

# “The Future is Very Dark”

## A Professor’s Decision to Resign, 1937

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**The Great Depression hit the nation, striking the state of Oklahoma with especially devastating force. Thomas stuck it out in Oklahoma for as long as he could.**

Alfred Barnaby Thomas was an adventuresome youngster. He was born in Belt, Montana, in April 1896. Before he was 20, he joined a surveying expedition that was exploring the Alaskan coast. When America entered World War I, a week before his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, Thomas enlisted in the Navy and spent the next 19 months overseas. He returned hungry for a college education and enrolled at the University of California in Berkeley. By the time he had earned his bachelor’s degree (1923) and his master’s (1924), he had decided to become a historian. He had fallen under the spell of Herbert Eugene Bolton (1870-1953), one of the country’s most famous and influential historians of the American Southwest. Professor Bolton’s specialty was the exploration and history of the Spanish borderlands—Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Southern California. Before his illustrious career was finished, Bolton had published a dozen books and many scholarly articles. Young Alfred Thomas was determined to follow in his teacher’s footsteps.

He was finishing his Ph.D. dissertation in 1927 at the very moment the University of Oklahoma was hoping to add a new historian to its staff, and Bolton wrote

to the history department about his student: “Thomas is a fine, handsome young man of nearly 30. He has a most attractive, agreeable personality. He is an excellent teacher and a fine scholar. He has already published

several articles in Spanish-American history and is known especially for his contributions to 18<sup>th</sup> century exploration. He came back from Spain full of ideas and loaded down with materials for future research, and I am confident that he will go far as a productive scholar.” Another of his teachers at Berkeley described Thomas as “a young man with an unusually attractive personality with all the earmarks of a good character showing so clearly that you will be convinced at once that in good time he will become an outstanding university professor.”

Alfred B. Thomas arrived in Norman in the fall of 1927 and went immediately to work teaching and writing. He was a fine teacher and an assiduous and hard working scholar of the Southwest. He, like Bolton, explored the Spanish borderlands in numerous books and articles and soon had earned a solid reputation among other historians of the region.

And then the Great Depression hit the nation, striking the state of Oklahoma with especially devastating force. Thomas stuck it out in Oklahoma for as long as he could. His original annual remuneration of \$2,400 had risen to \$2,850 by 1932 (with an additional

\$200 for teaching summer school), but then, as hard times engulfed the state, there came the cuts—his salary was reduced to \$2,664, and there it stayed. By the end of the 1936-37 academic year, he reluctantly concluded that

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Alfred B. Thomas, late in his career at Alabama.



it was time to move on. He was approached by the history department at the University of Alabama, offered a much more attractive salary and made up his mind to leave Oklahoma.

Before resigning, however, he thought it necessary to explain himself and the situation he was facing in Norman to his old teacher back in California. Alfred Thomas' letter to Herbert Bolton, printed below, provides us with a unique and invaluable window into the world-view of University of Oklahoma faculty members during the depths of the Great Depression. It accurately conveys the deep despair that so many of them felt during the 1930s. We may not wish to agree with every particular of Thomas' analysis and indictment of the state's politics and economy, but the tone of hopelessness, the inability to see any light at the end of the tunnel and the factors that he judged to be responsible for the travail are all worth recording here and remembering as we consider how far the University of Oklahoma has come from those dark and discouraging days.

Six days after writing this letter to Bolton, Alfred Thomas wrote another to Edward Everett Dale, chair of the history department, thanking him for his many kindnesses and announcing his resignation. He moved to Alabama and taught there until his retirement in 1964.

If there is any bright spot at all in this sad story, it is this: One of the last undergraduates that Thomas taught in Norman was a youngster named Max Moorhead. Thomas thought that the young man was unusually capable and sent him on to pursue graduate work under his own mentor, Herbert Bolton. Max Leon Moorhead finished his Ph.D. in 1942 and returned to teach at the University of Oklahoma in 1945. A distinguished scholar, devoted teacher and revered colleague, Professor Moorhead continued the Bolton-Thomas tradition until his own retirement in 1975.

May 2, 1937

Professor Herbert E. Bolton  
University of California  
Berkeley, California

Dear Professor Bolton:

Doubtless you have heard one way or another about my intention to resign here and accept a position on the faculty of the University of Alabama. Before taking such a step I would ordinarily of course [have] consulted you. However there are certain elements in the local situation of which you have I am sure no inkling so that I did not feel I could

justifiably put what was my own responsibility upon you for a decision.

One of the elements is that the future of the University of Oklahoma is very dark. We received the equivalent of a 30% cut in our salaries in 1932. The legislature here is about to adjourn and has let us know there will be no restoration of salaries. As it is my own salary after ten years of service amounts to slightly more than \$200 more than when I came here in 1927 at \$2400. . . . In the meantime my family has doubled and living costs are going up so . . . I see myself going into debt with no possible prospect of a salary raise until three years from now when such a raise, if given, would go into effect. . . .

**“The fundamental difficulty with Oklahoma rests in the fact that the state is supporting about forty schools, the most of which pretend to be of higher learning.”**

The fundamental difficulty with Oklahoma rests in the fact that the state is supporting about forty schools, the most of which pretend to be of higher learning. Among these are six fairly large state teachers' colleges, and five state agricultural schools, including the A. and M. at Stillwater. The legislative representatives from the various districts in which these schools are distributed constitute the Educational Block in the legislature, and all of them look upon the University as the common enemy. The A. and M. particularly, which receives a considerable amount

of money from the Federal Government as it is a land grant college, demands and receives an appropriation equal to that of the University although the student enrollment in the A. and M. is less than half of the University. The explanation is that Oklahoma, aside from the oil, is primarily an agricultural state, and among the farmers whom the A. and M. cultivates assiduously, the A. and M. has a strong following and has unhappily resorted to unfair means of antagonizing the farmers in respect to the University. . . . In the only two large cities, Oklahoma City and Tulsa, there are the University of Oklahoma City and the University of Tulsa. The press in both of those cities are vigorous in support of their own institutions and invariably critical of the University. . . . The state teachers colleges because they have been in existence some years now have also built up an alumni that has all the ardor that one usually finds among graduates of small schools. These alumni, frequently members of the legislature, have little sympathy for the legitimate needs of the University either as to salaries or buildings. . . . since 1926 there have been only three buildings erected on the campus, and one of those came from a WPA grant. In this same period the population of the student body has increased from under 3500 to almost 6000. The crowded conditions here are disgraceful. Classes for example are being held in make-shift room[s] erected underneath the stadium. . . . The only bright spot is the probability that the legislature will appropriate money this

year for two buildings, badly needed by the geology school and the petroleum engineering school. This will help the students but cement and brick is a hard diet for faculty.

A second element is the scandalous tax set up in the state, upon which in the last analysis the appropriations for state institutions depends. The oil riches of the state make Oklahoma one of the leading states in natural wealth. However, the powerful oil block in the legislature successfully has prevented adequate taxation of this product which is mainly disposed of beyond the borders of the state. The tax is 5% of the gross production. The resulting income is so small that the state finds it necessary to levy a 2% sales tax which of course falls upon those least able to bear it. . . . In the last analysis, it is the powerful oil group that are mainly responsible for the condition of the state institutions since they oppose all taxation on oil that, if levied at 15% or 20%, could dispense with the sales tax and provide adequate funds to run the state decently. . . . You would think that increasing the oil tax would be simple, but immediately anyone advocates an additional tax, he or she is labeled by the press as a dangerous agitator. . . .

In the third place there is a local condition on the campus that has affected my future here adversely. A year or so ago it became known that promotions without pay, "dry raises" we call them, were to be made. In this department it was generally believed that because of my publications I would be advanced to the status of full professor. The only other possible candidate was a man of my rank, associate professor, who did not have his degree and had published nothing. It caused general surprise when it became known that this individual had been given his full professorship. I immediately went to President Bizzell and asked him what the future for me here was in view of the recent promotion. He told me very frankly that since there were now five full professors in the department of history, I could look for no promotion until there was a vacancy. In plain English that meant that no matter how much research I carried on, how much publication I presented, or how well I taught my classes, my future depended upon what some other individual did! An accident, either demise or resignation of one of those full professors was offered to me as a reward for my work. . . .



**Herbert E. Bolton**  
**The University of California-Berkeley**

Finally, with regard to the University Press which was the main attraction to me as it offers an avenue of publication, there is no absolute assurance that it will continue. Like the rest of the departments in the University, it leads a hand to mouth existence. . . . the board of regents, being business men, expects this Press to pay its own way, if not show a profit! The editor [Joseph A. Brandt, later president of the University of Oklahoma] is hard put to explain the yearly deficit and persuade the

regents to continue the undertaking. A change in the board of regents, the resignation of the editor, whose competency has already drawn the attention of several large publishing houses, could very well end the life of the Press. On the other hand, with the marked increase in salary I shall get at Alabama, it will be possible for me to pay the necessary subsidy to continue my publication. . . .

I secured the position at Alabama entirely on my own merits as I am not acquainted with any member of that faculty. They knew of me only through my publication. Consequently I feel grateful to them for according me the recognition I feel I justly deserve there.

I have felt that this statement of the facts concerning Oklahoma and its future was due you. I trust that under the circumstances you will understand why I did not consult with you, whom I have always regarded as my father-confessor. I also hope that you do not think that I have made

an error in resigning from this position to accept one at Alabama. I feel that with the added salary, making summer work unnecessary, I shall be able to continue my research more effectively than I have been here.

Sincerely yours,

Alfred B. Thomas

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*[Source: Alfred B. Thomas Collection, Rio Grande Valley Historical Collection at the University of Texas-Pan American. Box 49. The author is indebted to Professor Albert Hurtado, who is at work on a biography of Herbert Bolton, for calling this letter to his attention and to Professor Edgar Frost, of the University of Alabama, an OU alumnus, for locating the Thomas photo. The quotations from letters of recommendation for Thomas come from his personnel file, Office of the Provost, Evans Hall.]*