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Early Weatherford, The Twenties

by Julie O'Neal Fulton and John K. Hayden

from chapter three of *Weatherford, Oklahoma: 1898-1998*

On November 11, 1918, World War I ended after Germany signed the armistice and surrendered. The end of the war created a combination of restlessness, desperation, boredom, and thrill-seeking in individuals who were about to enter into a new decade, the twenties. The mixture of attitudes earned the decade its nickname: the "Roaring Twenties."

Throughout the twenties, a broad conflict existed between a new, secular urban culture, connected to more modern views, and an older rural America, committed to traditional values that sometimes resented economic shifts and other change.

In the early twenties, the women's suffrage movement had a great impact on American society. By August 18, 1920, the 19th Amendment to the Constitution was ratified, giving women the right to vote. Ever since the 15th Amendment to the Constitution provided Afro-American men the right to vote, but denied this right to women, the women's suffrage movement had been pushing in full force to achieve the vote. Moreover, many women had contributed to the war effort during World War I, providing their role in the work place as well as at home. The adoption of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution provided one of the first major changes in the early twenties which affected every community, including Weatherford.

During the 1920's, a group of American writers and artists made an impact on the cultural life of the world. Two of the most famous were Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Many writers, artists, and intellectuals tried to find a place in the world during the twenties because the war had broken their spirit. It was a period when many were wildly creative, liberating, and reckless.

Since the 18th Amendment prohibited the sale

of alcohol in the twenties, prohibition drove many thirsty townspeople to violate the law in search of a drink. By some accounts, the twenties soon became "a lawless decade." Police raids occurred in covert saloons and where people brewed their own homemade beer. These continual raids and violations of the law created a wild atmosphere in the twenties.

In Weatherford, the twenties did not necessarily live up to the nickname, the "Roaring Twenties," if the university paper is to be believed. For example, historian Mel Fiegel writes that Southwestern students were at least aware "of something called flappers" in American society, but were not inclined to emulate them. In fact, *The Southwestern* dedicated space to attacking the culture of the flappers. It printed a poem in which a bachelor surmises that flappers wear a great deal of makeup because they are ugly. *The Southwestern* also warned young men that dating "A cigarette-smoking profane girl" would only bring them trouble.

The school paper also warned that "picture shows and unrestrained social pleasures create vices that are antagonistic to the home." Finally, *The Southwestern* warned teachers that "the schoolroom is not the place to try out the latest fashion."

Fiegel concludes that these views "revealed a continuing spirit of idealism, strong threads of conservatism, and a devotion to the values of rural nineteenth century America. In the 1920s, *Southwestern* as an institution simply failed to perceive the historical developments taking place in society. No doubt, the same conclusion could be attached to small town Weatherford as a whole in the 1920s.

But this is not to say there was no fun in Weatherford in the 1920s. Since the university enrollment was small in number, the students all





A pictorial greeting of early Weatherford

Photo courtesy Vonda McPhearson

knew each other. The townspeople were also well acquainted with the students. In the twenties there were no dormitories; therefore, the students lived in rooming houses or private homes. In the local supermarkets, two cans of tomato soup cost 25 cents and a 24 pound bag of flour sold for \$1.10, while tuna fish sold for 10 cents per can.

James J. Craddock remembers regular dances being held in the basement of the American Legion Hall, a building now occupied by the Tautfests. In the east part of town, J. S. Decker operated a swimming pool. At this time it was one of the few in this part of the country.

Weatherford in the twenties was also a center of entertainment. During the summers of the 1920s, the Chautauqua was a gift from the Chautauqua Association to communities all across Oklahoma, including Weatherford. These entertainers traveled from one town to another bringing their attractions. This event only happened one week of

every summer. As such, the community valued and anticipated the return of the Chautauqua.

After arriving in the community, the Chautauqua set up a tent, a stage, and seating areas. The seats filled up quickly because of their popularity. The entertainment included various types of plays, bands, speakers, and there would be something special for the children in the mornings. The Chautauqua brought inspiration, livelihood, and entertainment to the Weatherford community during long, hot summers.

Other entertainment in the community included Southwestern's sporting events. J.P. Jackson lettered four years in football at Southwestern and was named to the all-intercollegiate teams of 1926 and 1927. He later played professional football with the Boston Bulldogs in 1929. Arnold Shockely earned an all-conference tackle in 1927. He also played professional football after college with the Providence (Rhode Island) Steam Rollers.



Joe B. Milam assumed football and wrestling coaching duties in the fall of 1926. In the first year of coaching at Southwestern, his team won the Collegiate Conference Championship. Also, Milam helped wrestling become a popular sport in Weatherford.

From 1927 to 1933, many state and conference wrestling champions came from Southwestern. Today, Southwestern's football stadium is named in honor of Joe B. Milam.

In addition to the annual Chautauquas and sporting events, the locals could also check out the latest Hollywood fare at the Bungalow Theater. Mary Pickford features comprised the most regular offerings for anywhere between 10 cents and 25 cents. There was also an ice-skating rink where the admission was 25 cents. In an age devoid

of television, the Weatherford Booster reprinted contemporary novels such as Booth Tarkington's *The Magnificent Ambersons* in a serial format.

Kappa Kappa Iota, a national sorority for fe-

male teachers and wives of teachers, originated in Oklahoma on December 6, 1921. The sorority became known as the order of the Blue Violet. On February 6, 1922, Alfred Burris, president of Southwestern Teachers' College, extended to the women of his faculty an invitation to the sorority. Fifteen

women from Weatherford were initiated into the sorority. The organization grew, and other teachers from other states wanted to join. The Weatherford Chapter was called the Epsilon Conclave of KKI. The purpose of the sorority was to "promote good fellowship and fraternal cooperation among teachers, to strive for the elevation and dignity of the teaching profession, and to oppose all forces detrimental to the schools of the United States."

The 1920s also witnessed improvements in Weatherford's infrastructure. For

example, in February, 1920, the town approved a \$15,000 bond to repair and extend its water system to enable it to supply an adequate amount of water. In 1923, Weatherford approved a \$100,000

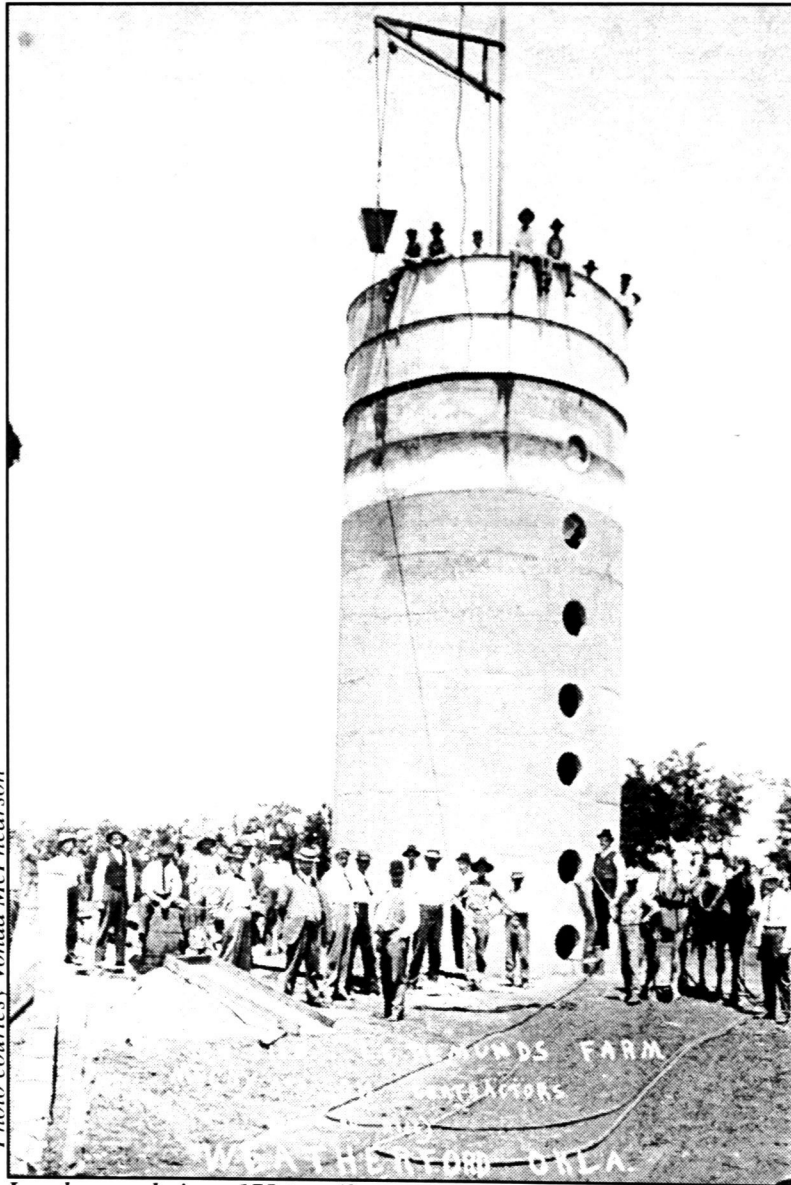


Photo courtesy Vonda McPhearson

Local men admire a 175-ton silo constructed on L.C. Remunds' farm



bond issue to extend and improve the municipal plant. Such improvements later allowed the city to charge less for electricity.

Other local progress included improving roads for better quality of travel. The first moves to pave three blocks of Main Street and seven blocks of Custer were made in May of 1922. The automobile had reached a new peak in popularity, and greater numbers were being seen in Weatherford. However, bad weather made roads muddy and undriveable. Paving was the solution to this problem. The contract for paving started with only Main Street, which made up the business district of Weatherford. The city commissioners let the Standard Paving Company of Tulsa have the contract. The price per square yard, including excavation, curbing, etc. was \$4.77. The contract provided that the two west blocks would be 72 feet wide while the east block would extend to 76 feet because of the narrower sidewalks. The work started ten days after this agreement was made and ended about thirty days after the beginning of the work. After it was done, seven blocks of Custer Street were also paved. This was not in the original contract.

Ralph Crall, a longtime farmer and teacher, helped work on the paving project. He remembers how the project took place:

First, the roads were fine-graded; after that, 4 inches of concrete were laid, then 1 inch of sand. Eight-pound bricks were laid, and finally, asphalt was poured over and between the bricks to seal them. The brick-laying was all done by one man. He would go from one side of the street to the other, setting each brick by hand. One man would push a wheelbarrow full of bricks and set them down for the brick-layer. He never missed a beat.

By 1929, Weatherford had "54 blocks of pavement." That same year, Charly Penn, a longtime resident, recalled how much Weatherford had changed since its incorporation. He recalled how The Choctaw Townsite Company camped on the spot now occupied by the Farmer's Telephone

Company, and how the construction of the Rock Island Road brought in a population that needed grocery stores, hotels, and saloons, which were often hastily constructed out of tents. Other early landmarks that had disappeared from Weatherford's Main Street included the old Weatherford Drug Store which was replaced by the Weatherford Drug Store and Cain Hotel, and the Old Park Hotel which was being replaced by the new Chevrolet garage.

Many townspeople were ready for this local progress in the community, but many continued to look to the older, traditional views of the past, and for organizations to promote this outlook. By 1920, there were fewer than 5,000 members of the Klu Klux Klan (KKK) nationally. The KKK wanted to get the group reestablished. Moreover, the KKK leaders believed that if the numbers grew locally, then they would soon improve at a national level. Col. William Joseph Simmons led the KKK in its reestablishment, and in 1921, the KKK was represented in all but three states. In April of 1923, the KKK staged a large rally on Main Street with many of its members on hand in their klan regalia (although *The Weatherford Booster* passed on the report that those in regalia "were citizens of surrounding towns.") A fiery cross was even erected on the roof of the Daughty Building. Ostensibly, the purpose of the rally was to dispel "the erroneous conception of the purposes and workings of the organization." *The Weatherford Booster* did report that the Klan had a large following locally even though it appeared less strong in western and southwestern Oklahoma than in other parts of the state. During the summer of 1923, the Klan increased its activities throughout Oklahoma. Governor John Walton then engaged in a bitter fight with both the Klan and the State Legislature, culminating in his impeachment and removal from office in November of that same year.

Less controversial than the role of the KKK in Weatherford in the twenties, but still a hotly con-





Southwestern Normal, 1912

Photo courtesy Vonda McPhearson

tested debate at the time, was the question of where to locate the county seat. For example, one tax levy Weatherford did oppose in this period was the July 1919 vote on a tax levy to build a courthouse in Custer County. Weatherford, along with every other town in the county except Arapaho, opposed the levy, which went down to defeat.

The vote reflected the struggle between the proponents of Arapaho and Clinton to lay final claim to the county seat.

An anonymous letter to the residents of Thomas and Weatherford, reprinted in the November 10, 1921 edition of *The Weatherford Booster*, makes plain how strongly folks felt about the politics of the county seat.

The letter accuses civic leaders in the two towns of selling out to the Clinton Chamber of Commerce by doing all they can to throw the county seat to Clinton in the December 6th election. But the letter writer is not surprised at the sell-out of Weatherford and Thomas, given the fact that the two towns are filled with preachers and cheap poli-

ticians, and that for the longest time the poorest breed of gamblers, prostitutes, and preachers comprised the bulk of the towns' populations. After observing that "politics are undermining the very foundation of the leading protestant churches," and suggesting that protestants emulate the more vigorous Jewish faith and Catholic Church by steering clear of hot political issues, the author concludes by assuring the residents of Weatherford and Thomas that "when you answer jury duty service or start a lawsuit, as long as you remain in Custer County, you will be compelled to do this business in Arapaho for the rest of your time."

On August 2, 1923, Weatherford was shocked nationally when President Warren G. Harding died suddenly. Many were alarmed because he had only been in office for two years. The true cause of the President's death is still not known because an autopsy was never performed. At one time, the cause was said to be food poisoning. Later, doctors in San Francisco said he suffered from pneumonia. As such, Calvin

Coolidge became the next President of the United States.

In the wake of the President's death, individuals living in Weatherford tried to keep focused. In March of 1923, A.L. Thornton of the Chickashaw Cotton Seed Oil Company purchased the old cotton gin site and seven adjoining lots. By June of that same year, the new cotton gin was up and running under the management of W. C. Hart. In May of 1924, a four year effort by the Weatherford Chamber of Commerce and other interested parties to obtain a Field Artillery Unit of the Oklahoma National Guard paid off when one of the two remaining firing batteries in Arizona, Battery "D," 158th Field Artillery, was transferred to Weatherford. Several months later, early Weatherford lost one of its landmark buildings when the Anhauser-Busch building on Main Street and Broadway was torn down in the wake of serious fire damage. It had served as part of the original townsite company, a saloon, a barber shop, and as a doctor's office.

In September of 1925, Lee Ratcliffe opened his first bookstore with \$4.25 cash in his hand and with another borrowed \$2.00. Ratcliffe had previously run his father's sandwich shop. However, this shop only had three to four shelves; there was hardly room to buy or sell used books. In 1936, the store moved to its present location and is still successful today.

In 1928, Ralph Logan Lockstone was elected as the mayor of Weatherford and was named president of the Weatherford Kiwanis Club. After Lockstone took over as mayor, Weatherford still had only two paved streets, Custer from Main to the college and three blocks on Main Street through the business section. Therefore, he had Caddo and Bradley Street paved also. Furthermore, Lockstone purchased land for the first city park and opened municipal swimming pools. Lockstone's many efforts led to growth and prosperity in the Weatherford community.

The 1920s witnessed a rise both in state financial support and student enrollments at the Southwestern State Teacher's College. During the war years, state support for Southwestern ranged from \$40,000 to \$60,000, but in 1920, state support totaled \$79,466, the most liberal disbursement from the state Southwestern had ever received. (The state legislature also disbursed more funds to other state regional colleges.) By 1927, the state appropriation had reached \$176,500. In 1921, the State Board of Education revised and raised the salary schedule at Southwestern. Instructors would earn a minimum of \$1,500 a year, assistant professors, a minimum of \$2,100, and associate professors, a minimum of \$2,700. The minimum salary for a full professor would be \$3,300 with a maximum of \$4,000.

Southwestern registered impressive enrollments in the 1920s. In the fall of 1921, over 300 students enrolled, double the total of the previous year. In 1922, enrollment reached 357, and the following year it exceeded 400.

To cope with rising enrollments, in May, 1925, two Weatherford businessmen, Carl Remund and R. Hoberecht, purchased the Park Hotel and converted it into a girls' dormitory for fifty students. The building, though privately owned, was supervised by college officials. Mel Fiegel points out that this action represented Southwestern's first known attempt to house and feed a large number of students in one dwelling.

The most important achievement at Southwestern in the 1920s, though, was its winning of accreditation in March, 1922. As Mel Fiegel observes, having been admitted to the North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools, "Southwestern was now a college in fact as well as name." The college then initiated a grading system which covered all areas of any given student's work. Seventy percent became the passing grade. Fiegel makes it plain that with accreditation came tougher standards.



New buildings also went up around campus in the 1920s. In March, 1926, Southwestern opened its first physical education building. The \$40,000 gymnasium featured a playing court with seating for 2,000, and was located northeast of the administration building. On Tuesday, May 21, 1929, Southwestern's new \$100,000 library was dedicated.

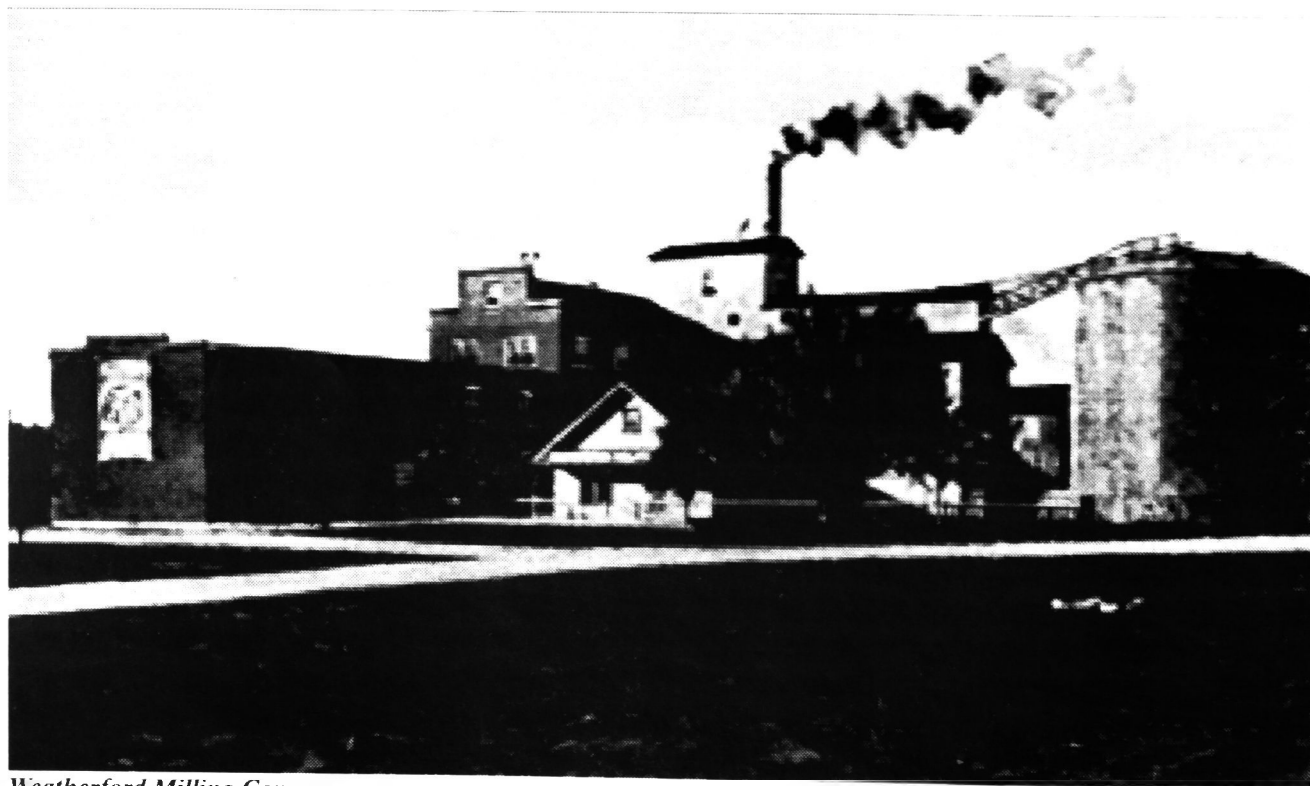
In the early 1920s, the Weatherford Public Schools boasted a staff of 15 teachers with an enrollment of 300 in the grade school and about 100 in the high school. Space was at a premium in the public schools, especially for the high school classes. Some high school students had to use grade school rooms. As *The Weatherford Booster* reported, the "lack of room is cramping every department." and so apparently the need for additional facilities extended beyond the high school. By 1922, 175 students were enrolled in the high school, and more than 30 students, a record to that date, turned out for football tryouts.

The close of the twenties brought economic dislocation to the country when stock market prices collapsed. The day of October 24, 1929 is remembered as "Black Thursday." Many individuals believed that the crash was the first phase of the Great Depression and world economic crisis. Americans speculated on stocks in unprecedented numbers and often overextended themselves. Banks and businesses had bought stock and lost everything. American stock losses were close to fifty billion dollars. As such, this loss is known as the worst American depression.

Thus, the post-World War I era closed with the stock market crash of 1929, and the approaching thirties would be sorely scarred by the crash as well as new national challenges such as Depression and the Dust Bowl.



Copies of *Weatherford: 1898-1998* can be purchased by calling (580) 772-7101



Weatherford Milling Company

Photo courtesy Vonda McPhearson

