

THE TERRITORIAL PRESIDENTS OF OKLAHOMA A. and M. COLLEGE

*By Dr. Harry E. Thompson**

On account of the lack of elementary training for students at A. & M. college, the preparatory department was created and I was placed at its head as principal and served as such for the eight years I was there. J. M. Halbrook, Miss Ella Hunter, and Miss May Overstreet were my assistants. I, too, had charge of summer classes in training them for teaching in the public schools. I taught free-hand and mechanical drawing, the forerunner of the art department.

The first college president was Robert J. Barker who was born in West Virginia and came from his home in Missouri to Oklahoma in the Run of April 22, 1889. He got a claim at Crescent in the edge of the blackjacks. He was a congenial, companionable, intelligent citizen, so his neighbors elected him a member of the first territorial legislature. There he was recognized as a leader and in the distribution of favors he was appointed president of the A. & M. board of regents.

A provision of law made the president of the board ex-officio president of the college. Barker resigned as president of the board but became college president. He was a warm personal friend of those he liked and I was one of his close friends. We boarded at the same place and shared the same room.

At a meeting of the board of regents in Stillwater on November 25, 1891, Barker was "elected president of the faculty and professor of moral and mental science." In the summer of 1893 he and I prepared the first A. & M. college catalog. It has forty-eight pages and "is a thing of beauty and a joy forever." Barker helped teach the basic college courses. He was not a college man but a graduate of a normal school. He was a good executive and got along well with the board, faculty, and the employees of the experiment station. His influence over students and faculty was good and all liked him.

A. C. Magruder, first A. & M. professor of agriculture and horticulture, joined the faculty at the time Barker became president.

* This article has been sent to *The Chronicles* by Dr. B. B. Chapman, Oklahoma A. and M., who kindly contributed the following statement on the writer: "Dr. Harry E. Thompson is the only living member of the first faculty of Oklahoma A. and M. college. He served from 1893-1901. Subsequently he was Assistant State Bank Commissioner, and Assistant State Auditor. For several years he has been a physician in McPherson, Kansas. He is a member of the Half-Century club of the college, and last spring (1954) he was awarded the 50-year gold pin of the college."—Ed.

Because of his position, Magruder was allowed to keep at the Red Barn a gray stallion called "Damit," a fine saddle-horse. Magruder was a good horseman and looked the part on "Damit." He let me ride the horse and also drive him double with another horse. Once some boys put burs under the saddle, and "Damit" nearly bucked me off.

It was during Barker's administration that the Cherokee Outlet was opened, September 16, 1893. About half of the resident population of Stillwater moved away when the opening occurred. Joseph W. McNeal was president of the Guthrie national bank and was a prominent Republican. He had purchased the Stillwater bonds which enabled Stillwater to secure the college. About the time of the opening of the Cherokee Outlet McNeal had a mortgage of \$450 on a 20-acre tract south of where Old Central was to be built. The tract had been platted for a townsite addition and in those panic days of '93 McNeal offered it to me for \$450. Prior to that time I had no experience in townsites and I did not make the purchase. Judge Sterling P. King then bought the tract and in due time made a hat-full of money out of it.

Barker was a Republican and when the democratic administration under Cleveland came, he went out as president. His term ended June 15, 1894, the day Old Central was dedicated. The good that men do live after them and the evil is interred with their bones. So let it be with my friend, President Barker. I agree with Professor Frank Waugh who said: "Barker's bitterest political rivals never dared accuse him of the slightest trickery. He never got credit for his really good qualities."

Barker was succeeded by Major Henry Alvord, a Virginia gentleman and a military character of the Civil War. After the war the government sent him to Indian Territory to supervise wild Indians who had been making raids into Texas to steal cattle and horses. Later he held a government job in Washington.

Through the influence of the agriculture department Alvord was named president of A. & M. to promote the government's plans in carrying out the provisions of the Hatch and Morrill acts. Alvord and I roomed and boarded at the same place so I knew him quite well and liked him. He got along pretty well with his work till he and John Clark, president of the board, disagreed. Then he terminated his presidency of seven months and returned to Washington to a position under Secretary James Wilson. I met him a few years later at a meeting of the national education association in Washington.

Edward Danridge Murdaugh was recommended to the board of regents by Alvord, and became the third president. He came from a good family. His father had been bishop of the Episcopal organization in Virginia. "E.D.M." was a handsome fellow and

had been a gay Lothario in his callow days. He had been president of a college on the Eastern Shore in Maryland.

At A. & M. Murdaugh never really got into the lives of the students for he served only six months. He was a misfit at Stillwater for he didn't know what was required under the law establishing A. & M. colleges. He lacked executive ability but he was a good teacher. He and I boarded at the same place and occupied adjoining rooms, and we were warm companions.

Murdaugh went on a camping trip with a group including John Clark. Murdaugh got in bad on the trip and his term as president ended on January 17, 1895. In March, 1895, Clark ended his two years of membership on the A. & M. board of regents.

My old friend, John L. Mitch, was president of the board having jurisdiction of the Central normal school at Edmond. He asked me if I would recommend Murdaugh for the presidency of that school. I recommended him and he was employed and served a half dozen years. He was a good teacher there and an efficient president.¹

Murdaugh was succeeded at A. & M. College by George Espy Morrow who was president from 1895 to 1899. I do not recall how many or what degrees he had but he had been called to Iowa State College, at Ames, to put it on the map as a model in the line of agriculture. He had been a prominent agricultural editor and he was a leader in all lines of progress in agriculture. He was at the head of that department at the University of Illinois for some years and had associates whom he had prepared to take his place when he was elected president of Oklahoma A. & M. college.

I loved and admired Morrow for his fine character, personality and splendid attainments which so fitly prepared him for service to A. & M. college. Only one thing, his advanced age, limited his services. At public gatherings where he spoke he showed his superiority over the heads of other institutions. I went with him on most of his trips as he depended on me to make arrangements and to care for him, and he was always grateful. For a time he and I were roommates in Stillwater.

Morrow was the first president to bring his family to Stillwater, build a house and identify himself with the people he served. His wife and two daughters were a real asset to college life, both to students and faculty members. His daughter Grace, a graduate of the University of Illinois, came to Stillwater about a year before there were any A. & M. graduates. While her fiance finished his

¹ See *Appendix A* for notes on the work of E. D. Murdaugh in the educational field of Oklahoma.

university work she did the first post graduate work in A. & M. history.²

Morrow was a fine executive for he always knew what to do for all factions. His lectures were "epics" of science and progress. His visits to foreign countries like Holland and Denmark were sources of information in all his teaching. Especially in England he profited by demonstrations he had seen in farming. He recommended to the board men for carrying on the work of the college as it should be done and was done by experts. After four years of fine service he realized that he was failing physically so he resigned and returned to his farm at Paxton, Illinois. He died soon after retirement.

An outstanding monument to his memory are the Morrow Plots established on the campus of the University of Illinois in 1877, demonstrating through the years the value of rotation of crops. The plots are said to be next to the oldest in the world. Morrow was also through his editorial writings given credit for the establishment of the Chicago Fat Stock Show, an annual event.

In 1898, during the Morrow administration, Angelo C. Scott was elected to the chair of English at A. & M. college. I had known Scott since the Run of '89 when we went to Oklahoma City. There I knew him personally in church and civic work. I was in his Sunday school class in the first presbyterian church. Later my wife was in the class and we greatly admired him. He was U. S. commissioner, a lawyer, and he owned the "Angelo," one of the first hotels in Oklahoma City. With his brother, W. W. Scott, he founded Oklahoma City's first newspaper, the *Oklahoma Times*.

Scott's great oratorical ability made him much in demand by the public. I think one of his best lectures was, "The Mistakes of Jeremiah." This lecture in Scott's handwriting is now in the Scott

² Grace Morrow Seely, La Jolla, California, furnished the following data concerning her father: George Espy Morrow was born October 19, 1840, entered Maineville Academy in 1856, and taught two terms of school before the Civil War. He volunteered in 1861 as a private, was wounded at Perryville, Kentucky, on October 8, 1862, and was discharged in 1863. In 1866 he graduated from the Law School of Michigan University.

He began editorial work on the *Western Rural* at Detroit in 1865, married Sara Maria Gifford on April 11, 1867, and removed to Chicago with the *Western Rural* in 1868. In 1869 he was editor and publisher of the *Western Farmer* at Madison, Wisconsin, but returned to the *Western Rural* in Chicago in 1875. The next year he was professor of agriculture in Iowa State College. In 1877 he became a professor in the University of Illinois, and in 1881 took charge of the two university farms.

In 1888 he became first agriculturist of the reorganized experiment station of Illinois, and in 1891 president of its board of directors. In 1894 he resigned the professorship after a service of eighteen years. In the meantime he had visited Europe in 1879, 1889, and in 1892 he had visited the Pacific coast. He died at Paxton, Illinois, March 26, 1900.

collection in the A. & M. library, and is listed in the inventory of the 294 items of the collection.

In 1898 when the chair of English at A. & M. was vacant, President Morrow was told by the board of regents to get someone from Oklahoma, and he asked me as one of the original Oklahomans who I would recommend. Without hesitation I suggested Scott. The board was in session so they phoned him and he came over the next day and was interviewed and elected to the chair of English. He filled the position with distinction and then served as college president from 1899-1908. It has been my fortune to know personally all the presidents of A. & M. college.

APPENDIX A

At Central State Normal School Murdaugh (1895) suggested the bronze and blue as school colors. This was one of the first state schools to adopt colors, and they have been retained. Murdaugh brought the first educational "doctor" to Central, and he inaugurated the first summer school there. He posted eleven rules for the faculty, and sixteen rules for students. He was an instructor at Central from 1917 until his death in 1925.

In the preparation of this article, Dr. B. B. Chapman was directed by Dr. Emma Estill-Harbour to an excellent unpublished study made in 1941 by Professor Francis Coram Oakes who knew Murdaugh as president of the Normal School.

Oakes said in part: "Murdaugh was directing head in organizing the Northwestern Normal School at Alva in 1897. Following his incumbency at Edmond he became superintendent of the Woodward schools for a year, then president of the State Normal School in Frostburg, Maryland; and later, president of the Oklahoma Military Academy at Claremore. Subsequently, he was president of Southeastern, and finally a member of the faculty of Central College at Edmond, where he closed his rich career as a school man. He maintained his great ability as a public speaker until long after his seventieth year. He was a princely character, always ranking much above his environment. A disciplinarian of the old school, he never faltered from his position. That the education process worked best under strict tutelage was his birthright and treasured inheritance. A southerner to the manor born, he never betrayed his Virginia antecedents! Oklahoma has known but one Edmund Danridge Murdaugh, and his name will linger long in the advancing years of thousands of Oklahomans!

"It was Murdaugh who first traveled over the Territory extensively to advertise the Normal School. During the summer of 1899 he visited 17 counties to make 60 speeches for the school, with the result of a 25 per cent increase in the autumn enrollment. He knew normal schools; and it was his good fortune, as well as Central's, largely to fashion Central as a standard teacher-training institution. It was he who first projected a six-year course of study for the Normal; it was he that established, tentatively, the training department; the oratorical association, the Athenian debating club; the 'Philomath', the school's first literary publication; the campus beautiful—the large evergreen in front of Old North Tower being a part of his handiwork; the music and speech departments; together with the custom of holding the meetings of educational groups on the Normal premises. It can be said with truth, that Central has few major characteristics now that were not initiated by Murdaugh. He was the first great builder of the institution, which is today called Central State College."