

EDUCATIONAL AND CULTURAL INFLUENCES OF THE CHEROKEE SEMINARIES

*By Ida Wetzel Tinnin**

The 1958 Homecoming of the Cherokee National Male and Female students has been referred to as the "Golden Anniversary", "Half Century of Progress" or "Happenings of Fifty Years Ago", which of course dates the members of the 1908 class. We hope all of you will remember that we were very young when we were graduated.

I am glad today finally arrived. I do not know how much of the excitement, the enthusiasm, the appreciation of my native state, and the sheer pleasure I have felt in preparation for today I shall be able to pass on to you. I do know that with every letter I received from Seminary folks and each visit I had with them, the more anxious I was for the day to come.

While the information I had from the reading and the reminiscing heightened my anticipation for today, I also have a deep feeling of gratitude for those of you who have kept this event alive by coming back year after year. From the reports of those who have attended other homecomings and from the printed programs giving the events of the different years, I am sure those of us who have not been present were losers.

I married and left the state soon after graduation and have had little contact with Seminary folks, yet I have never forgotten my Seminary days. They are among my most cherished memories. I have had cause to be thankful many times for the training I received here. To be seeing our old friends, recalling the happenings of the early part of the century, and observing the changes here on the campus are thrilling experiences.

* This contribution on the history of the Cherokee National seminaries, by Ida Wetzel Tinnin, was adapted from her paper read at the "Homecoming" of the Cherokee Seminaries Students Association meeting at Tahlequah on May 7, 1958. Mrs. Tinnin graduated from the Cherokee National Female Seminary on May 26, 1908. Soon after her marriage, she moved to Arkansas and now makes her home at Bentonville. She served as a teacher in her adopted state for many years, and was Superintendent of Schools at Bentonville from 1943-53. With all her attainments and success, Mrs. Tinnin has a deep feeling of loyalty and pride for her native Cherokee Nation, which she presents here in review for readers of *The Chronicles*.—Ed.

We all heartily agree with the President of our organization, Clarence B. Markham, that one of the reasons the homecomings of the Cherokee National Male and Female Students are such happy and successful occasions is the setting of the stage, the preparation made by our friends at Northeastern State College.

It is a real joy to see the large number of new buildings, the campus we all loved, and the many evidences of long-range planning for the educational program of Northeastern State College. To those of us who have not been here for a number of years, the growth is almost unbelievable. One of the things that gives us a thrill is the museum with many of the historical treasures of our people, the Cherokees. We Seminary folks feel possessive of Northeastern State College and have a pride in its progress. We are glad our Alma Mater came into the hands of those who so graciously receive our visits and who see a value in helping to preserve our traditions.

The members of the class of 1908¹ feel highly honored and deeply appreciate receiving special recognition at this Homecoming.² Since we were the first class to be graduated from the Cherokee National Male and Female seminaries after statehood and go through the rituals of commencement week as these were observed at the Seminaries, it does mark an epoch in our history.

This is the fiftieth anniversary of our graduation on May 26, 1908. Some of us have not seen nor heard from other members since that eventful time. Many things have happened that have affected our lives. Let us see what was happening fifty years ago. Telephone and telegraph services were limited. There were no movies from which we could get news flashes, there were no radios and certainly no T.V. There were few newspapers as compared with today's publications. The *Cherokee Advocate*, *Globe Democrat*, and the *Oklahoman* were some of the newspapers that came to the Seminary libraries. We got news from Washington when our statesmen returned or perhaps wrote relatives, friends, or to the newspapers. We heard speakers at political rallies and Chautauqua lectures. State and national news was colored by what the speaker wanted us to believe.

¹ Cherokee Seminary graduates attending the Annual Meeting of the Cherokee Seminaries Association, May 7, 1958, at Tahlequah, Oklahoma.

² There were fourteen members of the class of 1908. The girls were Addie Gravette, Alice Gravette, Lois Lindsey, Frances Lindsey, Bertha Reid, Ada Painter, Ruth Harnage, Kathleen Crafton, Lucile Freeman and Ida Wetzel. The boys were A. Denny Lane, John Alberty, Perry Foreman, J. William Garrett, and George C. Whitmire.

Theodore Roosevelt was in his second term as President of the United States. He had come into public favor by his spectacular leadership of the Rough Riders in the Spanish American War and by his fight against political corruption in the city and state of New York. He was aggressive, vigorous, and forceful.

There were some interesting and important events during the years of Theodore Roosevelt's Administration: The Wright Brothers had just made their first successful flight. The Model T Ford had just been put on the market. Wireless communication across the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans had just been completed. Admiral Peary had just launched his sixth and successful attempt to reach the North Pole. Our U.S. Navy was on its two-year cruise around the world and was flexing its muscles to impress our potential enemies of the strength of our country. President Roosevelt had won the Nobel Prize for his part in mediating peace in the Russo-Japanese War. He was the first president to use the Hague Court of International Arbitration. Our beloved Will Rogers had just come into public acclaim as a philosopher; previously he had been admired as an entertainer, a trick-rope actor, or performer.

The national event of the greatest consequence to us was the admission of Oklahoma as a state, November 16, 1907. Fifty years ago this month, Oklahoma, as a state, was about six months old, the youngest state, adding the forty-sixth star to the flag. This brought new problems and new challenges to the old Indian Territory.

Previous to and during the process of getting ready for statehood, there were controversies, differences of opinion on whether there should be single or double statehood, what the state capitol should be named, where it should be; certainly prohibition was a real issue as was the Jim Crow Law. Rivalry in the political parties and leadership in each had a natural setting. Somehow the issue just seemed to be swallowed up by the new possibilities, opportunities, and responsibilities of a future that was limited only by the desires and visions of the individual. The degree of aggressiveness, the imagination, and the courage of each determined his part in the development of the state.

Here was a new state made up of people of daring, pride, ambition, leadership, a cultural background and faith in themselves, just ready for adventure. The Sequoyah Convention had opened the eyes of the outside world to the fact that the Indian Territory could handle its own affairs. Great leadership and statemanship were shown by the men who

wrote our Oklahoma State constitution that would be acceptable to the people and would provide for every segment of their government. This is the longest state constitution ever written, 45,000 words. It is also the first state constitution to recognize divine power to the extent that it is written into its Preamble. William Jennings Bryan said of the writers of the Oklahoma constitution that they were "the most progressive body of men who ever met in deliberative assembly in America". What a tribute to the writers of the state constitution!

The Constitution was adopted by a vote of the people on September 17, 1907. A motto was chosen, "Labor Omnia Vincet", "Labor Conquers All Things." This motto was on the Oklahoma Territorial seal in 1891. It was the spirit of this motto that accounts for the rapid development of the communications, transportation, industry, education, government, and every facet of our modern living. The story of the development of the new state reads like a tale from *Arabian Nights*. The natural resources, agricultural and mineral, made Oklahoma truly a "land of opportunity."

The establishment of schools from the elementary level to the university is indicative of the importance of education in the thinking of the people. Certainly the chief wealth and assets of the new state lay in the caliber of the people. The low illiteracy status of the mass of the people of the state shows the stress that was laid on education of all the people.

The organization of our State government was provided with all vigor. The capacity for self government that is found in all good Americans was shown by the promptness and efficiency with which all levels of government, local, county and state, were set up. C. H. Haskell was our first governor; Robert L. Owen and Thomas P. Gore were our first United States Senators. E. D. Cameron was the first Superintendent of Public Instruction.

The development of Oklahoma's transportation system has been a marvel. We had mere trails, narrow, dim wagon roads in 1908. We now have a network of State and U.S. Highways that are intersected or paralleled, making the present highway system of 11,132 miles. We have millions of dollars in steel and concrete bridges, overpasses, and underpasses. We have two turnpikes, the Turner Trunpike 88 miles long, and the Will Rogers Trunpike about 90 miles long. Air travel is accessible on several cross-country airlines and a surprising number of people own private planes. There are 6,000 miles of main line railways across the state. All this program in transportation in half a century was far beyond

the imagination in 1908. In contrast, it took the greater part of two days by wagon in 1908 to come from Beatties Prairie to Tahlequah, a distance of about sixty miles.

We know something of this development because we of the class of 1908 were a part of it. Our parents, grandparents, friends, and neighbors had a part in this phenomenal growth.

Now we come to the local level and closer contacts, those students with whom we lived nine months in the year, those teachers who lived with us and taught us by word and precept. It was these teachers and our homes that gave us the direct educational and cultural influences of 1908. I speak with the "voice of experience" for I spent ten happy consecutive years on this campus. My aunt, Lou Wetzel Vaughn, came here in 1898 and enrolled for high school work. She paid her tuition in full but was overcome immediately by homesickness and did not stay. Since I lived in the home of my grandparents, I was permitted to take her place. My grandmother's maiden name was McDonald, and being of Scotch extraction she could not see five dollars per month, nine months in the year, lost to the family income. I said I was permitted to come and I think "permitted" is the right word, for though I was not quite nine years old and in the third grade, I seemed to sense even then that I was being given a rare opportunity. Now I recognize it as providential.

The five dollars per month for tuition was raised in the latter part of my ten-year stay to the sum of seven dollars and fifty cents. The sum covered board, room, hospital care, doctor and nurse visitation, medicine, books, school supplies, and laundry. Picture this in contrast with today's cost of living.

Life at the Cherokee National Male and Female seminaries was interesting, quite normal, yet challenging. Though there were strict regulations, it took only the demerit system for us to know our limitations. There were demerits for whispering in study hall or class rooms, being tardy to meals or classes, for having a light on in the room after 9 p.m., writing on the walls, for being out of one's room during "Still Hour" on Sunday afternoon, when each girl was supposed to be quiet, reading, sleeping, or writing letters home. Any misdemeanor brought demerits, the number was determined by the seriousness of the offense. Demerits prevented one's participation in public affairs such as attending ball games, monthly receptions, shopping trips or eating down town with friends. If too many demerits appeared on the record against any girl, she could be suspended or even expelled from school. The demerit system curbed any desire to defy the regulations of the school.

Every phase of development was provided for, the physical, mental, moral, spiritual and social. We were guided subtly, if possible, but always firmly. We did not have a guidance department. We did not ever call it guidance yet every teacher had a part in steering us in the right direction.

The curriculum was broad and rich and the subjects were well-taught. The curriculum included German, Latin, four years of Mathematics, four years of English, the Sciences (Botany, Chemistry, Physics, Zoology, Physiology), Music, Home Economics, and other basic subjects. Because the course of study was so far ahead of its time and the teachers had superior preparations, a plan was worked out after statehood by the State Legislature, the State Department of Education and Northeastern State College to grant a blanket of sixty-two hours of college credit to the graduates of the Cherokee National Male and Female Seminaries. I am proud to have this on my official transcript from Northeastern State College.

We who attended here were more fortunate than we could fully comprehend at the time. But our parents knew the importance of taking advantage of the opportunities offered. My home community, (Beatties Prairie, near Maysville, Arkansas) was made up of pioneer families. Each family prided itself on sending its sons and daughters to the Cherokee National Male and Female seminaries. It was considered a rare privilege. Some or all of the sons and daughters of these pioneer families stayed until graduation. These families were J. T. Edmondson³; the three Mack Edmondson daughters, Gonia, Cherrie and Bula⁴; W. W. Hastings⁵; the John Ward daughters, Dora, Lura, Lee, Deed and Winnie; the Wil Wards, Elva, Alta and Lola; the Joe Ward's daughters, Alma, May and Pink; the Bart Scotts, W. T.,⁶ Susie and Mattie; the Freemans, Carrie, Will and Lucile; the Will Stovers, Edith and Roger; the King Wetzels, Minnie and Lou, Ida, Claude and Oliver⁷.

We had the advantages of the Cherokee National Female and Male seminaries because someone had ideals, visions, and the intelligence to plan these beautiful structures, the Male

³ J. T. (Turner) Edmondson was a member of the constitutional convention.

⁴ Cherrie Edmondson Garrett (Mrs. Bruce Garrett) and Bula Benton Edmondson Coker (Mrs. Richard Coker), also Conia Edmondson Tinnin, were later teachers.

⁵ W. W. Hastings was a congressman and a prominent leader in legislative issues concerning Oklahoma.

⁶ W. T. (Will) Scott was a teacher in the Male Seminary. Mattie Scott Roller and Sue Scott are deceased.

⁷ Minnie Wetzel Mason and Lou Wetzel Vaughn were daughters of King Wetzel. Claude, Oliver and Ida Wetzel were grandchildren who lived in the King Wetzel home.

and Female seminaries, for the Cherokee Nation's youth and to build them in their lovely settings, to provide broad curriculum, and to establish routines and schedules that met the needs and have stood the tests of time.⁸ John Ross, Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation and other Cherokee leaders had the background to know where to get the best in education. Chief Ross sent a committee, David Vann⁹ and William Potter Ross, east to Mount Holyoke to study the organization there and to get teachers for the Seminaries. They brought back ideas of what goes into a well-rounded cultured life. They knew the value of good teachers. The Cherokee people owe much to Mount Holyoke, to Dartmouth and Princeton for the devoted teachers that helped them in establishing these schools of higher learning. Some of the "Principal Teachers" were Mount Holyoke graduates, Miss Ella Noyes, Miss Avery, Sarah Worcester, Ellen Rebecca Whitmore, and Miss Harriette Johnson. Some other eastern colleges represented on the teaching staff during my years at the Female Seminary were Miss Mellie Dyer, who said with pride, "I am a graduate of Cornell University, Ithaca, New York," and Miss Ida V. Mosser, who liked to relate her experience at Vassar.

⁸ The Cherokee Treaty of New Echota (Dec. 29, 1835), among the signers of which were Major Ridge, John Ridge, Elias Boudinot and Stand Watie, made provisions for certain funds to establish an institution of higher learning in the new Nation west. Controversy and difficulty that arose over the interpretation and carrying out of this treaty were finally adjusted in a new treaty signed at Washington in 1846. The following year the Cherokee National Council provided for the establishment of two schools. Handsome brick buildings, exact replicas, were completed in 1850, that of the Female Seminary located three miles southeast and that of the Male Seminary, one and half miles southwest of Tahlequah. The Male Seminary was opened on May 6, 1851, and the Female Seminary the following day, May 7, now celebrated as the "Homecoming" at the Annual Meeting of the Cherokee Seminaries Association. Traditional commencement exercises were established by the first graduates of the two schools in February, 1855. The Female Seminary was accidentally destroyed by fire in 1887, and a new building was erected and completed at Tahlequah two years later, today a handsome relic of the old Cherokee Nation, Indian Territory, serving as the administration building at Northeastern State College. The Male Seminary burned in March, 1910. The two Cherokee National seminaries were combined in September, 1909, and the senior class graduated from the Northeastern State Normal on May 31, 1910.—Ed.

⁹ David Vann's name is often found in the history of the Cherokees in positions of trust. He was the treasurer of the Nation. His name appears again and again as "Member"—member of Cherokee delegations to Washington at different times. William Potter Ross distinguished himself as editor of the *Cherokee Advocate*. He was a graduate of Princeton University. His pen and his voice were constantly used in the Cherokee service, in addresses at dedications, commencements, and in messages as chief to the National Council. His was a distinguished family of statesmen, teachers, and administrators.

These were typical of the qualifications of the teachers at the seminary. I have always been proud of the fact that some of the graduates of the Cherokee National Male and Female Seminaries continued their preparation for teaching and returned to their Alma Mater as teacher.¹⁰

These men and women, our instructors, were dedicated to the cause of education. Their lives were orderly and based on spiritual foundations. We could give long lists of teachers who influenced our individual lives but definitely we will all agree that no two teachers did more to direct the course of our lives than Miss Florence Wilson and Mr. Leonard M. Logan. Their names are synonymous with the Cherokee National Male and Female seminaries. Miss Wilson was principal of the Female Seminary for twenty-six years (1875-1901), out of the fifty-six years of the school's existence. (1851-1907). She was loved and respected to the extent that the National Council of the Cherokee Nation passed unanimously a bill appointing Miss Wilson as principal of the Female Seminary for life. While the bill did not become a law, it showed the esteem in which she was held by the people who knew her. Leonard M. Logan was superintendent of the Cherokee National Male Seminary from 1900 to 1904, a term of four and a half years. This was a record length of service as there had been twenty six men who served as superintendents in the sixteen years preceding his years of service. The approach of statehood made Mr. Logan realize the changes that must come with the dissolving of the Cherokee tribal government and the uncertainty of the future of the Seminary. Because of the insecurity of his position, he accepted an offer as president of a Texas college. It was women like Miss Florence A. Wilson and men like Professor Leonard M. Logan who in our generation set the high standard of scholarship and established acceptable patterns of social behavior. They had the love, respect, and almost a reverence of every student, such as come to few people in a lifetime.

Miss Wilson and Mr. Logan surrounded themselves with teachers who had the same philosophy of life. Their objectives were to prepare the students for a citizenship in which they could establish homes, rear good families, and find a place of service in their community, state and nation. Some made outstanding contributions in industry, government and professional world.

¹⁰ Among the Seminary girls and boys who served on the teaching staff were Robert L. Owen (U. S. Senator), Eldee Starr, W. T. Scott, Lillian Alexander Wyly, Bula Edmondson Coker, Eliza Bushyhead, Roseanne Harnage, Carlotta Archer, Janana Ballard, Flora Lindsey, Ella Mae Covell, Minneola Ward, Minnie Benge, Mayme Starr, Annie Rebecca Lindsey, Callie Eaton, and Bluiie Adair.

I am sure the lives of our generation are richer and fuller for the opportunities and influences, first in the Cherokee National Male and Female Seminaries and continued by North-eastern State College.

It is my hope that the traditional Homecoming on May 7, will be continued. The strides in education have made the whole world neighbors. Our improved communication and transportation have complicated our pattern of living. Perhaps the nearness, the kinship, the brotherly love we seminary folks feel for each other may somehow carry over and contribute to a better understanding, a greater tolerance, and a lasting peace.

The educational and cultural influence through the 1908 period have engendered in us the friendships, loyalties, and ideals which have been our great endowment for life. If we can reflect the essence of our heritage, our children and our children's children will sense with pride the rich dividends of our original investment of life at the Cherokee National Male and Female seminaries.