

## SOUTHWESTERN NORMAL SCHOOL: THE FOUNDING OF AN INSTITUTION

By James H. Thomas and Jeffrey A. Hurt\*

As is the case with the establishment of most institutions, the location of Southwestern State Normal School at Weatherford, Oklahoma, was determined by a combination of skillful negotiations, political intrigue and state lobbyists. But in the case of Southwestern, hardy frontiersmen fighting for an element of culture in a land that was still wild and untamed added a quality of Romanticism to the struggle. The people of southwestern Oklahoma fought for a school as they had fought for everything else—with unwavering determinism.

The rapid population increase in western Oklahoma, following the land rush of 1892, created many problems that were unique to the American frontier. The dozens of towns and hundreds of homesteads that sprang up practically overnight brought thousands of school-aged children to the area. Schools were erected, but there was an insufficient number of qualified teachers available to offer an adequate educational program. The State Department of Public Instruction attempted to train public school teachers with two-week workshops but failed to make a sizable improvement in the quality or quantity of teachers in western Oklahoma. However, in 1901, the Territorial Legislature of Oklahoma responded to the situation by authorizing establishment of a normal school in southwestern Oklahoma to train teachers.<sup>1</sup>

The state legislature knew that the normal would provide an economic boom to any community selected as a building site. Therefore, the town chosen would be required to furnish a forty acre tract within one mile of the city limits of the town and to provide \$5,000 for building fence, planting trees and beautifying the campus.<sup>2</sup> This was a large amount of both land and money for the fledgling towns to acquire. However, several towns responded enthusiastically, and soon fierce rivalries developed for the school's location.

Granite and Mangum in Greer County, Cordell in Washita County, Weatherford in Custer County and El Reno in Canadian County contended

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<sup>1</sup> Melvin Frank Fiegel, "A History of Southwestern State College, 1903-1953," Doctor of Philosophy Dissertation, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma, 1968, pp. 3-4.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

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The original structure which housed Southwestern Normal School before it was destroyed by fire in 1939

for the honor of building the first normal school in southwestern Oklahoma. El Reno, the largest of the communities, with a 1900 population of 3,383 was never seriously considered, presumably because it was not in southwestern Oklahoma.<sup>3</sup> This argument was also used against Weatherford, but apparently to no avail. Ultimately the struggle involved the two smallest communities, Weatherford and Granite, and the rivalry grew to bitter proportions.

In accordance with the law passed by the legislature, Governor C. M. Barnes had appointed a five-man committee to select a site for the new school. Original plans had been for the school to be completed by the fall of 1902, but intense competition and politics forced delays. Also, the committee that was chosen in May, 1901, did not make its selection before President William McKinley appointed a new territorial governor, William M. Jenkins.

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<sup>3</sup> United States Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910* (11 vols., Washington: Government Printing Office, 1913), Vol. III, p. 441.

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The committee appointed by Barnes had been inactive, but most indications seemed to be in favor of Weatherford as its choice for the school site. But in August, Governor Jenkins revived Granite's hopes by appointing a new committee to make the selection, without having informed the Barnes appointees of their dismissal. Weatherford boosters soon realized the implications of this ploy, and within the week, the *Custer County Republican* condemned Jenkins' actions. The editor charged that Jenkins deliberately appointed a new committee that would not select Weatherford.

Determined not to lose the normal school, Weatherford supporters raised \$10,000 to pay for any future legal action that would be needed to oppose the new board's decision. During the final weeks of August it became apparent that the new governor's appointees would select Granite, and that the old committee favored Weatherford. *The Granite Enterprise* charged that the Barnes group had been swayed by alcoholic refreshments while riding to Weatherford on the Choctaw Railroad, therefore nullifying any decision made by the group.<sup>4</sup>

On September 19, the Jenkins committee officially announced that their choice for the school's location was Granite. The Weatherford supporters ignored the committee's report and filed a deed setting aside forty acres of land at the north edge of the city limits for the school. The Barnes committee finally made their decision, selecting Weatherford as the designated site. Thus, both Weatherford and Granite were officially chosen as the location for the normal school by two separate committees, both of which were still officially active. Governor Jenkins rejected the Barnes committee's decision and began arbitration for construction of the school at Granite. However, Weatherford boosters filed an injunction in the District Court of Oklahoma County to halt construction of the school in Granite. George T. Webster was retained as legal council and made a prediction that Weatherford would ultimately gain a victory.<sup>5</sup>

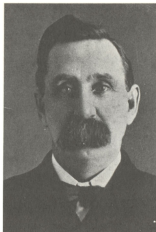
The Granite community fought a verbal and legal battle to retain the decision of the Jenkins board. The local newspaper suggested that its readers ignore the injunction, and smugly predicted that when "it reaches the higher court it will last about as long as a grasshopper in a blizzard"<sup>6</sup> However, the District Court of Oklahoma County issued a permanent injunction in April, 1902. The court not only prevented the construction of the school in Granite, but also contended that the Barnes committee was the legal

<sup>4</sup> *Granite Enterprise* (Granite), August 29, 1901.

<sup>5</sup> Fiegel, "A History of Southwestern State College, 1903-1953."

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

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James R. Campbell, first president of Southwestern Normal School

agent for the selection of the school site. Moreover, when the case was appealed, the Oklahoma Supreme Court upheld the lower court's verdict, and in October, 1902, Weatherford claimed victory.<sup>7</sup>

However, the Granite supporters did not give up. They prepared to campaign against the normal school bill in hopes of having it repealed during the legislative session of 1903. The next month, Weatherford sent a group to Guthrie, territorial capital of Oklahoma, to obtain permission to start construction of the school. The Board of Education promised that funds would be made available and that classes could start in the fall of 1903. In addition, the Superintendent of Public Instruction and the members of the Board of Education visited and approved the proposed school site at Weatherford.

Granite's last ditch effort to stop the normal school at Weatherford came in the form of a bill that would repeal the Normal School Act entirely and divide the funds set aside for it among the existing schools of the territory. The Territorial Council narrowly defeated the bill by a vote of seven to six, and Weatherford's victory was final.

The town that was to house the normal school was not the ideal college town. When the news of the October court victory arrived, the citizens of Weatherford celebrated by firing shotguns and pistols into the air and constructing a huge all night bonfire which consumed several of the town's buildings.<sup>8</sup> The citizens of Weatherford, as with all other western Oklahoma towns, were for the most part hardy, industrious folk with little education or culture, used to a rough existence. However, the remainder of the population composed of transients seeking work, fugitives escaping from the law of the organized states and confirmed roamers looking for a hand-

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>8</sup> *History of Custer and Washita Counties, Oklahoma* (Clinton, Oklahoma: *Clinton Daily News*, 1937), n.p.

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Aerial view of the school, which was constructed on a hill to provide a commanding view of the countryside

out gave Weatherford a national reputation. In 1898, when the founder of the Anheuser Busch Company, Adolphus Busch, decided to see the West where it was "wildest and wooliest," he chose to spend a week in Weatherford.<sup>9</sup> Saloons, dance halls and brothels thrived, and many forms of violence, including gun fights, were not out of the ordinary. However, the proposed normal infected the citizens of Weatherford with a new civic responsibility; and before the school was well established, most of the detrimental characteristics were eradicated.

The building of the school began with the laying of the first cornerstone on July 4, 1903.<sup>10</sup> A local contractor and farmer, Henry Vandenburg, began work on the building and projected that the building would be completed in December of that year.<sup>11</sup> The building was to contain its own electric, water and sewer systems, as those in the town were either too inefficient or not in existence at the time. When completed, the handsome red brick building was

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

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not only an excellent example of modern architecture but also a self-contained educational institution. The seventeen classrooms, auditorium, reception room, library, music rooms and science laboratories provided adequate facilities for the students and faculty.

When September arrived, students came to enroll in the new school, but the building was still far from complete. Undaunted, President James Campbell provided classroom space for his faculty of twelve and his student body of 113 in a church and several abandoned saloons.<sup>12</sup> The twelve faculty members who, according to Vice-President and Instructor of Education and Drawing, Austin E. Wilbur, were the "pluckiest group I have ever known," seemed to adjust to the adverse conditions.<sup>13</sup> Apparently, the administration had fewer problems adjusting to the conditions.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, the Normal school building was completed two months behind schedule. On February 23, 1904, amid considerable pomp, the building was officially occupied, and Southwestern Normal School became an institution. As was envisioned by the original supporters, the school in Weatherford sat atop a hill with a commanding view of the surrounding countryside. It was an imposing building with a beautiful view, and the community was proud of its impressive addition. Almost immediately, the influx of students and teachers made an impact on the community. The school became as much a focal point of the community as the saloons and gun fights had five years before.

The school grew slowly but steadily in both enrollment and stature. In 1908, it was necessary for the Oklahoma legislature to appropriate \$100,000 to build a new building for the school. The enrollment had grown to 501 and the faculty had increased to 22.<sup>15</sup> Apparently, the new building was needed more than even the most farsighted official could foretell, because by 1910, when the building was completed, the school's enrollment had more than doubled. In spite of the changes wrought by the new school, pioneer spirit and pride remained in the town. The expansion of the school's physical plant had rekindled the public spirit and another all night celebration, including a huge bonfire, filled Weatherford's streets.

Subsequent changes, high points and low points, enriched Southwestern's heritage. In December, 1919, the school became a college, expanding their

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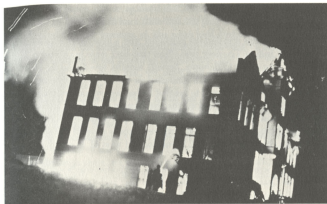
<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Austin Elgin Wilbur, "Reminiscences of Southwestern Normal School, 1903-1908," Library, Southwestern Oklahoma State University, Weatherford, Oklahoma.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Fiegl, "A History of Southwestern State College, 1903-1953," pp. 46, 51.

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The original building of the school being destroyed by fire during the night of July 27-28, 1939

curriculum to include a four-year degree. For the first time, graduates of Southwestern could earn a bachelor's degree. Increased enrollment and added curriculum brought about the need for new buildings, and the school added a library, a gymnasium, more classrooms and dormitories. The school's lowest point, at least in terms of morale, must have come on July 27, 1939, when the original building that Weatherford had fought so hard to gain, then being used as the administration building, was destroyed by fire.

But Southwestern survived and grew, and in the years since has become one of the major institutions in Oklahoma, and is regarded as a national leader in some areas of study. Southwestern Normal School, now officially titled Southwestern Oklahoma State University, has been one of the major reasons for Weatherford's continual prosperity. Those that fought so hard for the school at the turn of the century could not have known that Weatherford's future would be in question. Weatherford once prospered as a terminal for the Choctaw Railroad. However, when the terminal moved to Texas, Weatherford would surely have faded to a whistlestop had it not been for the normal school. The ironies of history prevail—Southwestern University, owing its existence to a dedicated citizenry, repaid its debt by giving the community economic stability.