

OKLAHOMA UNIVERSITY AT GUTHRIE

By Frank A. Balyeat

Guthrie, in 1891, was the largest town in Oklahoma Territory and its capital. Centrally located in the area opened for settlement and in that which was likely to be opened soon, Guthrie leaders were deeply concerned about additional attractions that would enable it to hold and increase its relative advantages.

A college would help. In December, 1890, Territorial legislation had located three public colleges at Edmond, Norman, and Stillwater. They got under way very slowly. Securing land, appointing and organizing of regents, voting bonds for buildings, advertising for bids and letting of contracts, and delayed construction once it had begun,—these were among the conditions that plagued the administration of the three public institutions. When they did enroll and teach, it was in rented quarters and with no college students. Most were at the high school level with some "unclassified," meaning not yet ready for high school work. Why should not Guthrie profit from these delays?

The arrival of William Albert Buxton, M. A., was what Guthrie leaders needed to trigger their dream into action. This teacher-preacher was well educated in New England colleges and had done graduate study in the University of Heidelberg, Germany. He was not a practical man, was even a dreamer, but his dreaming proved contagious in Guthrie. Among those favorably impressed by his proposal to establish a university at Guthrie, with himself as its president, was his brother, Dr. L. Haynes Buxton, M. D., then a leading practitioner there.¹

Dr. Buxton invested his savings of \$10,000 in establishing the university, thus giving his brother the needed financial start.

In September, 1891, W. A. Buxton purchased four lots at the intersection of Broad and Harrison, for \$540.² On these lots he proposed to erect the university building, facing north. This prospect and backing sufficed to interest the Guthrie Board of Trade in cooperating with him in raising money and in planning the building. No record has been found of any university directors, trustees, or regents. It is probable that

¹Dr. Buxton was appointed Territorial Superintendent of Public Health and later practiced in Oklahoma City. His daughter, Mrs. Gertrude Buxton Fleming, provided helpful information about this stage of Oklahoma University development.

²Official Records in the Logan County Court House.

the University Committee of the Board of Trade acted in this capacity as "Professor" Buxton, as he was generally called, developed plans.

He informed the Board of Trade that a \$2,000 "bonus" would be needed to get started.* This was raised by a public auction of merchandise solicited by Guthrie business firms from their wholesale dealers. Governor Seay formally opened the auction, which raised the requested sum, and a little more.³

Early in the spring of 1892, plans were drawn for a building, the contract was awarded, and construction soon began on a square, three-story, red sandstone university building. Work progressed steadily and rapidly, enabling President Buxton to advertise the opening of Oklahoma University in its own building on September 12, 1892. The appearance of the building appeared in an advertisement in the Guthrie papers and in the 1892 Guthrie Directory. The advertisement is used as an illustration here in this article, for the print serves as further documentary proof of the Oklahoma University at Guthrie.

The reader can get an idea of the unusual scope of offering that this new school promised. The wording above and below the picture states or implies the following: kindergarten, primary, intermediate, and high school courses; liberal arts and sciences, with degrees and graduate study; business courses as well as a Conservatory of Music; a Normal School for those preparing to teach; and additional professional programs in law, pharmacy, dentistry, and medicine. Tuition and board were at reasonable rates. Local newspapers carried this advertisement through much of the first semester of 1892-93. Fred L. Wenner reported:⁴

The school opened in the fall with a fair attendance but, just as things were getting well under way, United States Marshals out of Topeka, Kansas, court arrested Buxton on a Federal warrant, charging him with using the mails to defraud. It is really a mystery how the action was brought in the Topeka court instead of the U. S. Court here, but the charge being made by a publishing house which had a branch office in Topeka was probably the reason. They alleged that Buxton had solicited donations of books for the University fraudulently, but as the letters were written on the stationery of the "Oklahoma University" and no claim made of any connection with the University of Oklahoma, the case was dismissed by the Federal judge, who really scored the Marshal's office and the book company for their action. Arrest of Buxton, a minister and a college president, was just too much for the new institution to stand, however, and the new college soon closed.

³ Letters from the late Fred L. Wenner to F. A. Balyeat, dated June 9 and November 9, 1949. Wenner was a newspaper man in Guthrie from April 22, 1889 to June, 1907. For several years he was private secretary to three Territorial Governors and later served in Territorial government departments. His extensive research about Oklahoma University and his letters and interviews greatly helped the writer of this study.

⁴ *Ibid.*

The case was more drawn out and more damaging than Wenner's brief statement conveys. Though transferred to the court at Guthrie, the case dragged on there. At times the bond required of Buxton, while under indictment, was more than he could provide and he spent a good many days in jail, some of them hot summer days. "The appearance of Professor Buxton showed that prison life this hot weather was telling on him."⁵

Really, the president of the institution had little time or opportunity to attend to the needs of the school during the second semester of that first year, if it was in operation then. Mr. Wenner sought, through the press, information from or about those who attended the first semester at Oklahoma University and received very meager information. One wrote: "I started to school in Guthrie in the fall of 1892, but funds were not sufficient to finish the year, so Miss Bosworth had a private school for the remainder of the year."⁶ There is some evidence found that Miss Bosworth was on Mr. Buxton's faculty and continued to teach through that year in the University building. The control of the school had slipped from President Buxton and, sometime in 1893 after charges had been cleared, he moved "out west," where he spent his remaining years, broken financially, as well as in health and in spirit. He had meant well but his project had failed.

The question remains as to what subjects were taught and how many were enrolled at Oklahoma University in the fall of 1892. Memories of the few available old-timers agree that the attendance was disappointing and the school lasted only one semester. Since it was not a public or church school, it filed no formal reports. However, the Territorial Superintendent of Instruction, as of December 1, 1892, gave some data about the school. Superintendent J. H. Parker included in Table 12 (page 23) one line of information about each of seven "High Grade Schools in Oklahoma Territory for the Year Ending June 30, 1892." His statement is obviously in error, for some of these schools were not in existence in June 1892. For the three public institutions he lists the following figures on staff members and enrollment: University, Norman, 4 and 89; Agriculture College, Stillwater, 7 and 76; and the Normal, Edmond, 3 and 80.⁷ Actually, the University of Oklahoma began its first term in September, 1892, with a staff of four, and a total enrollment of 57 for the semester.⁸

⁵ Guthrie *Leader*, June 25, 1893.

⁶ Letter from Mrs. Adele Kessler Barwick to Fred L. Wenner, Nov. 12, 1949.

⁷ *First Biennial Report of Territorial Superintendent of Instruction*, Dec. 1, 1892.

⁸ Roy Gittinger, *The University of Oklahoma*, (University of Oklahoma Press, 1942), p. 12.

The four private and church schools included in Parker's table show these enrollments: Oklahoma College, Norman, South Methodist, 76; Kingfisher Academy, Kingfisher, Congregational, 78; Oklahoma College and Business Institute, Frisco, 130; and Oklahoma University, Guthrie, W. A. Buxton, 150 enrolled and 16 employed. Like the University of Oklahoma, Guthrie's Oklahoma University began classwork in September 1892. It may be that Supt. Parker had unofficial information about each school enrollment as of the date of his report, which would be for the first semester of that year and these are incorrect. It does provide some clue as to the enrollment at Guthrie, even though misleading.

It is almost certain that none of the Oklahoma University students was doing college work. Miss Etta Hikes, who came to Guthrie in the fall of 1893 to teach the newly organized public school work there, wrote:⁹

I remember the Oklahoma University building on the corner of Harrison and Broad, but I think that it did not continue as a university after I came to Guthrie. There were several young people in (Guthrie) high school in my first year there who had been students in the university the year before, among them Adele Kessler. I think the university did only high school work, as these people were high school sophomores. They told me that Miss Sarah Bosworth was one of the teachers there in 1892-93.

The present writer is convinced that Buxton's school ran just one semester and without his direction much of that time, and that it enrolled only those of high school rank, or lower. It is probable that no college work was ever taught in that building.

During the summer of 1893 it was very obvious that Mr. Buxton could not continue his school. The building was available and was then a liability to the Guthrie Board of Trade and possibly to Dr. L. H. Buxton, unless he had already removed himself from that connection, with his heavy financial loss. So it was wise for the Board of Trade committee to have the building occupied by a school and thus try for the realization of Guthrie's dream of soon becoming the cultural center of the new territory.

Joel F. Smith, A. B., S. T. B., a Methodist pastor in Guthrie, agreed to direct the school for another try in the fall of 1893, arranging with the Board of Trade to use the "Buxton University Building." Whether Smith did this on his own or was associated with his denomination in this venture, had not been determined by this writer. Superintendent J. G. Mallory, of the Guthrie Public Schools, had already announced that he had leased two rooms of the University Build-

⁹ Letter from Etta Hikes to Fred L. Wenner, Oct. 21, 1949.

ing for intermediate classes, the twenty-one public school teachers then scattered to about a dozen different buildings.¹⁰ Also, Miss Sarah Bosworth had leased part of the building for a private school, which she did not begin. Thus, with President Smith's arrangement to occupy space there, it would appear that the building was well utilized, especially considering the items in Miss Bosworth's advertisement that pupils could room in the building."¹¹

Miss Bosworth's advertisement appeared daily in the Guthrie papers from early in September, in which she offered to teach school courses to "young men and young ladies," especially preparing them for "college and teaching." President Smith began advertising his school in the Guthrie papers Sept. 13, 1893 and in a few days included in this information, "Miss Bosworth has accepted a position in the University." Her advertisement was then discontinued.

The advertisement of President Joel F. Smith was headed with a picture of the University Building, as Buxton had run it a year previously. Above the picture was "Oklahoma" and beneath it, "University, Guthrie, O. T. It announced that school will open Sept. 27, 1893. . . . Competent Professors and Teachers Will be Employed and Thorough Work Will Be Done in All Departments." He included "Instruction in Primary, Intermediate, and College Courses; Departments in Music and Art; Complete Business College. Rates, Reasonable. Faculty of Six Teachers."

After October 10, 1893 and through most the following January, the advertisement that was running daily in Guthrie newspapers was smaller (one column wide), without picture, and headed "Ok. University, Guthrie, Ok." The fact that this ran continuously through the semester but was discontinued late in January would suggest that courses were taught through the first semester but did not continue after that. Also, a news item about Methodist Church consideration of a church school, mentioned the Reverend Joel E. Smith as a Stillwater pastor.¹² Apparently President Smith was no longer connected with a school at Guthrie. By that time the public schools were caring for resident pupils in high school, and with no tuition charge.

During the spring of 1894 news stories and advertisements showed several occupants of the University Building. Dr. L. H. Buxton's professional card appeared in a news paper for May 31, 1893, and gave his residence as "University Building, Harrison Avenue." Undoubtedly he had not lived there in September, 1893, when it was so crowded with school activi-

¹⁰ Guthrie State Capital, Sept. 20, 1893.

¹¹ Guthrie State Capital, Sept. 9, 1893.

¹² Guthrie State Capital, January 9, 1894.

ties. A February 11, 1894 issue carried the advertisement of "Guthrie Business College." It was then occupying Rooms 2 and 3. Another tenant was Mrs. E. G. Hogan, who announced that she would begin a "Kindergarten School in University Building."

Sometime in the spring of 1894 the Guthrie Board of Trade disposed of the building for \$1,000, according to news items that appeared in the *Leader*. In 1895 the Territorial Legislature held their sessions in the building. Later, the county bought it for a court house, occupying it until the erection of the present structure in 1907.¹³ The building was then razed to make room for the present Logan County Court House which stands on the exact site of the ill fated "Buxton University Building," the dream home of Oklahoma University.

¹³ Fred L. Wenner, *op cit*.