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## A. H. Burris, Early-Day President of SOSU

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A frequent speaker at Teachers' Meetings in the 1920's, A. H. Burris never missed an opportunity to laud Southwestern (State Teachers' College, then). On one such occasion, the chairman was quite oratorical in his introduction:

"This man has been an inspiration to teachers in Oklahoma. At 20, he was a country-school teacher without even a formal highschool education. Many of us have watched him come up through the ranks, holding every position in public school work. Now, we see him at 43, a college president with two degrees from Phillips University." He paused, then grinned broadly. "But if you don't want to be convinced that Southwestern is the best Teachers' College in the state, I'd suggest that you leave — at once."

Amid a ripple of laughter, A.H. rose, ready, as always with a joke. No one left.

Those close to him knew why he was so exhilarated with his new work. As a teacher, he had zig-zagged over the state from Lincoln County, supporting a family and pursuing an education. Happy but difficult years. At last, that coveted college degree. It had opened doors. Superintendencies at Temple, Watonga, and Holdenville; membership on the State Board of Education; and a Master's degree in 1918 were climaxed by his moving to the presidency of Southwestern in July, 1921. Here, it was his privilege to foster a college for oncoming teachers.

He had excellent help. "We have one of the most highly qualified faculties in the state," he would boast in his speeches, and indeed a number of them held the Doctor's degree, a rarity in the early '20's.

## A. H. Burris, Early-Day President of SOSU

— by Gladys Toler Burris

Teachers would nod in recognition as he mentioned names such as Dr. Dora Ann Stewart, history; Dr. Clarence McCormick, mathematics; and Dr. J. A. McLaughlin, foreign language. To this distinguished list he soon added Dr. Grace Jencke as head of the English Department.

True, it was a small college with an enrollment of only 500. True, its only buildings were the Science Hall and the Administration Building at the top of the hill north of the President's Home. Never fear — this college would grow. It was a challenge he took with zest.

Accordingly, his first project was a Booster Trip with the Weatherford Chamber of Commerce. Touring the southwest part of the state, with a band and caravan of cars, he made enthusiastic speeches about the college's offerings. Later, he toured on his own, speaking at Teachers' Meetings.

Summer school enrollment the following year more than tripled, rising from 500 (winter term) to 1700.

Yet his greatest reward was not in the number of students, but in the warm, personal relationship he had with them. For example, those in the 1922 summer session pooled their \$2.00 Library Refund to present him with a new Buick. This may have been an expression of gratitude; for, remembering his own struggle, he befriended anyone who wanted a college education. Still, he was an outgoing man with an uncanny memory for names, and he loved people, it seemed reciprocal.

"Weatherford and Southwestern have the friendliest people you'll find anywhere," he often declared, and when he left — moving to Stillwater and OSU (then, Oklahoma A & M) — they proved that this was no empty tribute. Townspeople joined with those on campus in saying goodbye with dinners, speeches, and gifts the family long treasured: a complete set of silver and a beautiful rug.

At OSU, as head of the History Department, he established himself as a state leader in progressive education, and his career flourished. Here he remained until shortly before a fatal illness in 1934.

Perhaps only his family knew that the most cherished years of that career were those at Southwestern, where he had found his fruition.