the most scholarly men ever born in Oklahoma. I knew him well and knew that on his death he left much material connected with the history of the Creek Nation, the Indian Territory, and the State of Oklahoma. On his death all his papers came into possession of his son Will, from whom I had hoped to secure them.

4 Notes by Dr. Charles Evans, Secretary of the Oklahoma Historical Society.
Will who gave me one reason to hope, lived at the old home near Leonard in a large mansion, which was destroyed by fire a few years ago together with all the contents including Chief Porter's papers.

I am now hoping to secure the papers left by Chief Checotah through his recently deceased grandson in Okmulgee. Our secretary can tell you of the state of negotiations with the present holders of those papers. I asked him to present the matter to Mr. Peterson, the member of our board who lives in Okmulgee where the papers are.

The most shocking destruction of historical data that I can recall is partly due to the delay of our Society. It was brought to my attention by Miss Wright soon after it occurred. She was engaged in the preparation of an article on an important phase of Oklahoma history when she needed to consult some official records that should have been in the archives of the Indian Superintendency in Muskogee. These documents were concerned with the negotiations between the Indians and the Government, looking to the allotment of tribal lands. At a certain stage of the efforts of the Dawes Commission in the early days the Commission found that it was not invested with necessary authority to complete its work and on June 28, 1898, Congress enacted what was known as the Curtis Act, under which the Commission was implemented with needed authority which resulted in the execution of treaties with all of the Five Civilized Tribes, that resulted in the allotment of tribal lands. These old records were deposited in a helter-skelter confusion in the attic in the Federal Building in Muskogee. Judge Williams and I and the late Congressman Hastings, were instrumental in the preparation of a bill and its passage by Congress authorizing the removal of these old records from Muskogee and other Agencies over the state to the Archives of the Oklahoma Historical Society. Under my direction, Mrs. Looney, our Archivist, inventoried the material placed at our disposal by the Indian Superintendent and when we had something over 50,000 items inventoried so we could give a receipt to the Superintendent, Mrs. Looney took them to Oklahoma City and flat filed them in the steel cases where they now are.

It happened that the documents Miss Wright desired to see were in a separate part of the building at Muskogee and had not yet been delivered to Mrs. Looney when it was determined by someone in the office of the Superintendent to get rid of a lot of trash, having no historical value and to that end certain routine led to authority to destroy a large quantity of miscellaneous stubs and other junk said to be of no value for historical purposes. With this authority, employees assembled and hauled away from the building, several truck loads of such material but in doing so, carelessly included much valuable material pertaining to the negotiations between the Government and the Indians, pursuant to the terms of the Curtis Act, which was needed by Miss Wright in her writing. When she ran up against this situation she consulted the people in charge of the records and was told that the material she desired to see had been hauled off to the incinerator and burned. I reported the matter to Judge Williams, our President, to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, and to the National Archivist, who had approved the requisition for the destruction of designated useless material but to no avail.

It seems to me that these unfortunate experiences ought to strengthen the resolution of all of us in the Society, to exert every effort to interest the public in availing itself of the facilities our Society offers for the preservation of every scrap of material that may enable the public of the future to read our History and record it for future generations.

Almost as tragic was the fate of a vast collection of material accumulated by Choctaw Chief Peter Pitchlynn. Nearly twenty years ago, my friend, Dr. John R. Swanton of the Bureau of Ethnology, told me that Pitchlynn's daughter, a spinster, a rather eccentric old lady in Washington-
ton, had all her father's papers and library which he thought she would be glad to sell. With a letter of introduction from her friend, Senator Gore, I went to see her in her home in Washington. I was amazed at the amount of material she had, which occupied almost the whole floor in her front room. The library was in a separate room. I think I made several visits to her place and discussed the matter with her but I was not prepared to pay what she wanted for the material. In a little while a man who understood the money value of these papers and who had plenty to spend, made a deal with her and later when I saw some of these items advertised in the price list of Goodspeeds and other dealers in expensive collections, I realized that the purchaser of this material from Miss Pitchlyn was only interested in them for their money value and that there had been no hopes of my securing them for our Society.

On another occasion Dr. Swanton told me of a lot of material assembled by a distinguished Army Officer, General Ethan Allen Hitchcock, who as a Major, was detailed by the War Department, to visit the Indian Territory and investigate reports that the immigrant Indians had been badly treated by those having charge of the emigration from the east. Major Hitchcock arrived in the Indian Territory in November, 1841, and began his investigation. The result of his inquiries appears in a series of nine diaries which came into possession of his niece, Mrs. Bessie B. Croffut. It was in her declining years that Doctor Swanton told me of her possession of these diaries. When I went to see Mrs. Croffut in the Library of Congress where she kept the Hitchcock papers, she very graciously offered to copy the diaries for me when I told her I hoped to publish them in book form which I eventually did in a book I called *A Traveler in Indian Territory*, published by the University of Oklahoma Press in 1930.

In conclusion may I refer to the action of the Board of Directors of January 26, 1933, requesting me to prepare an article for the succeeding issue of *The Chronicles* giving information about certain material of historical value appropriate for the Society to endeavor to secure for our Archives; and the reports were subsequently prepared and filed by me under the title a "Survey of Tribal Records in the Archives of the United States Government in Oklahoma." This report the Board elected to preserve in a printed pamphlet form instead of including it in *The Chronicles* and has been part of the records of this Society since March, 1933.

For the first time in its fifty-eight annual meetings, the Oklahoma Historical Society at Tahlequah on May 7 broadcast part of its program. This was a fifteen minute round-table discussion concerning the services the society can render the people of Oklahoma, and how the National Archives and the Archives of Oklahoma University can best coordinate their work in this regard.

Participating in the discussion were Miss Kathryn M. Murphy, Assistant Archivist of the National Archives; Dr. Gaston Litton, Archivist of Oklahoma University; Dr. Charles Evans, Secretary of the Oklahoma Historical Society; and Dr. B. B. Chapman, co-ordinator. R. M. Mountcastle arranged for the program to be heard on the Muskogee stations, KBIX and KMUS. A tape recording of the program, preceded by an introduction by Dr. Evans, was placed in the Oklahoma Historical Society by the History Department of Oklahoma A. and M. College.