

‘Watch Over Our School, O Lord’

The incorporation certificate for the Baptist University of Oklahoma was issued on February 9, 1910, and a new university was born. The school’s Board of Trustees then signed an agreement with the City of Shawnee for sixty acres of land northwest of the town. The Kickapoo site, as the campus location became known, was deeded to the university by the Development Company of Shawnee.ⁱ

Shortly after the campus location was finalized, W.P. Blake, chairman of the trustees, and G. Lee Phelps, missionary to the Indians, visited the future building site. They gathered and arranged twelve stones, commemorating God’s leadership of the Israelites across the Jordan River into the Promised Land. Moved by this experience and their belief in the future, each prayed for the new school.ⁱⁱ

Blake’s prayer, as handed down through the generations, was, “Almighty God, our Heavenly Father, who art the only source of light, send down upon this school the rich gift of Thy Good Spirit, that truth may be sincerely sought, faithfully received, and obediently followed. Endue its teachers with wisdom, zeal, and patience. Inspire its scholars with the spirit of truth, honor, and humility. May they, day by day, grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Grant to all in this school such a cheerful and forbearing spirit, such strength of body, clearness of mind, and purity of heart that Thy word may be heartily done and Thy name glorified. Let Thy blessings

rest upon us now and Thy Spirit dwell in this place from generation to generation through Thy Son, Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.”

Phelps prayed: “Keep our school in deep sympathy with present thought, quick with the spirit of inquiry, eager to train its students to think and to reason. Equip the faculty with teaching power of the highest order; let them ever believe in the everlasting manifestation of the truth of God; keep them anxious to blend the most earnest piety with the most active intelligence. May they cultivate a deep enthusiastic, reasonable faith. Our Father, cause this Oklahoma Baptist University to stand very high among the powers which bid us hope great things.

“Watch over our school, O Lord, as its years increase. Guide her sons and daughters wherever they may be, keeping them ever unspotted from the world. Let their hearts be warm with faith of their youthful ideal, their faith unshaken, their principles immovable. Be thou by their side when the dark hours come upon them. Strengthen them when they stand. Comfort them when they are down-hearted. Raise them up if they fall. Let the cross never grow dim to their eyes; but through the struggles and suffering that may attend their steps, let its radiance lead them heavenward; and in their hearts may Thy peace which passeth understanding abide all the days of their lives. This we pray in the name of our Saviour and for His sake, Amen.”

A New School for Oklahoma Baptists

Prior to the creation of the Baptist University of Oklahoma by the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma in 1910, several other Baptist-affiliated schools were started in Oklahoma Territory. Oklahoma Baptist College in Blackwell began operation on September 4, 1901, with the support of the Oklahoma Baptist State Convention and the BGCO. The school fought financial problems throughout its history and closed in 1913.ⁱⁱⁱ In the fall of 1907, the Baptists of Hastings and the Comanche County and Mullins Baptist Associations opened Hastings Baptist College in the southwestern part of the state.^{iv} A year later, the name was changed to Southwest Baptist College and then to Southwest Baptist Academy.^v It suffered similar financial challenges and ceased operation in 1912.^{vi} Baptists in Mangum were able to pay off debts of Southwest Baptist College and move the school to their city. It was reopened in the fall of 1912 in the First Baptist Church building and was called Southwestern Baptist College, then Western Baptist College. It was closed in 1915.^{vii}

The Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma, created by the merger of Baptist organizations in Oklahoma and Indian Territories, was formed on November 9, 1906.^{viii} At the second annual meeting of the BGCO which gathered in Ardmore October 31 to November 4, 1907, the Baptist Education Commission unanimously passed this resolution: "That it is the sense of this Commission that as soon as practicable a new Baptist University be established."^{ix} W.C. Farmer, secretary of the Education Commission, "was instructed to notify the several cities of the state of the conclusion of the Commission and invite them to submit propositions looking to its location in their midst."^x Proposals were received from a number of cities, and, after several inconclusive

votes, the messengers to the convention passed a resolution to form a “Board of eleven trustees who shall form a corporation under the name of the Board of Trustees of the Oklahoma Baptist University . . . authorized to acquire title to lands and other property and to consummate the matter of locating the proposed University and to carry out the expressed will of this Convention as near as possible and practicable.”^{xi}

At the third annual BGCO meeting in Muskogee in 1908, the Board of Trustees of the proposed new school reported on extensive negotiations with El Reno and Lawton but noted that no agreement had been reached with either city.^{xii} In 1909 at the fourth annual BGCO meeting in Chickasha, the Board of Trustees reported that it had attempted to reach an agreement with I.M. Putnam of Oklahoma City to locate the school there, but a disagreement over election and qualification of trustees had terminated the negotiations; the trustees also reported that discussions with Chickasha had failed.^{xiii} At the 1910 annual meeting of the BGCO in Enid, the trustees reported that Shawnee had been selected as the site of the new university and that a charter had been issued by the State of Oklahoma. Plans for the administration building had been drawn and a contract for construction of the building had been signed on June 3, 1910. The total estimated cost to construct, equip, and furnish the building was \$140,000. The trustees reported that the City of Shawnee “through its development company, gave to the denomination sixty acres of land worth \$1,000 per acre and a cash bonus of \$100,000.” The report was submitted by W.P. Blake and George D. McKinnis and noted that Blake had been employed to supervise the erection of the building.^{xiv}

The 1911 annual BGCO meeting in Durant received a report from the trustees that the cornerstone for the new building had been set on February 22, 1911, but, later, work on the building had been halted. “. . . owing to various reasons, and the general depressions existing throughout our state, the company which had agreed to furnish the bonus promised by the City found itself unable to put up any money, and the work on the building ceased.” The report indicated that various plans were being considered to generate the balance of the funds committed by Shawnee and that some progress was being made. “The company whose obligation it is to furnish the bonus has deeded us all the unsold lots in the University [addition], and by a mutual agreement, we are now selling these lots to the citizens of Shawnee, with the understanding that they shall purchase enough of them to fully cover the balance of the \$100,000 bonus.”^{xv}

The First Class

Dr. J.M. Carroll, San Marcos, Texas, was selected by the Board of Trustees of the Baptist University of Oklahoma as the school’s first president. The trustees reported, “For many years Dr. Carroll has been a notable figure in Baptist history in Texas and in the Southwest. We believe that with his ripe experience, with his wide acquaintance and with his surpassing ability to interest people in educational affairs he is the best man qualified to lead us in this new undertaking.” The first session of classes began in the fall of 1911 with 150 students enrolled. Temporary facilities were used in downtown Shawnee.^{xvi}

The student body included men and women who were in college and others in preparatory school. At the close of the 1911-12 school year, nine students received

degrees.^{xvii} Remarkably, included in the first student body were three men who later served as United States Senators: Josh Lee and Robert S. Kerr of Oklahoma and Huey P. Long of Louisiana.^{xviii}

OBU's school colors of green and gold were chosen by students in the first year of classes because the school's future campus of 60 acres of green prairie located northwest of downtown Shawnee was covered with wild golden coreopsis. "This little flower had inspired the students . . ."^{xix}

Suspended Animation

The Board of Trustees of the Baptist University of Oklahoma reported to the Baptists of Oklahoma in 1912: "Soon after the closing up of the work for the year, our President, Dr. Carroll, tendered his resignation, which was accepted with regrets. And upon the advice and recommendation of Dr. Carroll the Board deemed it wise to temporarily close the school until such time as we could occupy our own building and address our efforts to liquidating our indebtedness, building and equipping our dormitories, and when in our own building open our school and go forward with that zeal and pride characteristic of our great denomination."^{xx} The period required to accomplish the trustees' goals was described as "suspended animation" by the BGCO's Education Commission. "We believe that we as Baptists are going to be able to realize the dream we have had for years, and that we will see at Shawnee a great co-educational college which will be the glory of the Denomination . . ."^{xxi}

The report submitted by the Board of Trustees to the BGCO annual meeting in 1914 discussed the need for completion of the construction of the Administration Building (which would gain the name Shawnee Hall in the mid-1920s) and recommended that the convention “begin at once to provide for the equipment of the building and make other necessary provisions for the opening of school in September, 1915,” and that the trustees move ahead to enlist a new president.^{xxii}

Reflecting on the construction of the first building and the period of “suspended animation,” Mary Blake Hixson, daughter of W.P. Blake, trustee chairman from 1909 to 1917, wrote, “Building began at once [1910] . . . They got the building up, the walls, etc., finished the interior, and then they ran out of money. There was danger of vandalism, and, in order to collect any insurance on the building it had to be occupied, so in the fall of 1913 the Blakes left N. Harrison and became residents of that empty building. It is shocking that a house, though bare, can become a home. The building did. We used the large basement room off the West entrance on the N.W. corner as a kitchen and dining room and large room on the S.W. corner across the hallway as a storeroom. Corresponding rooms upstairs were our living room and bedroom combined for Daddy and Mom on the N.W. and the large room across the hallway on the S.W. corner was the girls’ and boys’ bedroom. A curtained partition provided necessary privacy. . . . It was home until early in the year 1914 when building was resumed.”^{xxiii}

Building on the Ash Heap of Dead Schools

Frank M. Masters, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Ardmore and a member of the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma's Education Commission, was selected by the school's Board of Trustees as the president who would re-open the university. The new faculty included F. Erdmann Smith, dean and education faculty member; J.W. Jent, registrar and faculty member in philosophy and social science; W.D. Moorer, librarian and faculty member in Christianity; W. T. Short, mathematics; W. P. Powell, English and modern language; Ola Gullede, voice and piano; Joshua Lee, public speaking and dramatic arts; J. Louis Guthrie, Greek and Latin and band director.^{xxiv}

Jent described the first faculty meeting in 1915: "We were elected by the University Board, June 10. President Masters wrote each of us an official notice with a request that we meet him at his residence in Shawnee, June 20. In that meeting were President Masters, myself, Dean Smith, Dr. W.D. Moorer, Professor Powell, and Professor Short; we sat about a big table in the President's study. He arose and called the group to order. He looked into our faces and said, 'Gentlemen, we are about to make Baptist history. You are assembled by the will and wish of the Baptists of Oklahoma and I am persuaded by the grace and purpose of Almighty God, our Heavenly Father. We are charged with the challenging task of building a university on the ash heap of dead schools. We cannot afford to make a mistake. I suggest that we go down upon our knees and ask Almighty God to give guidance and wisdom without which we cannot perfect the organization of this institution properly.' So we kneeled about that big table. President Masters began the prayer and we all prayed around, every one of us praying. I was never

before nor since quite so profoundly moved. The weight of responsibility was crushing. Everyone in that group, I dare say, will never forget it.”^{xxv}

A total of 143 students enrolled for the fall semester and about a third of them were ministerial students.^{xxvi} Bonds were sold and gifts received for the construction of a second building—a women’s dormitory. Groundbreaking was held May 2, and the building was named for Dr. and Mrs. D.M. Montgomery of Marlow.^{xxvii} At the end of the school year, the Oklahoma Board of Education announced that graduates of the school with AB degrees were eligible for “Life Teaching Certificates.” It was the first external agency recognition for one of the university’s programs.^{xxviii}

ⁱ Uncle Jimmy Owens, *Annals of O.B.U.*, The Historical Commission, Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, 1956, Pages 36-37.

ⁱⁱ Ibid. Pages 37-39.

ⁱⁱⁱ J.M. Gaskin, *Baptist Milestones in Oklahoma*, Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, 1966, Pages 49-53.

^{iv} Ibid. Pages 53-56.

^v Robert L. Ross, *The Two Became One: The Story of Oklahoma Southern Baptists*, The Master Design, Union City, Tennessee, 2005, Pages 19-20.

^{vi} Owens, *Annals of O.B.U.*, Pages 53-56.

^{vii} Ibid. Pages 56-58.

^{viii} Ross, *The Two Became One*, Pages 33-34.

^{ix} *Proceedings of the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma*, October 31 to November 4, 1907, Page 57.

^x Ibid, 1907, Page 57.

^{xi} Ibid, 1907, Page 69.

^{xii} Ibid, October 29-31, 1908, Pages 24-33.

^{xiii} Ibid, November 10-13, 1909, Pages 76-78.

^{xiv} Ibid, November 16-18, 1910, Pages 50-52.

^{xv} Ibid, November 15-17, 1911, Pages 55-56.

^{xvi} Ibid, Pages 56-57.

^{xvii} Eunice Short, *The View from Bison Hill: 75 Years of Remembrances*, Oklahoma Baptist University, Shawnee, Oklahoma, 1985, Page 17.

^{xviii} Bill Epperson, “Shawnee Baptist College Was Brief Chapter For The Louisiana Kingfish,” *The Shawnee News-Star*, March 19, 1950.

^{xix} Short, *The View from Bison Hill*, Page 30.

^{xx} *Proceedings*, November 8-11, 1912, Page 49.

^{xxi} Owens, *Annals of O.B.U.*, Page 51.

^{xxii} *Proceedings*, November 18-20, 1914, Page 77.

^{xxiii} Mary Blake Hixson, *Reminiscences*, privately published, 1986, Page 3.

^{xxiv} Owens, *Annals of O.B.U.*, Page 58.

^{xxv} Ibid, Page 59.

^{xxvi} Peggy Askins, "Oklahoma Baptist University Enrollment History"; Short, *The View from Bison Hill*, Page 38.

^{xxvii} Short, *The View from Bison Hill*, Page 39.

^{xxviii} Ibid, Page 41.