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Living In The Burris House — 1921-1923

By George Burris

My father, A. H. Burris, was president of Southwestern for two years — 1921-1923. He was a farm boy, born in Northern Missouri, near Bethany. His father, George W. Burris, moved the family by covered wagon to Lincoln County, Oklahoma, in 1892. Father, then 14, and his older brother, Oliver, drove the family cows and walked the entire distance, about 600 miles!

During that time, Dad told his mother, "I don't want to be a farmer! I want an education!"

After teaching in country and town schools, he worked on his degrees at Phillips University in Enid, Oklahoma, by correspondence courses and summer attendance. He earned three degrees — B.A. and B.S. in Education and M.A. in History.

I was six years old when he became Southwestern president in 1921; he was then 43.

One of my strongest memories is of the President's house on the Southwestern campus — a two-story structure containing a large living room, library, kitchen, and dining room on the first floor and four bedrooms, a hallway, and a bathroom on the second floor.

Probably my next most important memory is of the day in July, 1922 when the Southwestern students joined in presenting Father with a 1922 Buick touring car, a 6-cylinder machine. He came home excited and told my mother, "Change into a nice dress. We're going downtown in our new Buick, and I'm going to make a speech!"

My younger sister, Alfreda, then five years old, sat in what they called a "jump seat," a little seat that unfolded from the rear of the front seat. That Buick was a seven-passenger car.

Mother had been ironing and forgot to turn off the iron. A hole was burned in the cloth covering, but the metal board prevented a dangerous fire.

Behind the President's home was a brick garage that contained a small apartment. My father allowed young men to occupy this apartment free of charge, and they also ate at the family table. Two men I recall were Ted Burris, no relation, though he claimed to be a distant cousin, and Everett Phillips. Ted later became a high-school inspector for the State Department of Education, and Everett became a professor of mathematics at OU in Norman. The building in which they lived is now the quarters of the Campus Police Department.

One day, Mother cooked a chocolate pie and set it in the kitchen window to cool. Phillips seized it and rushed to the

rear of the garage to eat it. My older brother, Edward, chased Phillips; and I chased Edward. Phillips had to divide the pie with both of us. Mother never figured out what happened to her pie.

One noon, I was walking barefoot in the yard in front of the house when I stepped on the jagged rim of a broken fruit jar. I cried out, and Dad came running, carried me into the house, emptied a sack of sugar into a bowl, and plunged my foot into the sugar. It stopped the bleeding.

At that time, there were only two buildings on the Southwestern campus — the Administration Building and the Science Hall. I was in the second grade at the Science Hall, and my teacher was a Miss Vrooman, a kindly, white-haired lady.

How I loved the Southwestern basketball team! I recall watching them beat Oklahoma City College 71-31, an enormous score in those days of defensive basketball! I was devastated in 1923 when Southwestern lost in a tournament at Durant to Southeastern 36-33. Our boys were said to be suffering from flu; otherwise, they were invincible to my young mind! "Doc" Williams was a star of that team. I would gladly give the school yell — "Rah, rah, rah for white and blue!"

My brother Edward was editor-in-chief of the school yearbook, *THE ORACLE*, during the 1922-1923 school year. My sister Clara May was in the QP Club (forerunner of Masquers and Alpha Psi Omega); my older sister, Crystal, was also a Southwestern student.

It was a wonderful two years for a little boy.

In the summer of 1983, I visited the Southwestern campus. The old brick home looked dilapidated (no wonder; it was sixty years later!). A sign indicated that the building was being used by the Division of Nursing.

I went to the new college library. On one wall was a row of pictures of former Southwestern presidents. Father looked natural. He was a loving father, a man of learning, with a prodigious memory and an eternal faith in education. ♡

GEORGE BURRIS is a retired Civil Service instructor and technical writer for the U.S. Air Force. He lives in Terrell, Texas. Earlier WESTVIEW articles about his father ("A. H. Burris, Early Day SOSU President" — Fall, 1983 — and "Keep Goin', Lad" — Spring, 1984) were by George's sister-in-law (Edward's widow), Gladys Toler Burris of Stillwater.