SOME CHURCH ACADEMIES IN EARLY OKLAHOMA TERRITORY

By Frank A. Balyeat

Because the word academy has varied meanings, it is necessary at the outset of this article to make clear the meaning used here. Since Plato's famous Greek academy, in the Fourth Century, B.C., there have been many well known academies and several uses of the term. An organization of learned men and women, with a common interest, such as the Oklahoma Academy of Science, is found frequently in the history of education in both Europe and the United States. Another use is for a training institution with a special function, such as a military academy, an academy of art, or even a riding academy.

In the United States, beginning with Benjamin Franklin's famous academy in Philadelphia, it has usually meant a non-public secondary school. It is sponsored by some individual or organization, often a religious denomination. Some have extended their offering upward, including one or two years of college study. In early Oklahoma it was more common to include lower grades, in order that tuition income might be sufficiently increased to pay the faculty.

On the Indian Territory side of what became the State of Oklahoma, there were many academies, provided by one of the Five Civilized Tribes or by a religious denomination and these have been well reported by several writers. Neither these nor the Federal academies for Indians are included in this study. Brief reports of only six of the church academies in early Oklahoma could be included in an article of this length.

Pioneer parents in Oklahoma Territory were confronted with delay and difficulty in providing schools for their children. The seven counties in "Old Oklahoma," opened by run on April 22, 1889, had to wait till December, 1890 before a public school system was legally established. They waited much longer for high school opportunities, except in the larger towns.

This delay was partially relieved by tuition schools in most towns and in a few rural areas, some of these schools including a little high school offering. Most of those teaching some high school work were sponsored by a denomination, often a local church, with contributions by local citizens and firms to help provide needed buildings and equipment. Teacher salary usually depended wholly upon tuition receipts. Some included, also, only the upper elementary grades, but a few
included the kindergarten. Some hoped, and a few promised, to add college work later.

The six schools included here represent six denominations and four of them used the word academy at some time in their existence. The other two were so like the others and the meaning defined above, that they are included, too. They are presented in the order that they began operation: Oklahoma High School, at Norman; Stella Friends Academy, near Cherokee; Northwestern Academy, at Carrier; Oklahoma Presbyterian Academy, at Newkirk; the Cordell Academy; and the Cordell Christian College. These six schools present a variety of sponsors, other means of financial support, aid and guidance from without the area served, and the prevailing plague of lack of financial support. All were, in time, not needed when the public school system developed sufficiently.

Oklahoma High School, 1890-1895

Known at different times by different names, "Oklahoma High School" was that officially used most of the time by the school sponsored and operated by the South Methodist Church at Norman, from September, 1890 to January, 1895. Though in its latter months it was called a college, it was still largely a secondary school and the full time of its operation is included above.

In the spring of 1890, at a public meeting called to discuss the need for a high school in Norman, the South Methodist proposal met with general approval. A committee was then appointed with power to select a board of trustees. At their first meeting, July 23, 1890, they chose a staff of three teachers, with the Reverend J. T. Farris, A. M., as principal. It was arranged to use as long as needed, the building of the South Methodist Church at the corner of Gray and Tonhawa, and such additional residential rooms as might be needed.

In the August 30, 1890 issue of the Norman Transcript was a conspicuous advertisement of the "Oklahoma District High School," which opened September 18, with an enrollment of 130. It should be remembered that most of these were probably in grades 1 to 8, and with none enrolled at the college level. Though some newspaper items referred to the "college," there was no official use of that word then or soon thereafter.

In newspaper publicity and advertising, Farris designated himself as "president." He thus signed an advertisement in the August 15, 1891 issue of the Norman Transcript, announcing

that the "Oklahoma High School" would begin its second year August 31, to run for two twenty-week terms, as was true the first year. He listed tuition rates as follows: Primary, $2.00 per month; Grammar School, $2.50; High School, $3.00; Music, $4.00; and Art, $4.00. Kinchen states that the enrollment in the fall of 1891 was 150.

When the third year opened, September 5, 1892, Farris had resigned, too late for his successor to be found. Aaron McDaniel, a Norman business man, directed the school during the first half of that year. Conditions and prospects had become such that it was difficult to get a suitable man to accept the principalship. At mid-year, the Reverend A. C. Morley became president, possibly bringing with him a few pupils from the private school that he then closed at some point between Oklahoma City and El Reno. By January, 1893, the high school enrollment had dropped to 50, says Kinchen, because of obvious and increasing emphasis then on college work for girls. The University of Oklahoma had opened in September, 1892 and the tuition-free Preparatory Department soon drew many who would have attended a tuition school or could not have secured high school benefits.

Late in its first year, and extending through the second year, plans for a building and site developed. A ten-acre site at the "east end of Main Street" had been accepted, donations and pledges were secured, and work had begun on the brick and stone building. In the August 1, 1893 issue of the Norman Transcript is a statement that the "High Gate College Building" had been turned to the trustees by the contractors in late summer, and interior work would be finished "at an early date."

Morley still headed the school when its fourth year opened, in September, 1893. Kinchen states that High Gate College moved into the partially finished building early that year, then a school for girls, emphasizing college work, though it still depended for support much on tuition paid by high school pupils. It is probable that by that time the Norman Public School sufficiently cared for elementary pupils. The closing exercises for the fourth year is announced thus by the June 8, 1894 issue of the Norman Transcript: "The Female College, known as High Gate College, a South Methodist School, closed last week."

The fifth, and last year, began in September, 1894 with such decrease in enrollment and such unfavorable prospects that President Morley soon resigned when he had secured a pastorate. Kinchen states that pupils steadily withdrew until, by December, few were left and that none returned after the 1894 Christmas vacation. The school was formally closed at mid-year.

In January of 1895, the Oklahoma Sanitarium Company purchased High Gate College and grounds. During the spring,
this company added forty acres to the grounds and remodeled and enlarged the building. Their first contingent of mental patients arrived in July, 1895. The former High Gate building continued to be used until the mid-twenties, when it was razed to make room for a more suitable structure.

**Stella Friends Academy, 1897-1921**

Stella Academy was one of the first church academies established in Oklahoma Territory and which survived many years. A member of one of the pioneer families has written a good history of that school. This section is a condensation of her article, supplemented by information obtained by correspondence with her. She is Mrs. M. L. Coppock, Sr., of Cherokee, Oklahoma.

The Cherokee Outlet was opened to settlement on September 16, 1893. Several families of Friends, sometimes known as Quakers, migrated from farms in northern Kansas to Oklahoma in 1893 and staked claims in a neighborhood about 5 miles northeast of Cherokee and 20 miles east of Alva. They soon built a sod school house and conducted a tuition school for elementary pupils, taught by Stella Howard. It was named Stella School, in her honor.

The twenty-mile distance to the nearest high school was too far for the pupils to travel. A few were sent back to their former homes in Kansas or Iowa, but most adolescents, ready and eager for high school, could not attend. So, by 1895, the parents in this group were seriously considering the establishment of an academy. The financial pledges that they made and paid to erect and equip necessary buildings in that rural area proved a real test of their interest in the education of their children.

In the fall of 1897, the Stella community opened a high school in a tabernacle, pending the completion of their first frame building. The new school, called Stella Friends Academy, was supported by tuition and attended by children of Friends families and others, in that community and adjoining areas.

During that first year a frame building, 28 by 48 feet, was completed and occupied by the academy. All building material was hauled from places 20 to 40 miles distant. The first floor was used for school rooms and the second story provided dormitory rooms for non-resident girls. The first year enrollment was 75, increasing to 90 the second year. In 1907, a dormitory was built for girls, their former quarters then used as a boys dormitory.

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At first, the subjects were strictly academic and sufficed for college entrance. Pedagogy was added, thus helping to prepare for rural teaching. In 1911, industrial courses of a very practical nature for that farm community were included. It may safely be assumed that non-sectarian religious teaching was not neglected.

The building and operation of the Rock Island and Santa Fe railroads caused new towns to spring up which, before long, provided high schools for those towns and rural areas within daily riding distance. This caused a decline in Stella Academy enrollment and seriously reduced the income needed to pay the teaching staff. For financial reasons, the school year 1920-21 was the last. The academy was formally discontinued, the high school age pupils then cared for in public schools available to them. The buildings were sold and were razed in 1922.

Very few rural areas in early Oklahoma were so well and so promptly served with opportunities for a good secondary education. Leaders in the Friends church firmly believed in good schooling and were willing to make such sacrifices as were necessary to provide it. Alumni and former students of Stella Academy meet annually at the Friends University, in Wichita, Kansas, where records and mementos of the academy are kept in the University museum.

Northwestern Academy, 1898-1910

Northwestern Academy was opened September 19, 1898, at Carrier, ten miles northwest of Enid. It was one of the Congregational academies of Oklahoma Territory that were organized, in part, to serve as feeders for Kingfisher College which had begun in 1895. School work began in the Carrier Congregational church building, but soon had facilities adequate and well suited to the school's needs. It was on a ten-acre tract, given by Zue Carrier, aunt of Floyd E. Carrier who provided and interpreted the material needed to prepare this section. These included annual catalogs of the academy which are now in the possession of Mrs. A. E. Ford, widow of the last secretary of the academy governing board.

There were three frame buildings: (a) a main building, 32 x 44 feet, with auditorium, library, and classrooms on the first floor and dormitory rooms for boys, above; (b) a girls dormitory, 28 by 32 feet, with kitchen, dining room, and recep-

3 The Stella Academy Alumni, Mrs. M. L. Coppock, Chairman, erected an official Oklahoma Historical Marker on the site of the Academy in September, 1959 (roadside type), under the auspices of the Oklahoma Historical Society. This marker is located north of the City of Cherokee, Alfalfa County, on State Highway 11, two miles east of the junction with U.S. Highway 64.—Ed.
tion room on first floor and six rooms, above, for non-resident girls; and (c) the principal's residence. Near the girls dormitory was a storm cellar, 10 by 24 feet. Citizens of Carrier and community provided much of the money for buildings, and at great sacrifices, considering the financial conditions of most pioneers. The Congregational Education Society, Boston, Massachusetts, rendered much "material assistance" especially in later years.

Tuition for the thirty-eight week year was $28.00 soon after the academy opened, rising slightly in later years. A scholarship plan was designed to draw pupils from areas near Carrier. Each annual catalog listed pupils by school grade and home post-office. While most of them lived in or near Carrier, some came from other districts and from other counties. Though pupils were "accepted from six years of age, and up," emphasis was on serving the needs of high school pupils. The number of primary and elementary pupils decreased as the Carrier Public School District increased its ability to provide schooling for them.

The three high school curricula were: Classical, Scientific, and English, reflecting the prevailing secondary school practices of that time. When the late Victor E. Harlow became principal, in 1904, he was listed as teaching Latin, Greek, and German. At that time, Latin was expected of all pupils in every year of high school.

The principal had special care of the boys, especially the non-resident; a lady teacher, known as the preceptress, had similar responsibility for the girls who boarded in the dormitory. Church attendance was required of all boarding pupils and their morals were carefully safeguarded, as each issue of the catalog shows.

College preparation was considered a major need of a minority of the pupils; some availed themselves of the opportunity to prepare for rural teaching; but the general needs for successful living was a major consideration for all. Music was stressed, serving many older youth and some adults, who were not enrolled for any other courses.

As the Carrier Public School increasingly provided tuition free, for pupils of that district, and as other towns and areas increased their high school opportunities, the academy enrollment declined, with serious threats to the financial maintenance of the school. By act of the trustees, the academy was closed at the end of the 1909-10 school year, when enrollment had dropped to forty full-time pupils. For twelve years, Northwestern had rendered real service in providing schooling through the 12th grade
to many who otherwise would not have been able to attend high school.

The trustees voted to give the piano to the Carrier Congregational church. The buildings were sold in a way that would permit the public school to utilize such rooms as were needed until buildings could be provided. It was also provided by the trustees that the money received from sale of school buildings would retire the $1,240.00 academy indebtedness.

**Oklahoma Presbyterian Academy, 1900-1905**

The Oklahoma Presbyterian Academy planning was officially launched in the autumn of 1899 when a resolution was passed by the Presbyterian Synod of Indian Territory, authorizing the establishment of an academy at a suitable place in Oklahoma Territory. The school began in Newkirk in September, 1900, with an enrollment of twenty-nine the first year. The Board of Directors had purchased a quarter-section of land, minus a row of lots on the east side, next to the town. Ample campus provisions were made from this land, the remaining portion sold as residence lots to help finance the school.

The 1902 Biennial Report of the Territorial Superintendent of Instruction stated, “A two-story building, requisite for present needs, has been erected.” This report told of additional building plans that did not develop. Highly competent instructors were secured from Eastern colleges, William Thurman being the first headmaster. He taught history, mental and moral philosophy, and pedagogy. Another man on the staff taught languages, literature, and natural science. One young woman taught mathematics and the commercial subjects and another taught music and voice culture. On paper, an ambitious offering included four years of Latin, three of Greek, and two of German, but it is highly doubtful that much of this foreign language offering was ever taught. A three-year course in teacher training was included. This academy never included any work below the high school level nor did it attempt to teach college courses.

The academy operated five years, when it was formally closed, mainly because of inadequate income. No doubt it suffered from its geographical location, being too far from most Oklahoma Territory youth. Also, by 1905 the public schools of Newkirk and other towns were providing high school work and without tuition charge. In 1905, the Directors sold the rest of the land as town lots and sold the building to a Catholic group for school purposes.

The class of 1905 consisted of just one pupil, Frank Midgly, still living in Newkirk in 1962. He had completed the full high school course in the Presbyterian Academy there. From him the
Kay County Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Wm. A. Franklin, secured most of the information used in this account of that academy. Additional and corroborating information was found in Territorial reports for that period.

CORDELL ACADEMY, 1906-1911

Cordell Academy was at first officially named "Cordell Academy of the Reformed Church of America." Sponsorship by this denomination assured better planning, supervision, and financial support than was enjoyed by any of the other church academies in early Oklahoma.

Dutch Reformed mission work in Oklahoma was, at first, largely with the Indians. One school thus sponsored was the Seger governmental school at Colony, a few miles northeast of Cordell and south of Weatherford. The pastor of the church at Colony became impressed with the need of secondary schools for white children in the nearby area of the Cheyenne and Arapaho country, which had been opened to settlement in 1892. Dutch Reformed churches had been organized in several towns of that area, including Cordell, by the turn of the century. The Reverend Richard H. Harper, pastor of the Colony church in 1907-1909 and again in 1927-1929, tells much of the background of Cordell academy in his article in the Chronicles of Oklahoma.4

Harper tells of the desire of the denominational leaders to provide secondary schooling for "the young people in the western part of this great territory." When possibility of an academy was publicized, Cordell and Arapaho were the main aspirants for its location. Each made liberal offers of land and money. The Board of Education of the Reformed Church appointed a committee, which studied the relative merits of the two bids and recommended that the Board make an effort to match the amount of money raised by the town selected. Cordell was chosen. "Friends and churches contributed almost $17,000.00. Of this amount, $5,000.00 came from Mrs. Charles Nash Harder, of Philmont, New York, as a memorial to her husband . . . and $5,029.00 was given by the citizens of Cordell." Later, Mrs. Harder gave an additional $500.00 to furnish the academy building.5 The corner stone for this building was laid in February, 1906.

Cordell Academy began its first term September 12, 1906, enrolling sixty-five the first year, drawing from several towns from that area, then and through the five years that it operated. The first faculty of five, headed by Myron B. Keastor, was an

5 Ibid., p. 173.
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unusually well prepared staff. In 1908, the Reverend Jacob Poppon, Ph. D., became principal, still with carefully selected teachers who had graduated from eastern colleges. Courses included Classical, Scientific, Latin, English, Commercial, and others added later. Tuition was $6.00 per quarter. No work was then, or later, offered below the high school level, but, in its latter years, some courses were taught at the junior college level, probably to very few of those enrolled.

In 1907, there was the first graduate, the only one that year, Alfred Floss Cherry, of Colony. In 1908 the only graduate was Gertrude Ash, of Cordell, now Mrs. A. R. Ash, of Cordell. She is secretary of the association of former students and teachers of Cordell Academy, which has met annually since 1941. Their collection of records and mementos is kept in the Cordell Public Library. Mrs. Ash has helped much in providing and interpreting information needed for this brief account.6

During the fifth year of operation as Cordell Academy, there was a “culmination of thinking” among representative church leaders that there were “too few people of that denomination coming into Oklahoma” to justify continuation of the school at Cordell. It was then voted that “the Reformed Church should retire in Oklahoma” and close the school at the end of the 1910-11 school year. An effort to continue one more year under combined Dutch Reformed and Southern Presbyterian sponsorship “was an experiment that did not prove satisfactory.” The building was sold to the Cordell school district for $8,000.00 and this money “was remitted to the principal donor of the building.” Thus closed a most successfully planned and supported church academy which maintained high standards throughout its entire five years.

Cordell Christian College, 1907-1918
Western Oklahoma Christian College, 1921-1925
Oklahoma Christian College, 1925-1931

From September, 1907 to January, 1931, with a three-year interruption during and immediately following World War I, the Church of Christ operated in Cordell a school under the three names shown above. Though called a college, it always included a high school department and usually some elementary grades. In fact, the secondary school enrollment usually exceeded that in college. Therefore, this denominational school is included in a history of some of the church academies in early Oklahoma.

6 The Alumni Association through Mrs. A. R. Ash, erected an official Oklahoma Historical Marker (roadside type) under the auspices of the Oklahoma Historical Society commemorating the site of “Cordell Academy.” In 1958, Location of this marker is in the Cordell City Park, Washita County.—Ed.
Cordell Christian College opened September 1, 1907. Since no building was then ready, the Dutch Reformed Cordell Academy, then in its second year, shared space. For the additional space needed for classrooms, the Church of Christ building was used. On the opening day, seventy-two were enrolled. From the beginning, financial conditions and prospects were so discouraging that President J. H. Lawson soon resigned. The remainder of the year the school was administered by two "joint managers," chosen from the faculty.7

Cordell citizens raised sufficient money to buy land for a campus and erect a three-story building. With improved prospects, it was possible to attract J. N. Armstrong, who ably served as president from 1908 to 1918. In 1908 "the courses included elementary work, high school work, and a two-year college course."8 During the third year, 1909-10, enrollment reached 200. By 1912 a four-year college program was "offered," but it is not probable that many, if any, of the advanced courses offered were really sufficiently in demand to be taught. The below-college courses were still the main part of the school.

Between 1918 and 1921, the school did not operate. This was largely because of local and denominational dissension, caused by charges of pacifism brought against some faculty members. In 1921, the denominational leaders in Oklahoma made plans to resume college work, and in the town where there was the best prospect of success. The Cordell Chamber of Commerce led in raising enough money to clear the school property of debt. Work was then resumed at Cordell, but under the new name of "Western Oklahoma Christian College." "The first eight grades were taught, a full high school course was given, and the school was accredited for two years of college work."9 In 1924-25, the State Department of Education reported an enrollment of 181, with 121 of them below college level.

In 1925, the name was again changed to "Oklahoma Christian College." In the last five and a half years of its existence, the school had four presidents. The last of the four began in the autumn of 1930. By mid-year, the financial situation was desperate, and the school was officially and finally closed. The buildings were sold to the City of Cordell, under stipulations made in 1921. Furnishings and equipment were sold at public auction. A persistent and courageous effort of nearly a quarter of a century then ended, after ably serving many children and youth with high level schooling.

8 Ibid., p. 195
9 Ibid., p. 199