

WITH OPTIMISM FOR THE MORROW

A History of the University of Oklahoma

By CHARLES F. LONG

With his violin tucked under his arm and a hot sun at his back, Fredrik Holmberg started a long walk toward the state hospital at the east end of Main Street. Because the hospital grounds was the only property that even faintly resembled his idea of a college campus, he decided that therein lay his new situation, and he immediately set forth in search of the president and a few college students.

"I didn't think that the people looked much like a school crowd," he recalled. "I saw no one who had the earmarks of a college professor, nor did I notice anyone who looked like a student. Having almost arrived at the buildings, I asked a man if this was the University of Oklahoma. He promptly answered, 'Hell, no! This is the bug house!'"

Holmberg had left the security of Lindsborg, Kansas, where he was a faculty member at Bethany College, and accepted a position in Norman because of the "unbounded opportunities ready for the man who was willing to leave the more populous centers of comfort and come to the desolate and barren plains of Oklahoma."

Although he didn't know the name of the president of the University, he managed to direct an application to him and was promptly engaged as teacher of violin and harmony at the munificent annual salary of \$600. The year was 1903.

There was actually little wonder in Holmberg's error. Men before and after him confused Central State Hospital with the University of Oklahoma. Leaving the hospital grounds a gravely disappointed man, he walked approximately a mile and a half in the September heat across the dusty frontier town to arrive at the scene of his new employment. Again he was to meet with disillusionment.

Standing on the fringe of a wide expanse of prairie seemingly reaching into infinity, Holmberg exclaimed, "Only one building!" Ready to turn back and resign his position, he chanced to meet the president, David Ross Boyd. Because Boyd was one of those optimistic souls who could always see the brighter side of any unpleasant situation and because Holmberg, in spite of rebuffs and letdowns, still retained the adventurous spirit that led him to apply for

the position in the first place, he was persuaded to stay and do his best.

Years later, although he had been assured that Norman was not really a fool's paradise, Holmberg couldn't forget he had come to a crude prairie town with a one-building campus.

"I found the population of Oklahoma different from any other I had known anything about. Other states were somewhat colonized; that is, the people came in groups either from older states or foreign countries, and in the new state would form communities of the same nationality with the same interests as well as the same ideas. In Oklahoma, this was not true at all. On a certain day at a set time, Uncle Sam shot off a pistol, and the preacher, salesman, carpenter, college graduate, illiterate, the lawyer, horse thief—everyone—just made a run and staked down lots or farms side by side, and out of that conglomeration, Oklahoma was formed.

"It stands to reason, therefore, that in the matter of fine arts there would be a sprinkling of people who were genuinely interested. But the majority had never, seemingly, cared or had any inclination to look for the beautiful things in life.

"There was, of course, no fine arts center developed at that time, and so the door was wide open, and it was merely a question of taking advantage of this situation. I soon found that one could start anything in Oklahoma, and there would be no particular opposition to it, but that once a thing was started, it was almost suicide not to be able to carry it on. . . ."

. . . One could start anything in Oklahoma, the man said. Well, this was probably true since almost anything a person undertook in those days was an innovation. But if Holmberg thought Norman was a crude

prairie town when he arrived in 1903, he should have been there right after Uncle Sam fired that pistol.

Main Street a year after the run was a one-hundred-foot-wide stretch of red dirt, packed solid by the steady traffic of horses and wagons. On either side, pedestrians paraded noisily on insecure board ramps, flanked by rectilinear rows of business establishments, including two drygoods stores, four grocery firms, a six-room hotel—The Agnes—promising peace and quiet, and three saloons where occasional brawls or gun fights would liven up the day. Down near the livery stable dust rarely settled where young Clyde Bogle and other twelve- and thirteen-year-olds could be seen playing in the wagon yard. A favorite place to shoot the breeze was in front of the Adkins Building, a two-story structure that housed the Norman State Bank.

It was a dingy little boom town, unsure of itself, wild and crazy, and barely old enough to talk. Yet—despite all—it had been selected by men in high places to be the site of an institution of higher learning.

Specifically, on December 19, 1890, George W. Steele, first governor of the Territory of Oklahoma, approved a bill for the establishment of three educational oases—an agricultural and mechanical college at Stillwater, a normal school at Edmond, and a university at Norman. Mort L. Bixler, editor of a Norman newspaper, and Thomas R. Waggoner, also of Norman, both members of the territory's first legislature, were instrumental in getting their town on the bill.

According to this new act, a university would be located at Norman on the condition that Cleveland County vote bonds to provide \$10,000 to assist in constructing a building. Also, county and Norman resi-

dents were required to donate a campus of forty acres within half a mile of town. So, given one year in which to meet these prerequisites, Norman voiced its approval for incorporation on May 12, 1891, and set the election date for the approval of bonds seven days later.

The bonds received overwhelming support, but disposing of them was another matter. Norman banker Charley Bessent, one of a handful of leaders who maintained the fight for their city's educational center, described those early days:

"The legislature had stipulated that Norman was to pay \$10,000 to the territory when the university was definitely placed here. Immediately the bonds were floated. . . . They were printed on bright, new paper and signed by J. M. Daniel, chairman of the board of county commissioners. Then came disconcerting news. The legislature would refuse to accept the bonds. The legislature would accept \$10,000 in cash only!"

It was extremely difficult to raise this kind of money, the difficulty arising from the fact that there was little or no taxable land in the county. When homesteads were staked out in 1889, settlers were given five years in which to prove their claims. Until the claims were proved, the property was still government land theoretically and could not be taxed. Consequently, it would be three years before settlers' land could be taxed, and, meanwhile, the city and county had no funds.

Despite the lack of taxable property, the people of Norman raised the money. The bonds were sold to an Oklahoma City man for \$7,200, and the remaining \$2,800 was raised by subscription from Norman businessmen. This proved to be quite a sacrifice at a time when cash was an exceedingly

rare commodity. Delbert L. Larsh headed the subscription campaign, and, just five days before the expiration date of the year allowed, \$10,000 was delivered to the territorial treasurer.

In the meanwhile, after endless debate over whether the university should be located on the east or west side of town, forty acres half a mile southwest were bought from S. M. (Dad) Moore for \$1,500. As a supplement, Thomas Waggoner and Larsh each contributed a strip of land which combined to make a broad passageway between their respective tracts, leading from the edge of town to the forty acres and thus providing the bare beginnings of what eventually would be called University Boulevard.

There was method in the madness of these progressive pioneers of Norman. Indeed, similar sacrifices were being made all over the territory. When the country was opened, there was no law providing for an educational system. The only law, actually, which existed in '89 was the proclamation opening the land for settlement.

Parents, on the other hand, were ambitious for their children, and they realized that if they waited for passage of territorial laws, there would be gaps in their schooling. Accordingly, provision was made by county officials for the people to organize their own school districts, the pinch being that they would also have to provide for their own school equipment.

Volunteers were immediately organized to construct little schoolhouses that would soon be dotted over Payne, Logan, Kingfisher, Canadian, Oklahoma, and Cleveland counties. Volunteer hauling, labor, and raw materials solved parts of the problem; donations of money with which to buy nails and window glass and hardware

helped further. But, with this work finished, another requirement was discovered—school furniture. Benches for students, desks for teachers, blackboards for exercises, all were needed. The only solution was to get the furniture on credit; so, although loans could not be made officially until the legislature had met and authorized the establishment of schools, these transplanted families, determined to educate their children and with notes which were not legally valid as their only security, ordered carloads of furniture from Chicago to be sent into the territory.

The main item on the agenda of the first legislature concerned the location of the territorial capital. One group wanted it in Oklahoma City, another in Guthrie. Following a number of disputes over the matter, a bill was drafted for locating the capital at Oklahoma City, the university at Norman, the agricultural college at Stillwater, and the normal school at Edmond. All of these items were to be submitted as one bill.

It was then that Tom Waggoner proved his foresight by insisting that each item be considered separately; otherwise, if the governor should disapprove of one site, he would have to veto all of them. Waggoner's advice was followed, and, true to his prophecy, the three school bills passed; the capital bill, however, was vetoed and Guthrie ultimately selected as its site.

The University of Oklahoma's first Board of Regents, appointed by Governor Steele, was composed of J. M. Cannon of El Reno, Albert Taggart of Stillwater, L. G. Pittman of Oklahoma City, E. C. Tritt of Kingfisher, and A. F. Pentecost of Guth-

rie. A short time after the appointment, Taggart resigned, and John R. Clark, also of Payne County, was named to replace him. After debating the merits of the acreage now occupied by Central State Hospital and that of the University, the regents let the contract for the main building, C. H. Holcraft being the lowest and best bidder at \$15,739. The letting brought this appraisal from *The Norman Transcript*:

"The building is to be three stories high with a basement the entire length of the building, and work will begin at once. This will be by long odds the largest public structure in all Oklahoma, and we will soon see it going skyward. Reflect for a moment what \$15,739 in one building alone will mean for Norman and then add to this the hundreds of dollars that will be spent in Norman for homes as a result. Please take a few links out of the length of your face and be happy."

Andrew Jackson Seay of Kingfisher was Steele's successor as governor, and it appeared as if he might make a last-minute decision to move the University to his home town. News was spreading that he would call a halt to the proceedings in Norman, refusing to have warrants audited which would provide the contractor with funds necessary to continue the building program. But, with the election of Grover Cleveland as President in 1892, the crisis ended. Cleveland appointed W. C. Renfrow as the new territorial governor of Oklahoma. Formerly connected with the Norman State Bank, Governor Renfrow had many ties with Norman, and one of his closest friends was Charley Bessent.

Thus, those first hectic days had come to a close. And there would be no more anxiety over retaining the University in Norman until the day when fire broke loose.