

STELLA FRIENDS ACADEMY

*By Mary Blue Coppock**

Seated around their breakfast table one morning in the year of 1896, were Alvin and Laura Coppock and their ten children. This was two years after the Coppocks had established their home in 'M' County of the "Cherokee Strip."¹ Morning devotions were over, and during the course of the meal, the father who had attended a business meeting of their church the night before, casually announced to the family that he had pledged \$350.00 toward the erection of an academy. The family knew he had previously made a substantial pledge, but the announcement of this additional amount, left them all but speechless; for they knew only too well what additional sacrifices they would be required to make to fulfill this pledge. For two years life on the plains had indeed been rugged; crops had been failures, or at best, provided the scantiest of necessities. But in those days father's word was law; so regardless of the hard work and sacrifices entailed, each knew that somehow this money would be raised. Considering the value of the dollar of to-day, such an amount would now be quite insignificant; but the sum of \$350 then, would perhaps purchase about as much as \$3,500 would to-day.

The above incident is personal in nature but is given as an illustration to show that the sacrifices made by the Coppock family were typical of those made in the homes of the several families of early day Friends and other citizens of the community five miles to the northeast of Cherokee, Oklahoma, where Stella Academy once stood. When this Academy was erected, the nearest high school, with the exception of the one at Alva, Oklahoma, was in Kansas many miles away. For years Stella Academy stood as a memorial to the deep concern this group of pioneers had for a higher education for their children.

It is interesting to recall the events that lead this group of people, all members of the Friends Church, to this section of Oklahoma. In the late 1870's most of these families were located in a farming community of Iowa, adjacent to the Friends College of Oskaloosa, Iowa. Here the price of land was high; the winters long and severe, and the cost of feeding

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¹The site where the Academy and Dormitory and other buildings stood, was donated by Ernest Howard. This location is: S $\frac{1}{2}$; SE $\frac{1}{4}$; Sec. 24 Township 27; Range 11.

livestock throughout the winters almost prohibitive. It was largely due to these conditions that these Iowa neighbors decided to seek a milder climate. The trek led them to Jewel County, Kansas, one of the northern tiers of counties of that state, where, to their sorrow, they soon discovered the winters not much different from the long, cold winters of Iowa. So when "Uncle Sam" opened the "Cherokee Strip" for settlement, five members of the Jewel County group of Quakers, William Howard and two sons, John and Ernest; and Albert Dillon and son, Bert, made the famous run for homesteads at this opening on September 16, 1893. All five staked claims in the vicinity five miles northeast of the present town of Cherokee. When the water was found highly alkaline, three other men who had staked claims nearby the Howards and Dillons abandoned their claims, leaving the land free for filing by some one else. This was immediately reported to friends back in Jewel County, Kansas. This was done with such fervor and praise for the prospects down here that three men came down immediately to investigate. These men were Micajah Pickrell, Alvin George and Alvin Coppock.

After inspecting the three abandoned farms, Mr. George, Mr. Pickrell and Mr. Coppock started to the Land Office in Alva, twenty miles to the west, to file on the three claims. On the way it occurred to them they had made no decision as to which farm each would file on. There was a decided difference in the quality of the land, one piece in particular being much better than the other two. Alvin George proposed that since Mr. Coppock had the largest family he should have the best farm; and that Mr. Pickrell with the next largest, should have the second best, while he, not yet married take the poorest. After considerable discussion and protest, the above mentioned plan was agreed upon, and thus the Southeast Quarter of Section 30, became the Coppock homestead.

By March 1894, six months after the exciting run for homesteads, the prairies of the Cherokee Strip were no longer barren and monotonous, but were dotted with buildings and trees. Almost every claim by this time had a house upon it, some of frame construction, some of sod, while many settlers were living in the lowly dugout. All lumber and building material had to be hauled from the towns of Alva, Oklahoma or Kiowa, north across the line in Kansas, both of which were located approximately twenty miles from the Stella neighborhood, as this community was eventually called.

Buildings and trees were not all that dotted the prairies, as those were the days of large families and many children were roaming the countryside in search of entertainment. From

the very beginning of their sojourn here, the lack of schools weighed heavily on the minds of this group of people. So within six months from the day of the opening of the Strip, funds had been solicited, a sod school house built and Stella Howard selected as teacher for the first eight grades. This building was erected on the Andy Botleman farm, on land which Mr. Botleman donated for this purpose. The school was known as the Stella School, named in honor of the first teacher. The Township was also called Stella, named for this same young lady. Stella School remained a subscription school until after the Cherokee Strip was incorporated in Oklahoma Territory, after which taxes were levied, collected and through the due process of law the correct percentage was returned to this district for the express purpose of maintaining public schools.

Provision had been made for a grade school, but for those who had completed the grades, there was no higher school of learning. At first these young people were returned to Kansas where high schools and academies had been established. But with so many young children reaching the high-school age each year, sending them to another state for further education became not only an expensive arrangement but one very unsatisfactory to the parents. They deemed it very unwise to have such young people away from home discipline.

To clarify some of the situations that will arise in this narrative a little later one must recall the first Sunday after the run into the Strip. A Sunday School had been organized in the home of William Howard. This was the first religious service held in this community, and was the forerunner of many interesting events that occurred later. One of these events was connected with the moving of the Micaiah Pickrell and Alvin Coppock families from Kansas to Oklahoma. The two families made up a party of about twenty people who came by covered wagons. The wagons were heavily loaded as they brought all their household and farming equipment, while the livestock was driven behind the caravan by the smaller boys. The cows were milked both night and morning thus contributing much toward the necessarily scant meals. It took nine days to make the journey of about 300 miles. The first Sunday out no traveling was done as this was considered wrong by this God-fearing, God-trusting group. On the night of the eighth day they camped at Kiowa, Kansas, about twenty miles from their final destination. That evening the men held a conference and decided by leaving early Sunday morning they could arrive at the Howard home in time to attend the Sunday School services. They agreed that attendance at Sunday school would justify the Sunday traveling. So, they con-

cluded on Sunday evening, arriving in time to participate in the Sunday service.

Immediately after the organization of the Sunday School, plans were begun to establish a Friends Meeting under the supervision of Rose Hill Quarterly Meeting at Wichita, Kansas. When all requirements had been met Alvin Coppock and wife, Laura, were elected to serve the Church as its first ministers. This was the first church established in the Cherokee Strip and was known as the Stella Church.

Under the supervision of the Stella church, an Academy with the equivalent of four years of high school, plus one year of college, was established. The minutes of Stella Quarterly Meeting of February 17, 1895, which was held in the little sod school house, record:

To Stella Monthly Meeting: As there has been talk of trying to build an Academy in this vicinity, and some preliminary work done looking to that end, we the committee appointed to bring the matter before you, wish to give you a brief summary of what has been done. A meeting was called February 17, 1895, by I. M. Pollock and J. M. Parkeson for the purpose of ascertaining the views of the people in regard to the matter. After a thorough discussion of the subject it was decided to draw up and circulate the following agreement:—We the undersigned agree to contribute the sum opposite our names for the purpose of building a Friends Academy in the vicinity of Stella school house to be used for educational and church purposes, the exact site to be determined by the Friends Monthly Meeting.

A committee was appointed to make estimates on the cost of different sized buildings. The following resolution by J. Hester was adopted:

That it was the sense of this meeting that having canvassed the neighborhood, find there is about \$600.00 promised for the building of the academy. That the building committee report the cost of the structure, 40 by 60 feet with two recitation rooms, at \$615.00, with the erection being done by volunteer labor. That we now turn the matter over to the Monthly Meeting for its consideration. In accordance with this resolution we lay this report before you, together with the subscription list and the minutes of the several meetings, and request you give it your most earnest attention and take such action as you think the circumstances warrant.—Committee: P. N. Ferguson, H. C. Dexter, C. C. Zimmerman.

The Meeting is united in approving and appointing a committee to consider the matter. Isaac Pollock, John Howard, Charles

²The Proclamation of President Grover Cleveland on August 19, 1893, for the opening of the Cherokee Outlet (popularly called "The Cherokee Strip") on September 16, 1893, provided for the organization of 'M' County with the local land office at Alva. This county was soon named "Woods County" in Oklahoma Territory. The eastern part of old Woods County was organized as Alfalfa County when Oklahoma became a state in 1907, and Stella Friends Academy was within the boundaries of this new county where the old site is located today.—Ed.

Zimmerman are appointed as a committee of investigation, and Charles Culver, Arlo Fell and Robert Wallace a Committee on Location and Construction.

In the fall of 1897, an accredited high school known as Stella Friends Academy was opened in a large tabernacle tent, pending the completion of the academy building, with H. C. Fellow, A.M., Ph.D., Principal, and his wife Melissa Fellow as assistant. Other instructors that first year were Josie M. Snediker, Ernest Howard, Gertrude Bates and Chester Coppock. The first Board of Trustees were Isaac Pollock, President; Alvin Coppock, Treasurer; John Howard, Corresponding Secretary; Arlo Fell, Laura Coppock, Pearl Nuckles, Frank Veatch, Irene Hester, Charles Jackson and John Hays, members.³

The first catalog of the school, issued in 1897, contains the following description:

Stella Friends Academy is situated in Woods County, Oklahoma Territory, nineteen miles east of Alva. Located in the eastern part of the beautiful Salt Fork valley, on the mouth of the Medicine river, standing on an eminence, the Academy building can be seen from the distant range of hills ten to fifteen miles away. The building is a frame structure 28 x 48 feet, divided below into auditorium, reception and library rooms, and above into five rooms for ladies dormitory purposes.¹ The rooms and library are fitted up with the best of furniture. All the material used in the construction of the building was hauled in wagons, drawn by horses, from nineteen to forty miles. Surrounding the building is a beautiful campus of ten acres laid out in ample playgrounds and surrounded by groves of young trees.

Tuition is \$6.50 per term of twelve weeks. Pupils can secure excellent accommodations for self-boarding a fifty cents a month. First class board in private families, \$2.00 per full week, and \$1.50 per school week. An excellent working cabinet of 1,000 specimens and curios from various parts of the world is available for students in Natural Science and History.

A very strict course of four years was required for graduation. Latin was required throughout the four years unless German was preferred in the Senior year. The four years of Latin included Caesar, Virgil, Cicero and Horace. The first Library consisted of 400 volumes of standard works on history, literature, science, mathematics, pedagogy. These were always at hand for the daily convenience of the pupils.

³ The "Coppock Memorial Bible Chair," a Bible professorship has been established at Friends Bible College, Haviland, Kansas, as a fitting memorial to Alvin Coppock, who maintained an active concern for Quaker education throughout his lifetime. He not only helped found Stella Friends Academy but was a "tower of strength to that school during its fruitful ministry." When the Academy closed, Alvin and Laura Coppock moved to Haviland, Kansas, where he served as vice-president of the Kansas Central Bible Training School which is now known as Friends Bible College.—Ed.

When the Academy building had been completed in 1897, work was begun immediately on a dormitory for young ladies. The building was made possible through the generosity and assistance of James Welch who had lately moved into the community from Iowa. This was a two-story dormitory, divided into living quarters for the principal and his family, and dining room and kitchen on the first floor; with six large, airy and sunny rooms on the second floor, to accommodate twelve girls. Another dormitory was built in 1907 on land donated by James Welch. This was across the road to the south from the Academy grounds. This was a three-story building of cement blocks, with accommodations for twenty-four girls, and with a large, well lighted basement used for kitchen and dining room. The first dormitory was then converted into a boy's dormitory.

Enrollment the first year (1897-1898) was seventy-five; the second year, ninety. Many names familiar in the Cherokee vicinity to-day were found among those early students.

In 1911, an industrial department was added, having a two fold purpose: first, to aid students by supplying work for them, thus assisting them financially; second, to teach them an occupation. A farm of sixty-five acres was procured; and broom and cement factories were established. The work done by the boys in this department was most commendable. The girls assisted with the general housework, cooking and sewing.

The enrollment at the school remained good until the Rock Island and Santa Fe railroads were built through this section of the country. Towns sprang up all along these railroads, and in the due course of time, a high school an established institution in each of these towns. As a result the enrollment at the Academy gradually declined, until in the Spring of 1921, after twenty-four year of useful life, Stella Academy closed its doors permanently. The land and buildings were sold at public auction, and the buildings razed in the year 1922.

Thus, passed into history Stella Friends Academy, the first high school of Alfalfa County. All that remains are the memories that linger with the very few founders still living, and with those who once were students here. It is not too much to say, that perhaps no institution in the State of Oklahoma considering its size and scope, ever sent from its portals so many young people who had received such valuable instruction in correct morals and spiritual truths. While to-day the methods used in such teaching might meet with criticism and censure, yet these early day instructors were zealous adherents of the Friends Doctrine, and were firm believers in

their cause and their methods of instruction. Much credit goes to the instructors of Stella Academy for its splendid rating, many of whose names are lost to history.

Too much praise and credit cannot be given to the fearless and God-serving pioneers who made this institution possible, especially when one judges their high endeavors and the remarkable results they obtained. Many live to-day who would rise up and give thanks for this institution, for what it stood, and for those who made it a reality. Men and women of culture, of excellent character and high intelligence are scattered in all parts of the world, who give credit to Stella Friends Academy for any meritorious services they have rendered the world. These former students can be found in all the professions: law medicine, engineering, college instructors, ministers, missionaries, as well as in all the humbler walks of life.

This short history of Stella Academy brings the thought that church, or religious institutions of learning are still needed. It is from such schools that young people enter the business world with a balanced and a just perspective of life and with a character based on the cardinal and christian virtues.