

THE GOLDEN AGE OF BLOOMFIELD ACADEMY IN THE CHICKASAW NATION

*By Irene B. Mitchell and Ida Belle Renken**

Bloomfield Academy was the work of missionaries who came into the Chickasaw District of Indian Territory. The school developed from an ordinary boarding school for Chickasaw girls to a finishing school of the first order and was sometimes called the "Bryn Mawr of the West." During the Golden Age in the history of Bloomfield the girls who graduated enjoyed a measure of prestige warranted by the standards that had been established and maintained for many years. The school was founded by the Reverend John H. Carr in 1852 and its fame grew because of the desire that the Chickasaw people provide excellent schools for their children and the devotion of the missionaries who came to serve them.

When the missionaries came into the Chickasaw District shortly after the removal of the Indians had been completed they found a wonderfully rich country. This was like a promised land to the missionaries who believed that here in the bosom of the earth lay untold riches; but for them the greater wealth was in the lives of the Indians among whom they had chosen to work. To the Indians this new land was like a trackless wilderness for here there were no homes, no schools, no churches, no cultivated fields, and no one to teach their children.¹

A petition from the Chickasaw Indians was presented to the Seventh Indian Mission Conference at the Choctaw Agency, November 7, 1850, by Reverend John H. Carr. This

*A new dimension in higher education at Oklahoma College of Liberal Arts was achieved when Dr. Irene E. Mitchell, Professor of History and Mrs. Ida Belle Renken, senior were brought into a collegial relationship by their sharing historical research experiences in an Oklahoma History class.

¹Sidney H. Babcock and John V. Berry, *History of Methodism in Oklahoma* (Privately published, 1935), Vol. I, p. 28. The Church Agency provided additional funds for support of teachers.

was a request for a neighborhood school. At this conference the Presiding Elder appointed Reverend John H. Carr as superintendent and discussed a possible site for this school which was in the Island Bayou region of the Chickasaw country, now south of the present town of Durant.

For many years Reverend Carr had served as a missionary and as a circuit rider for the Methodist Church. He was assigned to superintend the construction of a Chickasaw Indian Mission school. The name of this school was chosen in a most unique way. When asked by the school trustee, Mr. Jackson Kemp, where to address his mail while at school, Reverend Carr gazed on every side of him at the prairie flowers in prolific growth and gorgeous bloom and said "Bloomfield!"²

Reverend John H. Carr went East in the summer of 1852 for the purpose of selecting teachers to help him conduct this school. He engaged Miss Angelina Hosmer, of Bedford, Massachusetts, whom he married in June of that year and Miss Susan Jane Johnson of Stockbridge, Massachusetts. Miss Angelina Hosmer had had previous experience as a missionary among the Choctaws.³

When they reached Bloomfield in the fall of 1852 the building was not completed. An experienced carpenter, Reverend Carr assisted in completing the structure. At first a neighborhood school was conducted for both boys and girls but soon Bloomfield became a boarding school for girls.

²*Indian Pioneer History*, Foreman Collection (Oklahoma Historical Society), No. 7335, p. 335. Interview with Mrs. Georgia Lee Carr McCoy. Other sources give the credit of naming Bloomfield to Jackson Kemp. Picture No. 2369 in Oklahoma Historical Society is named Jackson Kemp, Chickasaw who named Bloomfield Academy.

³Inscription on Mrs. Carr's tombstone in Old Bloomfield Cemetery located a short distance northwest of the first site of the school.

In Memory

of

Angelina H.

Wife of Rev. J. H. Carr

Born in Mass. April 1, 1820

Died Sept. 28, 1894

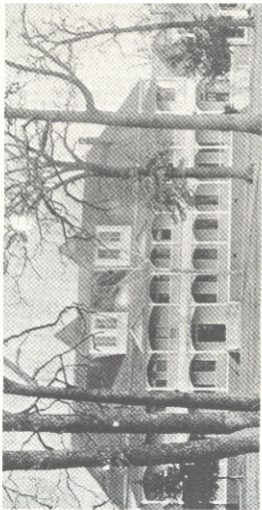
For more than 15 years a missionary to the Choctaw and Chickasaw Indians.

During the years prior to the Civil War Bloomfield, like the other mission schools, was on the industrial order plan. The girls showed progress in music, needlework, and homemaking as well as academic studies. No doubt the responsibility for the splendid records of accomplishment came because of the influence of the missionary teachers. They were able to transplant their love of wisdom in such manner as to endow their pupils not only with a keen awareness of righteous living, but also with the desire to learn. These teachers, for the most part young women but recently graduated, created a cultured environment for the Indian children and influenced the social tone of the entire community.

Throughout the Civil War Bloomfield served as a neighborhood school but the building was used as a drug dispensary and a hospital for the Chickasaw Battalion. When the War ended the Chickasaw Nation adopted a new constitution August 16, 1867, which specifically stated quality education should be provided for their young people. A number of educators directed the affairs of Bloomfield, from 1867 to 1876 including Captain Frederick Young, Dr. and Mrs. H. F. Murray, and Mr. Robert Cole.

An issue of the Choctaw newspaper, *The Vindicator*, published at New Boggy, Indian Territory, on June 14, 1873, contained a school report to the editor which said in part: "Send all our children to schools that could be carried on in a manner that would reflect honor on the Nation, besides conferring a lasting good upon the rising generation... and in their belief we ask the help and support of every sober thinking mind of our country. Let us inaugurate schools that will elevate our children to an equal footing with our white brethren...."

On October 9, 1876, Governor B. F. Overton signed an act establishing a female seminary at Bloomfield Academy under the contract system. The Superintendent of Chickasaw Schools and the National School Board consisting of three members agreed: "The Contract shall not be made but with those of the highest moral character, or Christian standing,



BLOOMFIELD ACADEMY

This was the last Chickasaw academy building erected at the site of Bloomfield in 1896

with practical and successful experience in teaching and managing a first-class boarding school."⁴ The first contractors to operate the academy were Mr. J. E. Wharton, Mr. Robert L. Boyd, and Mr. Douglas H. Johnston.

During this period of reconstruction, Governor Benjamin C. Burney, in 1879, expressed his concern for education of the Chickasaw youth. He said, "Education is the lever by which our people are to be raised to a mental level with our surroundings. . . ."⁵ Truly the next two decades were the Golden Age of Bloomfield.

The history of the Chickasaw educational system extended throughout the Nation until their youths possessed a cultural and educational background that excelled in the Indian Territory. In every part of the state of Oklahoma one sees evidence of this training and the contribution made by the girls who attended Bloomfield Academy. The descendants of these girls of Bloomfield have received a cultural heritage that is of intrinsic, aesthetic value coupled with a religious fervor that will be forever a blessing to them.

A discovery of unprinted material concerning Bloomfield Academy in 1904 reveals education at this Indian institute for Chickasaw girls was more modern than today. A cultural environment was created which continued to influence the social tone in Oklahoma. Bloomfield Academy was a highly selective school and only the best scholars attended. The girls excelled in all the performing arts. Dedicated teachers and an excellent staff helped the girls become a part of a unique culture which has permeated the warp and the woof of Oklahoma's culture today.

One such young lady was Helen Birdie Smith, a member of the graduating class at Bloomfield Academy in 1904.

⁴Constitution, *Treaties and Laws of the Chickasaw Nation*, (Atoka, I. T., 1896), p. 98.

⁵John Bartlett Meserve, "Governor Benjamin Franklin Overton and Governor Benjamin Burney," *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, XVI, June, 1938, p. 227.

Birdie Smith was born February 15, 1884 near Tishomingo, Indian Territory, and died November 18, 1970 at Chickasha, Oklahoma. She was the daughter of Woodford T. Smith and Syrena Cheadle Smith. Her father, Woodford T. Smith was Superintendent of Collins Institute for a number of years.

The Smith family was indeed proud of Birdie who was selected to attend Bloomfield Academy at the turn of the century. From the very beginning the Chickasaw legislators were most exacting in setting up the standards for Bloomfield Academy. The girls selected for this school were between the ages of nine and eighteen and each family was allowed only one daughter to attend at a time and for no longer than a five-year period. The standards prescribed for entrance included: the ability to read well in the *McGuffey's Fifth Reader*, spell well, and read the *New Testament*, and be of good moral character. ⁶

Birdie Smith made progress at Bloomfield in her academic studies, in performing the arts, and learning the social graces. She and the other students at Bloomfield Academy were progressing in the usual manner characteristic of a girls' boarding school. Although the scholastic requirements were strictly adhered, the students had many carefree hours both outdoors and within the school buildings.

This leisure time found many of the girls riding horseback down lanes shaded by innumerable trees or through the meadow that skirted the placid lake on the eastern edge of the Bloomfield farm. Sometimes the girls found the forbidden pleasures most alluring and for the infringement of school regulations punishment was meted out. Such an incident was related by an employee of the school as follows:⁷

I worked at Bloomfield for two years when it was located near Old Kemp. Freightd supplies from Dornison, broke horses for the girls to ride, cared for the cattle and hogs belonging to the Academy, and

⁶ *The Indian Champion*, Atoka, I. T. May 24, 1884.

⁷ *Indian Pioneer History*, Vol: 07, No. 4871, p. 239.

washed dishes. Douglas H. Johnston was the superintendent. Every Saturday he and the principal went to Denison. The girls stacked the benches in the auditorium and danced. The leaders were to be whipped but they ran off. It was cold and snowing so I felt sorry and hitched up a team and took them home.

The academy maintained strict discipline but the girls were allowed an unusual amount of freedom in governing themselves. Birdie was a leader not only in her class but had the respect of the entire student body. She gave a "Talk to the Girls" that expressed her feelings about dating:

You must always be thinking about what you are doing when young men are about. You must mind how you throw out your bouquets and roses and fillets²¹ or you will find yourself like minnows in muddy water. In fact, it is the easiest thing in the world for some chaps to think they can court you. . . . All Christendom can't keep them from thinking because your body is in their presence that your *heart* is there also.

You may appear as lovely as liquid bloom and lily white can make a young lady of the period, but you must not be peering at a pair of whiskers over the edge of a feathery fan, if they catch you napping, first thing you know they will have you labeled with their image. In fact, *courtship* is something like fishing. — You throw out the baited hook, soon the excited cork, bobbing up and down, elicits bright anticipations, that you will in a moment draw up a beautiful sunny pearl of the deep, and lo! you swing out one of the ugliest, mossy blacked, *stump-narrative* monsters of creation, just as ugly in his form and will never let loose till it thunders.

Keep your eyes open but it won't do to trust too much appearances either. If a young man calls at your Pa's, whose *business* you can very well guess, some cold Saturday evening, and looks in the face something like a heated furnace, you get some of the little fellows under the buggy seat to see if there is not a terrapin shape bottle there with something in it as strong as Sarnappur. In a word as he passes the door he leaves an odor something like unto cloves drowned in a whiskey barrel.

Some men's souls seem to be very low down, even down in a slick pair of boots; if you will watch such a one quite close you will find he has a *peculiar* attachment for some domestic affairs. He has a wonderful liking about how his mother does things; *depend* upon it you will have to do *just like she does* and you'll never know what sort of condition you're in, till you find yourself *awfully* tididled [*sic.*] over the narrow track of domestic expenditures. I say he won't do, and if you'll sail around Cape-lookout again you'll find he is *actually* tied to his mamma's apron strings and goes whittling to her for advice.

²¹—A narrow band, ribbon, or the like, worn around the head to keep the hair in place or as an ornament.

All is not *gold* that *glitters* either. That *butter-fly* looking that dazzles out in a society as *polished* as a *looking glass*, *shines* from bottom to top, but on the other side he is *perfect quick silver*, he is a *domestic caterpillar*, a *moth moody*, *exacting*, you'd not know him at home. There is another kind of disease quite puzzlesome sometimes known as *contrariness*: some of them would sometimes be quite a *jewel*, a *good grab*, if it wasn't for that. . . . Such occasions magnified anticipation for flatters and flirts continually tugging at your heart strings with their sickle formalities. They won't do either. They make a sensible person think of a dose of *castor oil*, *pretty* and *slick* but the very mischief to take. Courtship, flattery, flirtation and jealousy make quite a cautious compound and the *young lady* that analyzes them without being strained with either ingredient is indeed a very expert chemist.

In the early 1900's the curriculum at Bloomfield was equal to the course of study offered in present day junior colleges and the girls were allowed to select their courses from a variety of subjects, such as logic, chemistry, astronomy, botany, typing, art, elocution, and music.* During the heyday of Bloomfield, the girls who graduated from the Academy held diplomas which were sufficient proof of their ability to teach school within the Chickasaw Nation without the usual teachers' examinations. The school was considered the cultural institution in the southern part of Indian Territory. This came about largely through the progressive methods used in the teaching of music and painting. At the Louisiana Purchase Exposition held in St. Louis in 1904, the Indian Territory Exhibit received very favorable comments and a prize was awarded to the art department of Bloomfield.

The requirements for graduation were rigid. The girls enrolled at Bloomfield Seminary were required to take written and oral final examinations in all the subjects. Many weeks were spent in reviewing and preparing for public exercises during which the parents and friends were allowed

*An interview with Mrs. Julia Chisholm Davenport, December 29, 1931. Mrs. Davenport was the granddaughter of Jesse Chisholm and niece of Governor Douglas H. Johnston, Chief of the Chickasaws. She lived with the Johnston family and attended Bloomfield during the time her uncle was superintendent of the Academy. A cousin of Mrs. Davenport and niece of Governor D. H. Johnston was Alice Hearrell, a graduate of Bloomfield. She was the gracious and charming First Lady of Oklahoma when her husband William H. Murray served as Governor of Oklahoma, 1901-1905.

to question the students and assist in conducting the examinations. In later years at Bloomfield, this public examination was replaced by the more traditional graduation services and each member of the graduating class was required to write an original essay and deliver this paper at the commencement exercises. This prerequisite to graduation was an integral part of the exercises taking the form of entertainment similar to the valedictory and salutatory addresses of today. The girls of the graduating class of the early 1900's selected a costume that appeared to be the standard apparel for a number of classes. They wore full, wide gored skirts of black serge that were ankle length revealing only a small portion of the black high buttoned shoes that were in vogue. The graduating seniors wore fashion plates of loveliness in their long sleeved, elaborately tucked shirtwaists of white lawn styled with high collars trimmed with bands of black ribbon for certain gala occasions. Highly decorative belts were worn by the girls.⁹ When they went as a group on shopping trips or visits to other schools in Indian Territory they were required to wear black mortar-board academic caps with the initials, "B. B." (Bloomfield Blossoms) embroidered in bright yellow. In preparation for the formal graduation ceremony, the senior girls of the class of 1904, selected white Japanese silk material for their graduation dresses. The girls designed and made by hand their ankle length, identical dresses.¹⁰ They also memorized musical compositions to be performed during the graduation program. The most important preparation for the graduation exercises was the writing of their essays. The class of six senior girls included Lucy Young, Jane Newberry, Charlotte Goforth, Myrtle Conner, Ramona Bynum, and Birdie Smith who wrote their essays on subjects ranging from History of Indian Territory to world peace. Birdie Smith was valedictorian of her class and received the Masters of Dramatic degree. Her graduation speech was as follows:

*An interview with Mrs. Wayne Hill, Houghton, Okla. October 10, 1951.

¹⁰Interviews with Mrs. Birdie Smith Butler, #24 South Eighth Street, Chickasha, Oklahoma, the summer of 1970. A tribute to her memory at the time of her death on November 18, 1970, appeared in *The Chickasha Daily Express*, Chickasha, Oklahoma.

All the good things of the earth first had their birth in the fancy of some idealist. And in spite of the fact that several of the great nations of the world are still engaged in strife, the voice of prophecy proclaims that the era of peace is sure to come. We have seen among the most advanced and progressive nations of the earth a growing tendency to submit their disputes to arbitration. And instead of being ambitious to excel at arms, they are seeking commercial and educational supremacy. As it is with the individual so it will be with the nation. As the spirit of peace finds root and flourishes in each individual soul the possibility of clashes between nations will become more and more remote. Health, happiness, and true success can only exist either for the individual or for the nation, where peace and harmony can rule. The man who hates his brother or seeks to injure him is sure to reap a harvest of sorrow because he is violating the great law of peace and friendship.

As we come more and more under the influence of the One Law and give up our individual lives more and more fully to its influence, we see clearly that the best interests of one are bound up with the good of the Whole. Education in the laws of life is the great promoter of peace and well-being. Men must be taught the oneness of all life and the spirit of altruism must be aroused in them. They must be shown that the father-hood of God and the brother-hood of man is something more than a figure of speech. That it has a scientific foundation and is going to become an actuality upon this earth. The first and foremost instinct of man on the animal plane is self-preservation. But as he advances in spiritual unfoldment he learns that the law of the universe is peace and order.

Then in proportion as the nations of the earth come to live at peace with each other and to replace jealousy and strife with true helpfulness and cooperation, they will find themselves developing true strength and permanency. For harmony in all its forms is temporal while peace and harmony are eternal. With universal peace we can be one great and loving nation. The grandest enterprises may be carried forward, our loftiest aspirations may be reached and our highest ambitions realized. Peace has its own peculiar victories in comparison with which Marathon, and Bannockburn and Bunker Hill, fields which are held sacred in the history of human freedom, shall lose their lustre. In all time to come may the grandeur of men be discerned, not in bloody victories nor in ravenous conquests, but in the blessings which they shall secure, in establishment of perpetual peace.

Dear parents, it is through your agency and inducement that we, the class of 1904, have reached this day, a day which will be a remarkable period within our lives. Kind teachers, we hope you have not labored in vain to make women of us which our country will be proud. We appreciate your kind words of advice and the interest you have manifested in us. Dear loving schoolmates, we have been a joyful happy band and now that the day has come for us to part, let us remember each other kindly and try to make use of the great lessons we have learned. Now, to all Farewell! Farewell to Bloomfield, the pride of all true Bloomfield Blossoms!

Graduation was considered a great occasion and social event in the Chickasaw Nation. All the prominent Chickasaws



BIRDIE SMITH
GRADUATE OF BLOOMFIELD ACADEMY
1904

were present for these graduation festivities. An interesting musical and literary program was presented to the family and friends of the graduates. Thursday was devoted to graduation exercises and to entertaining the guests. The girls were long remembered for their excellent performances. Music and drama at Bloomfield Academy were a part of the culture and had a lasting influence upon life in the Chickasaw Nation and indirectly has had a place in Oklahoma. This cultural heritage among the Chickasaws received from the graduates of Bloomfield left its impress in the state of Oklahoma. An article in the *Denison Semi-Weekly Herald* described the graduation at Bloomfield Seminary in June, 1904.¹¹ Outstanding among the graduates of Bloomfield was Birdie Smith, a gracious lady who loved beauty, gained wisdom, and shared the understanding of her Indian culture.

¹¹ Edwin C. McReynolds, *Oklahoma A History of the Sooner State*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1934, p. 414. The article from the *Denison Semi-Weekly Herald* in June, 1904, describes the graduation exercises at Bloomfield. See *Appendix* at the end of this article.

APPENDIX

(From *The Semi-Weekly Denison Herald*, June, 1904)

Season Is Ended

Closing exercises of Bloomfield Seminary were held last Thursday.

School Made Good Record

Attendance was not large on account of rains but the program rendered by the pupils was very elaborate. — Games and Barbecue.

The closing exercises of the Bloomfield Seminary for the season of 1903 and 1904 were held Thursday and the faculty have just cause for pride in the showing made not only by the graduates but by the entire corps of students. The rains and bad condition of the public roads caused a falling off in attendance at the closing exercises. About six hundred visitors were present which is less than half the usual attendance. The guests were from all portions of the Territory.

The program this season was even more interesting than in former years and those who braved the elements were well repaid for their trouble. Preceding the exercises of Thursday an interesting musical and literary program was rendered on Wednesday evening for the entertainment of the parents of students and other visitors who had come from a distance.

Thursday the entire day was given to the entertainment of the guests and the program for the commencement exercises.

An interesting feature of the morning's program was a contest between two teams of Indian club swingers. The members of each club wore halves of rosettes of yellow and black ribbons, and at the close of the contest the victors were given the colors of the opposing team and were decorated with the full rosette which they had won after a close and spirited contest. Miss Sophia Frye, of Ardmore, was the captain of the black ribbon class which won the victory. The yellow ribbon class was captained by Miss Carrie Young of Berwin. The judges of the contest were W. J. Boudard, W. R. Hume, and J. W. Johnson.

During the morning recess the two basketball teams gave an interesting exhibition of basketball which was highly appreciated by the spectators. The game was played on the seminary campus. The remainder of the morning hours were taken up with recitations, readings, and contests.

The graduating class numbered six young ladies, Misses Ramona Bynum, Myrils Conner, Jane Newberry, Charlotte Goforth, Laey Young, and Birdie Smith.

The room in which the exercises were held was prettily decorated with the class colors of pink and white and the class flower a white rose was much in evidence.

The exercises for the afternoon commenced with an invocation by Rev.

C. A. Burris delivered in the Chickasaw language. Rev. Burris is one of the oldest Chickasaws and is considered the orator of the Chickasaw Nation.

The program rendered by the graduates and students was as follows:

Chorus, "Summer Fancies," Metra Glee Club.

Salutatory, "The Development of the Indian Territory." — Lucy Young
Class Recitation, "Wind".

Orchestra, "Zacatecas," — Cordima.

Essay, "Helen Keller." Jane Newberry.

Piano (30 hands), "Les Amazonas," Stebbog — Carrie Love, Neta Johnson, Carrie Young, Melissa Johnson, Sudie Durham, Lucy White, Grace Moore, Lizzie Grinslade, Effie Archerd, Illa White, Jennie Connelly, Rowena Burks, Eddie Turnbull, Elsie Reynolds, Lorena Eastman.

Poem, "The Lotus Eaters." Tennyson — Fantomined by class; reading by Carrie Young.

Orchestra, "March Edina," Wiegand.

Essay, "Our Alma Mater." — Charlotte Goforth.

Chorus, "A Natural Spell," Briatow Glee Club.

Piano (16 hands), "La Premiere Danseuse," Zetterbatt. — Myrtle Conner, Sophie Frye, Vera Burks, Cecil Burris, Lena Thompson, Minnie Good, Fannie Kemp, Ramona Bynum.

Essay, "A Rough Surface, Polished, Shines Forth in Brilliancy." — Myrtle Conner.

Chorus, "Morn Rise," Czebulka — Glee Club

Solo (6 pianos), "Invitation to a Dance." Weber (op. 65). — Charlotte Goforth, Lucy Young, Birdie Smith, Lucretia Harris, Rennie Colbert.

Essay, "History Making of the Present Age." Ramona Bynum.

Duet (4 pianos), "June Bugs," Holst, Lillie Sacra, Daisy Harris, Illa White, Ruth Enskay, Zula Wolfenbarger, Josie McGeehee, Lena Thompson, Abbie Mead.

Orchestra, "Valse Ninette," Bosce.

Piano (quartette), "Grand March," Wallenhaupt, Charlotte Goforth, Lucy Young, Birdie Smith, Lucretia Harris.

Valedictory, "Peace on Earth." — Birdie Smith.

Graduating Ode, "Dear Sisters. Now Adieu," Ayres — Seniors and Juniors

Presentation of Certificates and Diplomas.

Orchestra composed of twenty-five stringed instruments.

Every number on the program was rendered with that excellence which is only attained after conscientious study and careful training.

Great credit is due the faculty for the excellence displayed by the students and those who witnessed the closing exercises were loud in their praise of the general efficiency displayed in all departments. The faculty for the session was composed of Prof. Elihu B. Hinshaw, superintendent; Earl S. Light, principal; Mrs. E. B. Hinshaw, Matron; Misses Mica Mullins, Zenobia Verborough, E. Jennetta Bennet, Pearl J. Statts, Ruth T. Hubbard, department teachers.

M. V. Cheadle, of Tishomingo, superintendent of public instruction of the Chickasaw Nation delivered an address in which he accorded the faculty great praise for the general tone of excellence established and maintained at Bloomfield and to which the students bear witness not only during their school days but in after life.

At noon Thursday an excellent barbecue and luncheon was furnished the guests through the generosity of Professor Hinshaw. The day was very pleasantly spent and the visitors will long cherish agreeable memories of the occasion. Much of the work displayed in the literary and art departments will find a place at the St. Louis Fair where the school already had an excellent exhibit.