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A colorful history that will surprise many readers

On Colleges, Asylums, Reformatories, & Racetracks

By Donald Hamm



SOUTHWESTERN'S "OLD SCIENCE" BUILDING

This is an account of how Southwestern--Southwestern Normal School; Southwestern State Teachers' College; Southwestern State College of Diversified Occupations; Southwestern Institute of Technology; Southwestern State College; Southwestern Oklahoma State University--came to be located in Weatherford. It's a two-part story. The first, a short story, has to do with name and purpose. The second, a not-so-short story, has to do with location.

"Southwestern" was established by an act of the Oklahoma Territorial Legislature in 1901 as the Southwestern Normal School. (A decision on the location wasn't reached until October, 1902.) The school was authorized to offer two years of training for public-school teachers. Four years of preparatory work for

students not qualified to enter college was also provided. The first classes met in 1903.

In 1920, the preparatory classes were eliminated and four years of college work were offered, after the state legislature changed the name (and purpose) of the institution to Southwestern State Teachers' College. The first baccalaureate degrees were awarded in 1921.

In 1939, Southwestern became Southwestern State College of Diversified Occupations. In 1941, a School of Pharmacy, degree work in art and sciences, and trade schools were added, and the college became Southwestern Institute of Technology.

In 1949, Southwestern became Southwestern State College, a name it was to wear for 25 years. In 1974, the Oklahoma

state legislature changed the name of the institution again--to Southwestern Oklahoma State University.

The events which led to the location of Southwestern in Weatherford are considerably more interesting than the names the institution has worn. To a large extent, these events constitute an earlier version of a more recent Oklahoma drama, the location of parimutuel racetracks. How many racetracks shall we have? Shall we have some large ones and some small ones, or just one? Where shall they be located?

In the early days of Oklahoma, indeed even before Oklahoma came to be, every town and city wanted a railroad, and/or a college--or if not a college, then a prison would do. In 1890, people across Oklahoma Territory hoped to get a "territorial

plum." The rivalries for these plums were rarely displays of integrity.

In the competition for territorial plums in Southwestern Oklahoma, Weatherford placed first--and won Southwestern. Granite placed second--and won a reformatory. Mangum placed third--for which there was no prize.

The most interesting account of the competition for the Normal School of which I am aware is that found in *HISTORY OF SOUTHWESTERN STATE COLLEGE, 1903-1953*, by Melvin Frank Fiegel. Dr. Fiegel is a member of the faculty of the Southwestern Social Sciences Department. What follows is taken from Dr. Fiegel's account. It's a very brief summary. Readers interested in more detail should consult Dr. Fiegel's history.

The territorial legislature authorized the establishment of a Normal School in Southwestern Oklahoma in 1901 and appropriated the sum of \$52,000 to erect and equip an appropriate building. Since there was sure to be a competition for the school, just as there has been more recently for racetracks, certain requirements were imposed. The town in which the school would be located would be required to provide a forty-acre tract for the school and a sum of \$5,000 for fencing, planting of trees, and beautifying the campus of the proposed school.

Even before the passage of the legislation authorizing the Normal, lobbies were at work. Two Granite residents agreed to donate land in 1900. Early on, Greer County was thought to have an inside track for the location of the Normal. In February of 1901, a 27-man delegation from the legislature visited both Mangum and Granite. The Mangum newspaper, *THE MANGUM STAR*, was optimistic that the Normal would be located in Greer County--if not in Mangum, then in Granite.

Meanwhile, the Weatherford lobby was hard at work behind the scenes in the territorial capitol at Guthrie, hoping to help shape the legislation required. The law that was passed provided for a committee of five men to select the site for the Normal, and for the Governor to select the members of the committee. As it turned out, several Weatherford backers were appointed to the committee.

The location was to be designated within 90 days after the approval of the Act. But this was not to be. It takes time

to locate a college, just as it takes time to locate a racetrack. "Local politics, state politics, and intense competition," Dr. Fiegel's words, must run their course.

In May of 1901, Governor C. M. Barnes appointed the selection committee. Granite, Mangum, Weatherford, Cordell, and El Reno were among the contenders. By mid-July, the editor of *THE MANGUM STAR* complained that Weatherford appeared to have the inside track with the selection committee, even though Weatherford wasn't located in Southwestern Oklahoma.

As time passed, the plot thickened. President William McKinley replaced Governor Barnes with William H. Jenkins. In August, Governor Jenkins replaced the Barnes selection committee with a new selection committee, without notifying the former committee or asking for its resignation. Two selection committees now existed. The editor of the *CUSTER COUNTY REPUBLICAN* pointed out that Custer County was the only Republican county in the Southwest, and that Weatherford was entitled to the Normal School "under a Republican administration." The Weatherford lobby raised money for a possible court action, should such be needed.

Subsequently, the Jenkins committee visited Granite, and Granite appeared to be the favorite. Later, the Barnes committee visited Weatherford, and the editor of *THE CUSTER COUNTY REPUBLICAN* reported that Weatherford had been chosen for the Normal School.

In September, the Jenkins group selected Granite, as expected. The Barnes committee then selected Weatherford, as expected, a recommendation which Governor Jenkins ignored, as expected, and prepared to proceed with the choice of the committee which he had appointed. At this point, the Weatherford group sought and obtained a temporary injunction in the district court of Oklahoma County enjoining the Board of Education from awarding any contract for the construction of any building near Granite and from expending any funds for the Normal School at any place other than Weatherford. In April, 1902, the district court issued a permanent injunction prohibiting the building of the school in Granite. Granite then appealed the case to the Oklahoma Supreme Court, which upheld the decision of the lower court, confirming the legality of the first

selection committee appointed, the Barnes committee.

It seemed that the matter was closed and that Weatherford had won. But Granite mounted a final effort to prevent this outcome. In February of 1903, a bill was introduced in the Territorial Council which would have repealed the Normal Act and have appropriated \$10,000 of the funds previously authorized for the proposed Normal school to other schools in the territory. If Granite was to lose, then Weatherford should lose as well. There were six who voted to repeal the law and seven to sustain it. Weatherford prevailed, by a single vote. The Normal School officially opened on September 15, 1903. Southwestern had found a home.

Perhaps two postscripts are in order. Colleges were subsequently established in Mangum, Cordell, and El Reno. Mangum became home to a junior college and to Southwestern Bible College. Cordell became home to Central Christian College, operated by the Churches of Christ. None of these institutions survived. A junior college was established in El Reno, and this institution has survived.

Oklahoma didn't invent politics, nor do Oklahomans have a monopoly on politics. The selection of locations for state institutions followed a predictable political pattern in most states, just as it did in Oklahoma--as the following excerpt indicates:

Frequently communities entered into bitter and even scandalous contests to secure the state university or agricultural college, and these institutions were distributed in the state, along with insane asylums, prisons, and reformatories, in response to the political and economic pressures that local communities could bring to bear. The educational institution was often a consolation prize for the community that had not been successful in securing the asylum or penitentiary. Similar sectional bargaining and influences within the state also account in part for the multiplication and distribution of normal schools, teachers' colleges, . . . colleges for women. . . which could be given to local communities that had failed to secure one of the given prizes (AMERICAN COUNCIL ON EDUCATION STUDIES, April, 1938). ●