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EVERETT GARTRELL
Age, Only A State Of Mind  
— Everett Gartrell

— by Ruby Gartrell

Everett Gartrell was not born in a log cabin on his father’s farm near Fargo, Oklahoma, November 6, 1906, probably because there were no trees on the prairie at that time. He was born in a sod house, much like the one on display at the Cowboy Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City. The sod house was home until he was almost 12 years old. It was warm in winter and naturally cool in summer. A more conventional home was built on another part of the farm, and it still stands housing the youngest of the Gartrell brothers, Leo, and his family. Leo and LuElla Gartrell added on to the old structure and re-made the entire inside of the house, which stands in the midst of a level stretch of lush wheatland.

No school bus rumbled up to gather the Gartrell children. Everett, the oldest of the seven children, rode a horse to school and like all the others carried a lunch pail. Remembering the early school days, Everett said that the Gartrell kids’ cinnamon rolls were the best to eat or to trade for some other family’s “best goodies.”

In high school there were school buses and Everett drove one from his sophomore year. No license was required. He had some chores to do on the farm before and after school. Milking cows was one of his regular jobs. He says that he had absolutely no trouble finding something to do as he grew up. Sports at school — football, basketball, and baseball, all in their allotted seasons, plus studying to make good grades — kept him on the job all his waking hours.

“A farm kid had hard work to do all summer,” he recalled, “and I did my fair share of pitching wheat, driving a truck or tractor, and working the old header machine.”

After high-school graduation, Everett tried Business College in Dodge City, Kansas. His first job was on the railroad. Being an apprentice “railroad man” wore thin in a short time. He quit and called his parents. They were so annoyed and angry with him for walking out on what they considered a fine job with a great future that they refused to meet him at the train depot. As always, he managed without their help.

In 1928 he married his high-school sweetheart, Carrie Burgess. Farming and managing a grain elevator in summers paid his tuition at Southwestern State Teachers College where he worked on his degree from 1928 to 1938. He was among the few married men in college at that period of time, but even with three children over a period of six years, they managed. Everett earned enough hours for a
two-year certificate and took his first teaching job at Edwardsville, a community west of Weatherford. After four years there, he moved to Red Rock, where he was principal for six years. Working, going to school, nights and Saturdays and summers, he completed his degree in 1938.

With his degree finally completed and with ten years experience, he moved up to the position of Superintendent of Schools at Independence, a large consolidated school district north and west of Custer. At the present time, Custer City and Independence are consolidated at Custer City. From Independence, he became County Superintendent of Custer County dependent schools. There were 64 schools under his supervision.

In August, 1945, President Harold Burton called from Southwestern State College and asked Everett to come for an interview. The college needed a Business Manager; Everett got the job.

The college at that time had a budget of $139,000 and debts amounting to $20,000. There were fewer than fifty faculty members, and their salaries were meager. A professor with a Ph.D. netted the highest salary, $200 a month — for nine months of the year.

Mr. Gartrell's first challenge occurred the first day on the job and didn't let up until he retired in 1972.

It took five years to clear up all the debts and get the college in the black. His days were filled with meetings and conferences concerning budgets, building plans, architects, meetings with committees from the legislature, with the Boards of Regents — the list was endless. His working day began with coffee in the Student Union at 7:00 a.m. with a small group of "the boys." Promptly, exactly, at 8:00 o'clock on Mondays through Saturdays, Everett opened the Business Office and his day began.

Managing the business affairs of a fast growing institution became his mission in life. He considered the state's money to be managed as if it were his own. He always got the college's money's worth.

A salesman who wanted the college's account for maintenance material sent Everett a beautiful hand-tooled leather piece of luggage. Everett admired the present and promptly returned it with a note: "Thanks but no thanks."

The salesman didn't get the account.

From the war years' scant enrollment to the crowded Viet Nam years when youngsters went to college in droves, Gartrell maintained a firm hand on the college's finances. With increasing enrollment came the need for building. The old war years Student Union yielded its spot on campus to the new Student Center completed in 1956. A new gymnasium housing a Physical Education program was built for all the students, with Dr. L. J. Van Horn at the helm.

Old Neff Hall and Stewart Hall were bulging at the seams. Talk about double-celling at the prison makes Everett Gartrell laugh. "We had four kids in rooms that were built for two," and shaking his head and laughing as he remembered, said, "and the college kids felt lucky to have a place to live."

New dorms were going up, but not as fast as the enrollment grew. In time, however, Parker Hall for boys and Oklahoma Hall for girls were finished. In addition to a place for students to sleep, a place for them to attend classes was essential. The Arts and Sciences Classroom Building across from Oklahoma Hall provided space and equipment for needed classes. Offices for professors are always scarce, with space seemingly squeezed in where broom closets used to be. The Old Science Building was renovated, even air-conditioned, and now provides laboratories and classrooms for the biological sciences, English, drama, Home Economics, and the old auditorium.

The beautiful new Pharmacy-Chemistry-Physics Building, long a dream, became a reality and Dean Strother retired. Dr. Walter Dickison became dean of the Pharmacy School and kept it on its track as he led it to become one of the top-ranked schools of pharmacy in the nation.

North Central Accrediting Association insisted on an adequate library. In 1960 Dr. Al Harris became president of Southwestern Oklahoma State University. The library became a reality in 1966. Sheila Hoke, the head librarian, commandeered all the muscle power she could muster from college students and in time had all the books moved from the old library to the new Al Harris Library. The Art Department was most happy to have the old building, which they share with other departments in classroom space.

Again, or still, Everett Gartrell and his budget worked on behalf of the Art building. The old gymnasium had been converted years earlier to the Music Building.

In 1972, after 27 years, Everett Gartrell retired from Southwestern. The financial affairs were in top-flight condition. The face of the Southwestern campus had changed almost completely since he began in 1945. Changes and improvements didn't even slow down with his retirement, but the new business manager, Cliff Camden, had no bad debts nor money shortage to contend with.

Neither did Everett Gartrell slow down. In 1973, his wife Carrie died after a five-year hospital confinement following a stroke. Everett ran for the office of Mayor and won — and won — and won, for three terms. In 1974, Everett and Ruby Drinkwater were married. Dr. Drinkwater was a professor in the School of Education and Psychology and Director of Counselor Education. She retired in 1979.
At age 75, he had so many projects to complete as mayor of Weatherford that he tossed his hat into the ring again and for the fourth term won again.

Exactly at 8:00 each morning he and "the boys" meet for coffee at the Mark. At 8:30, he is at work in his office at City Hall. The city is in excellent financial health, as is the mayor. His golf score is higher than his age, but he figures that with practice he will catch up. His aiming eye is first class. Hunting quail and pheasant with his nephews and sons keeps him competitive and young. He is a deacon in the First Baptist Church, a loyal Democrat, and prefers to own a Ford car. He likes to quote Dr. Dora Ann Stewart, who is said to have said, "Anybody who reads the Bible and believes it and practices it will naturally be a Baptist, a Democrat, and drive a Ford car."

Walter Crouch maintains that Everett really believes that.

Traveling, golf, gardening, hunting when he can, and his first love "work" fill his days and years. His children — Harold, Duane, and Winifred — are his delight. Their families provide material for the proud grandfather to brag about "my grandson, the doctor," among other stories.

The neighbors can set their watches by his coming and going. So can anybody else who lives between 702 Arlington and City Hall.