How Norman Got the University
A Territorial Governor Almost Prevented Its Establishment

An Interview with Charles H. Bessent by Arthur Johnsey

If you'll buy the warrants unaudited for eighty-five cents on the dollar, I'll put up these buildings in spite of hell," said J. H. Holcraft, contractor to Charles H. Bessent, who, in 1891, was president of the Norman State bank, and the man who, in the early days, bought the warrants for the erection of the university buildings.

Holcraft had begun to construct the buildings which were to house a great educational institution. He had a natural anxiety to go ahead with his work.

But it happened that the territorial governor, Andrew Jackson Seay, had his home in Kingfisher where his friends and political supporters were making a bid for the state university.

The governor, deciding to call a halt in the proceedings at Norman, refused to have the warrants audited which would provide the contractor with funds necessary for continuation of the building program, according to Mr. Bessent.

"I've followed Seay from one end of the territory to the other," continued Holcraft, "but he is determined. Now if you'll take these warrants for eighty-five-"

The banker had been paying ninety cents on the dollar for the audited warrants. But to take these unaudited ones at eighty-five was not necessarily cheaper, Mr. Bessent couldn't have known whether they would ever be paid by the state. To take them meant placing $1,300 (which sum in those days would have paid for a very good house and lot in Norman) in an extremely dangerous investment.

But at this point Charles Bessent forgot any prejudices which he might have held in regard to being strictly businesslike in his investments. Things had gone too far to stop now. He bought the warrants and the work of building again was taken up.

The situation was becoming tense. It was Norman's "big moment.

Everyone interested in the university waited anxiously for something to happen, and something did happen.

It was the national election of 1892 which relieved the situation. Grover Cleveland, elected president of the
United States, appointed a new territorial governor, W. C. Renfrow, for Oklahoma. Governor Renfrow, who was formerly connected with the Norman State bank, was a friend of Norman, and a personal friend of Charles Bessent. Of course there was no more trouble about the auditing.

The rose petals in the path of Norman’s progress in the early days were not unmixed with thorns. Blind fate is not the force which located the university at Norman. Rather it was the result of the intelligent design of several leaders among the pioneers of a rough frontier town.

The whole trouble was that the university, secured for Norman, was not secure. Those early settlers were to fight a difficult battle before they made it so.

Mr. Bessent, now president of the Security National bank of Norman, knows some of the more discouraging elements of that struggle. He knows them well, because he was in the middle of the struggle from the time Norman made her bid for the school, until the campus, crowded with students, and the buildings, being added to continuously, gave assurance that the university was definitely placed.

Time, which in passing, has brought the university city from its infancy into its youth, has taken the youthfulness from the appearance of this man, leaving lines of experience in a face enlivened still by eager and kindly eyes. He is very active handling with the dispatch of a much younger man and with the experience which age has brought. Almost always there is a crowd around his desk in the Security National bank.

E had a very severe upset in the beginning,” Mr. Bessent recalled. “The legislature held a big surprise.

“The legislature had stipulated that Norman was to pay $10,000 to the territory when the university was definitely placed here.

“Immediately the bonds were floated — it is hard to imagine in these days of prosperity just what a burden Cleveland county was taking upon itself — for the amount of $10,000. They were printed on bright, new paper and signed by J. M. Daniel, chairman of the board of county commissioners.

“Then came disconcerting news. The legislature would refuse to accept the bonds. The legislature would accept $10,000 in cash only!

It was necessary to sell the bonds. The law under which the bonds were floated provided that they could not be sold for less than one hundred cents on the dollar, and the highest bid received for them was an offer of seventy-five cents from J. B. Wheeler of Oklahoma City.

So the bonds were sold to Wheeler for one hundred cents on the dollar, the price stipulated, and the people of Norman were faced with the task of collecting by subscription the sum of $2,500 to turn over to Wheeler.

A campaign was started with Delbert L. Larsh, a leader of the civic affairs of early Norman, at the head of the campaigning forces. This drive was a considerable burden on Norman, where practically all of the money was to be obtained. Twenty-five dollars was to be considered a very generous donation. When the campaigners finally went “over the top” in their drive, and the money was paid in to the territory, smooth sailing appeared to be just ahead.

After the program of building was started nothing of great importance happened to mar the happiness of those interested in the school until the destruction of the administration building by fire brought on another crisis. But this accident gave them cause for a great deal of anxiety.

Luckily for Norman the building was covered to some extent by insurance, so that, with the aid of a small appropriation from the territory, the work of replacing the building was begun immediately. Speed in rebuilding was essential at that time on account of the fact that other localities were awakening to the desirability of possessing the university. Kingfisher had offered to reimburse Norman with the $10,000 paid to the territory before the university was placed here. Oklahoma City, and other cities were taking an interest in the matter. But before others interested in the securing of the university could make any move, the work of rebuilding was started. In this way the last critical period in the career of Norman as the home of the university was quickly passed over.

It is as the home of the university that Norman has achieved prosperity. A wonderful metamorphosis has occurred within a relatively short span of years. Since the time when T. R. Waggoner, formerly a telegraph operator of Purcell, Oklahoma, and the representative of Cleveland county in the territorial legislature, linked his political influence with that of the representatives of Payne and Oklahoma counties in order to secure the three schools of the territory for those three counties, Norman, in which Waggoner was most interested, has enjoyed prosperity — a rich smile from fortune.

The years have seen the development of a class of people in Norman, typical of most college towns, which the pioneers desired to bring in when they secured the university.

In the old days the town had its rough spots. Three saloons livened up the frontage on Main street. Real shooting scraps, not mere set-ups, occurred in them occasionally. Main street was wide, even then, but surfaced only with red dirt in which patches of weeds and grass, growing from each side, strove persistently and almost successfully to cover the trails which the wagons had worn down its center.

The street was flanked by two rows of insecure box structures. A two-story building, the Adkins building, harbored the Norman State bank and a dry goods store. There were two dry-goods stores in town, and four or five grocery stores were scattered about more or less within the business district. A six-room hotel on west Main street served its guests as decently as a frontier hotel could.

Today Norman, with paved streets, an extensive section of boarding houses and apartments, and a Main street crowded with electric signs, is enjoying the prosperity which fortune promised the pioneers.