

## THOMAS T. MONTGOMERY

By Charles Evans

Someone has said that the best study of mankind is man. "Know thyself" has been the chief challenge to man's progress though the ages. The substance of life takes the form of birth, growth and death. Arranged about these, biographers present a life as a thing too often composed of dates, conquests and acquisitions. The chief and the all enduring part of man, his character, his impression upon others and finally the residue of good, his contribution to the eternal verities are left in fragments to be picked up by subsequent history or rest forever in silence.

One of the master spirits of the Bible says, "Man that is born of woman is of few days and full of trouble; he cometh forth like a flower and is cut down; he fleeth also as a shadow and continueth not." Perhaps this is as complete a story of man, all embracing and fitting all human beings, as has ever been offered. At least if any thinking mortal desires to give a penetrative blow to vanity, cupidity and dishonor, in which too often the life of man has its being, he would find it in this definition offered by Job.

The *Durant Daily Democrat*, in its issue of Sunday, March 21, 1954, states:

Dr. Thomas T. Montgomery, president emeritus of Southeastern State College, passed away Friday night in a local hospital where he had been undergoing treatment for the past week for a heart ailment. He was 72 years of age.

Dr. Montgomery was born in Greenfield, Mo., on October 9, 1882 and spent his life in Missouri and Oklahoma in the teaching profession. He was preceded in death by his wife, who died on October 20, 1932, and by his son, George Montgomery, who passed away last August.

He is survived by his son, Phil Montgomery, of Duncan; his daughter, Miss Jo Anne Montgomery, of New York City; his daughter-in-law and grandsons, Mrs. George Montgomery and Tommy, Joe, and Phil, of Oklahoma City; five sisters, Miss Effie Montgomery, Durant; Mrs. William P. Finley, of South Greenfield, Mo.; Mrs. Ralph E. Duffy, Jefferson City, Mo.; Mrs. R. M. George, Whittier, Calif.; and Mrs. Mattie E. Newman, Bell, Calif.; and a brother, Edward P. Montgomery, of Braggs, Oklahoma.

Dr. Montgomery entered the teaching profession in Missouri in 1901, and from the rural schools there he came to Madill as superintendent of schools in 1905. He served as superintendent there and at Miami and Chickasha until 1939, when he became president of Southeastern. He retired from this position in 1952 and was named president emeritus.

He held the master of science degree, granted by the University of Oklahoma in 1926, and the LL.D. degree from Austin college in 1948.

Included in Dr. Montgomery's activities were the following: a director of the Red River council, Boy Scouts of America; life member of the

Oklahoma Education association; OEA state president in 1937; member of Kappa Delta Pi, National education fraternity; a member of the Presbyterian church, and elder in the First Presbyterian church of Durant; a 32nd degree Mason; past president of the Lions Club; a director of the Oklahoma Historical Society; author of a state government of Oklahoma and an elementary history of Oklahoma, in 1924.

Thus, in brief itemization, is the growth of a truly great educator's life set forth. This tabulates the shadow of this man's deeds, his service and his character. The substance, the forces, the ideals which shaped him and which he shaped, are not here. There are two forces which mold man: heredity and environment. The first may be defined as all things before; the other, all things afterward.

Montgomery is a Scotch name. It is as much a part of Scotland as the heather or its rocky terrain or its clear blue lakes. The family of Dr. Montgomery inherited a love of learning. Out of the rough, thin lands of southwest Missouri, they found a way to send their son, Thomas, through the public schools and gave him an incentive to secure more education which led him to teaching in rural and small town schools.

These days were the formative influences of his life. There, in the meeting with youth, in the buoyancy and joy of a young school master, he fell in love with teaching and the teacher's life. There are just two divisions of teachers or workers among children. One consists of those who do not love the pupil, his associations or his aims; the other, who does.

Young Montgomery became superintendent of the schools in Madill, Marshall County, Oklahoma, in 1905. In that same year, I entered this intensely interesting country as superintendent of the city schools of Ardmore, Carter County, bordering on the county of Marshall. In a short while I met the young leader of education in Madill. He invited me to visit his schools and meet his people. Mark the word *people* because it was the open sesame to his progress and power. Through all the forty years and more he kept steadily in view the truth that to serve the children of the community was to serve all the people of that community and to serve all of the people of that community was to serve the County, the State and the Nation. He made Madill, a small but a strategic county capital, a name to be respected and felt among the best school centers of southern Indian Territory. He did this by using all the modern devices, a standard but flexible curriculum, the employment of efficient teachers, and by obtaining the best buildings and equipment possible. Better than these, he made the life of his pupils and patrons, his life. Each home met him, knew him as its children's helper not merely as their Superintendent. The churches, the social and business clubs found him an ever present help in time of need. His love of sports, even his radiant enthusiasm for hunting and fishing would in themselves have won him the love and respect of all southeastern Oklahomans had he not possessed other values.

In the Summer of 1912, the National Education Association in Chicago took for its central theme: The School—The Community Center. It had taken the leaders of education two hundred years and more to discover that the richest value of any community, rural, town or city was its children. The school was a sequestered thing. Having established it in Boston, in 1636, the people took to business and let the schools fall into the hands of a select few. The school as a center of life with its courses of study, its activities endeavoring to reach into the home, the church and the whole social order which it is doing today, was not discovered until the early years of the twentieth century.

Montgomery was one of the first educators in the new Oklahoma country to adopt the idea that in truth the school should be a Community Center. In a little while he had made himself at Madill a larger influence outside his school room than in it. That is true of every active teacher. He was invited to give his views on this movement and though, never in his modesty claiming any powers of compelling speech, the people and the educational forces always found him convincing. Soon, the new State called him to higher places.

Chickasha, one of the promising cities of Southern Oklahoma, with an inspiring and confident citizenship, as revealed in their planting among them, The Oklahoma College for Women in 1909, called the school man from Madill and Dr. Montgomery began a work as City Superintendent that in a little while captured the attention of the progressive people of the whole State.

The progress of modern education in Oklahoma may be divided into two parts: First, the Period of Foundation, stretching from 1889 to 1918; Second, the Period of Oil Wealth and Standardization, reaching from 1918 to the present day.

#### THE PERIOD OF FOUNDATION

In the first period, the school term grew from three or five months to six and eight and then on to the nine and ten months terms. Salaries, in the grades from \$30.00 to \$60.00; principals and superintendents from \$75.00 to \$150.00.

The writer of this article as first president of the Oklahoma Education Association (elected in December 1908) brought O. J. Kern of Winnebago County, Illinois, to sell the new state, Oklahoma, on the Consolidated School and he sold it so well, it moved rapidly into being under the laws of Oklahoma. The results were more school money, better buildings, better apparatus, higher wages for teachers. Three more teacher training schools were added in this period, Tahlequah, Ada and Durant. Here better transportation, better roads, more automobiles and inter-urbans appeared. In 1905 the Glen Pool oil boom struck and the people of the whole Oklahoma

region were amazed. All institutions of higher learning found their rooms and halls filling with school teachers. The Central State Normal at Edmond attracted attention. Though a town of some 1,800 people, it saw the teacher training school in its midst grow in enrollment from 550 in 1911 to 3,420 in 1916.

#### THE PERIOD OF OIL WEALTH AND STANDARDIZATION

About 1918, a group of able and aspiring school men concluded that the only way to break up the indifference with which the government of Oklahoma treated the schools, and the only way it could be cured, was by teachers entering the government. The group met in the city of Durant and drew up some resolutions setting forth that a new era of progress and potent wealth appearing was enriching all the agricultural, commercial and mineral resources of the State; that its oil and gas fields, fast spreading out over the state, attracting attention of the world, were bringing taxable wealth many times more than was possessed in the beginning of statehood in 1907. These resolutions boldly stated that while some things had been done to enlarge the base and strengthen the structure of the educational system, still school buildings were too few and inadequate, teachers' salaries were shamefully low, standards for teachers were by no means high enough and that the school system from bottom to top, despite this new wealth, seemed to be Oklahoma's "forgotten child." Then it was boldly set forth that in present and future elections, legislators and governors and all political factors standing out clearly for better educational laws and more moneys for education should receive the support of the several thousands of teachers in the state.

In less than five years out of the twelve or more who signed those resolutions, some eight of them were in high positions of educational leadership. Dr. Montgomery was one of these. In September 1919, the Superintendent of the Schools of Chickasha was honored with a place on the State Board of Education, serving with R. H. Wilson, State Superintendent, W. F. Dodson, Secretary, J. M. Sandlin, the Reverend R. F. Brewer, W. J. Marshall, A. H. Burris and J. L. Newman. While he might not have appeared in such high places as some of the men who assisted in shaping the resolution and who began with him to fashion the future policies and progress of education in Oklahoma yet no plan was laid, no fundamental steps were taken for more than thirty years thereafter in the school world of this State without Dr. Montgomery's advice and assistance. Before this period that began about 1918, the school teacher stood with his hat in his hand outside the doors of government in Oklahoma, held out his hand and took without back talk most anything governors and legislatures saw fit to give. After that, steadily growing through the years until this good hour—1955—the teacher,

as an organized power, has demanded much of the political forces of the state and has received rich educational gifts.<sup>1</sup>

From 1920 to 1950, Oklahoma has expanded in wealth until it has become for its years, the wonder and admiration of America. In these years, the teachers of Oklahoma have developed steadily into a sensitive, creative and potently organized unit, not surpassed perhaps by any educational group in any state of America. If you want any proof of this, read, look about you, watch your elections and your government. This, though there may appear at certain points some weakness and poor thinking, is as it should be. *Who in all the land are more devoted to duty, toil any more arduously and lift the aim of youth toward honor, justice and truth higher than do the teachers in Oklahoma and America.*

Perhaps his unceasing work of bringing the people near to the schools and moving the schools close in about the government of Oklahoma, for thirty years must be rated the greatest contribution Dr. Montgomery gave to education.

For fifty years it has been given to me to meet all the schools, elementary, secondary, and the colleges and university of Oklahoma as much and as often as anyone living within the confines of the state. Montgomery's spirit, plans and power in conquering any field of education was exemplified to the highest degree, in his administration as President of Southeastern State College at Durant. The writer of this article entered Durant often before those brave and forward-looking citizens of that city possessed its Southeastern State College. When they secured this institution it was placed at the remote edge of the town. Its one building was almost hidden by grass and trees. With unrestrained zeal and high faith of the citizens of Durant, a building would be added to the campus every few years but the growth of the Southeastern College for teachers in all phases was painfully slow.

Montgomery was elected President of Southeastern State College in 1939. In a little while, anyone residing in Oklahoma City and visiting the legislatures on school business, as I was doing at that

---

<sup>1</sup>In 1925, for example, a need for assistance for an essential and better school in the rural and small town districts, some \$500,000.00 was reluctantly appropriated by the Legislature. Today, the Oklahoma Education Association has grown to a membership of 20,000 teachers in the state, and the legislative appropriation for public schools reached the large sum of \$30,000,000.00 in 1954. Other outstanding points in the Oklahoma field of education provided since about 1918 include (1) two more years added to the curriculum of teachers' colleges; (2) the O.E.A. re-organized for professional and political action; (3) gradation of rural and small town schools by use of the score card; (4) State school boards recognized by the O.E.A. as regular units in all meetings on education; (5) State aid for equalizing weak schools; (6) co-ordination of higher education in 1941 for an all State college system; (7) enlargement of the statewide program of P.T.A.; (8) special needs in the public schools financed by money obtained from such foundations as the Rosenwald Fund, the Slater Fund and the Jeannes Fund.

time, it was clear that the Durant educational institution was getting larger appropriations than many schools of this class, and that two buildings were being secured for Southeastern when other schools of like kind was getting none. In a further time it was discovered that the quiet and unassuming College President at Durant, was received by the legislators as one who knew what he wanted and offered the proof of his needs so plain and so palatable that the legislature was letting him set a pace for expansion of Southeastern not found there before and seldom at any other educational point of the state.

Just a few months before the demise of Dr. Montgomery, I visited the city of Durant and he took me on a visit to his buildings and grounds. The campus, vastly enlarged, was alluring and resplendent with green velvety lawns, adorned in orderly fashion with flowering shrubs, borders and plots of varied flowers, and all this dominated by an over-influence of the use of the Magnolia. The President told me with justified pride how the pupil life, together with the faculty, had joined him in making these now spacious grounds into this Magnolia world.

Hundreds of these magnolias, many advanced in years, were in full bloom and as I traced the wonderful beauty of these ivory-tinted, gorgeous flowers over against the marvelous rich green of the leaves, it came to me that this man who had loved this institution, not only as a center from which to distribute the best trained life he could give to the State, he had at the same time made it a thing of beauty and a joy forever which would testify to all those who ever looked upon this campus and these splendid buildings that he was a devotee of that sort of education which only a creative genius could give.

We entered the Student Union Building, one of its class, first brought into service among the teacher colleges of the state. I was overwhelmed with its elaborate rooms, halls and such an abundance of all material to give happiness to pupils and to people. This was just one of many such modern and spacious buildings that had placed Southeastern not only among the leading and larger state teacher colleges of America but had given to all the citizens of southeastern Oklahoma a regional center where they were meeting in conventions, entertainments, lectures, all climaxing into a newer, a better and a happier life for that entire section of the state.

If I ever doubted Montgomery's ability as a real national figure in education, I then and there put away my doubts.

In the list of honors received and the many places of high repute, the people of Oklahoma gave this man, the reader may observe that Dr. Montgomery was elevated to the position of a Director of the Oklahoma Historical Society in 1951. This honor and tribute from the twenty-five eminent men and women composing the Board

of Directors of this Society came to him because of his most valuable contributions in the fields of education and his authorship and writings on Oklahoma history. Perhaps above that they felt the need of a man to whom governors, legislators, all men and women who should and could support the Oklahoma State Historical Society, would listen. He served too short a time. On the morning of his death one of the Directors said to me, "Sorrowful indeed is his passing; there was a man who could do more for this institution in the approaching days than most any man of the State."

The city of Durant and Southeastern State College found their grief and tribute expressed in the words of Dr. A. E. Shearer, now President of Southeastern:

In the passing of President T. T. Montgomery, the state lost one of its most important citizens. For a half century, President Montgomery was identified with every important educational movement in the state and was closely associated with the civic and religious life in the communities in which he lived.

He was a great educator, a loyal friend, a devoted father, and an outstanding leader. Every school system with which he was connected prospered under his leadership and all who knew him appreciated his friendship, his aggressive leadership, his devotion to duty, and his fine contribution to education.

Southeastern State College made rapid strides during his long tenure as President. He has left his imprint on the college in the improvement of the educational program, in the raising of scholastic standards, and in the expansion of the school plant.

He was truly one of the greatest college presidents in the history of the state.

We often speak of the three learned professions as Theology, Medicine and Law. I never cared to discuss which is greatest for the question was decided early in my life when I entered the school-room as a teacher. *There is a fourth profession though many do not call it a profession, and this is the profession of teaching which I think is the greatest of all. One may vision a society so high and so excellent that it would have no need for the preacher, doctor or lawyer yet the teacher would always be needed. The teacher's work is to develop the substance of wisdom that lies in every soul.* Dr. Montgomery understood and believed this,<sup>2</sup> and it made his life a rich and potent one.

---

<sup>2</sup> The writer observed closely Dr. Montgomery's service to Oklahoma and his country for almost fifty years, and upon his death, drafted a resolution in tribute to Dr. T. T. Montgomery at the request of the Board of Directors of the Oklahoma Historical Society, which was adopted by the Board and published in the Society's official journal, *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. XXXII, No. 2 (Summer, 1954), pp. 244-5.