Memories of Yesteryear

Trials of Early University Told by Vice-President Buchanan

By Ed Mills, '30

In August of 1928 the University of Oklahoma campus was sleeping in the summer heat. It was after most of the summer students had left and before the fall term began.

The campus lay drowsy and all but idle. But for its sleep it had the shade of trees, and though even shade is hot in August it is better than the barren plains.

Thirty-three years ago, that was in 1895, the campus was also idle, but it had no shade for its rest. The one building stood on the barren plains, a pioneer in a pioneer territory.

Leading to the university was no well-paved highway. Down Boulevard ran a board walk. It was probably somewhat dilapidated. Most board walks are.

When this board walk came to the place about where the gates to the oval now stand, it angled to the right. At the termination of this walk was the University of Oklahoma. It was one building, constructed at a cost of about $18,000.

Up this walk in 1895 came J. S. Buchanan, a young professor. He had taught for a year at Central Normal School at Edmond, but he was shifting his allegiance to what was then the state university.

In any history that may ever be written of this university Doctor Buchanan will stand among the leading figures.

In that day in August many years ago, he has been associated with the school. For a number of years he was a professor of history, government and English. He then became dean of the college of arts and sciences. He held this position until he was made vice-president of the university.

But why tell who Doctor Buchanan is to a group of graduates, all of whom have known him better than I. One might as well tell a group of New Yorkers who Babe Ruth is, or have spent hours explaining to the Old

Dr. J. S. Buchanan
Vice president of the University of Oklahoma, and former acting president, who is one of the beloved figures in the annals of the university. In the accompanying interview, Doctor Buchanan recalls the early days of the university.

Guard that Napoleon was a great general.

Who he is is well known. What he has done for thousands of students probably could never be learned.

That he is forced out of active duty during the first semester by a recent illness is regretted, but, "I will get well," he says, and a conversation with him leaves little doubt of it.

Therefore since I cannot tell you of Doctor Buchanan, I will let him tell you of the early days of the university.

His reminiscences are vitally interesting. A history of the school from his pen would be a treasure house for its alumni. In so short a space it will be impossible to tell more than a minute fraction of the interesting facts of the past with which his mind is filled.

When he came to the school in August, thirty-three years ago, there were probably fewer college students than there now are departments. While about 300 were attending school in the one university building, only twenty-five or thirty of these were in college work.

The remainder were taking preparatory work in what was really a high school. The university was not divided into schools and colleges. The curriculum was not varied as it is now, but Doctor Buchanan assures us it was "stiff."

 Going to school in those days was not so common a thing as it is now, and only those deeply imbued with a desire to learn were able to get through.

In 1896 the University of Oklahoma sent forth its first graduates. It took no large auditorium to accommodate the group before it filed past for its degrees. In fact, in that first class there were but two.

Those first two graduates were Ross Hume and Roy Stoops. Hume is now Judge Ross Hume of Anadarko. His son, Ross G. Hume, is now a senior in the university. Stoops is now a physician of Amarillo.

At the time Doctor Buchanan came there were but five members of the university faculty.

President David R. Boyd taught Latin and psychology. Dr. Edwin DeBarr was a professor of engineering, but
also taught physics and one foreign language.

Doctor Buchanan was an instructor in American and European history, government and English, besides teaching several of the preparatory classes. Dr. F. S. Elder was a professor of mathematics and a Doctor Anders instructed in Latin.

In addition to these there were some instructors who taught only in the preparatory branches.

Still more whites continued to invade the last stronghold of the red man the school grew and by 1900 it was running in fine style.

About this time the campus met with a calamity. There came an afternoon when all the students and professors packed up their books and went home in the usual manner. They intended to come back to school the next morning, but when morning came the school had ceased to be, so far as its material aspects were concerned.

During the night the one building had caught fire and burned to the ground. Disappointment was the first emotion, but the spirit of the pioneer is not to give up.

Classes were moved up town. An old stone building still standing east of Bearly's lumber company was called into action. The Christian church which had been used for a hotel became the university.

Classes met in the dining room, the lobby and even the bar room, although Doctor Buchanan says the hotel was no longer in business, so there was no especial advantage in going to school where men had once caroused.

The Baptist and Presbyterian churches were also used and school went on, despite the lack of a central place of holding it.

Records and the library were lost in the fire, but faculty members refused to look backward with tears in their eyes. They looked forward toward an ideal.

Taking the insurance from the former building as a nucleus, a new building was erected. That structure now stands as old science hall, the oldest standing building on the campus.

About 1904 the university received money from the Andrew Carnegie fund for the erection of a library. It was the first time Carnegie had given money to a school for the building of a library, although his work in building libraries for cities had already been carried on for some time.

That first library building now stands as the education building, opposite science hall.

About two years later the legislature appropriated $90,000 to the school and a main building was erected. It was built where the administration building now stands.

Its construction was of white stone with two wings. One wing extended back from the west end and the other from the center. Doctor Buchanan says that it gave a lopsided appearance but was the pride of the school.

The entrance of the new building was marked by great pillars. Atop this proud structure a great pine tower was erected. This tower was covered with tin, and proud in its new dress, the university set out on a new era.

The faculty saw a great university growing where the lone building had stood on the plains a few years before. They were proud, and the students came and went with a new morale and love of school.

In 1907 the territory was made the forty-sixth state in the union and its education center automatically became the state university. Statehood came in November and about the middle of December students went home to celebrate Christmas and statehood.

In honor of the new state President Boyd decided that the main building needed a new coat of tar on the roof. So with the students home for the holidays the work of covering the roof anew was begun. It was cold in December as it often is at that time of year. A coal oil stove was brought into the tower to heat the tar.

THE YOUNG PROFESSOR

Styles have changed since this picture of Doctor Buchanan was taken.
While the man working on the roof was spreading one bucket of tar, another was heating over the stove within the tower. The bucket boiled over and when the tar spreader looked around the tower had broken forth in its own celebration of the new right of statehood.

One of the hoses in the halls of the building was carried to the tower, but the base was on a higher level than the school waterworks and this effort was futile.

By the time the fire department could reach the campus the university had paid its second sacrifice to the fire god.

The main building was destroyed and with it most of the records once more passed into oblivion.

All of the classes were crowded into science hall. The basement, both floors and even the attic were called into service.

“We should have been arrested for holding classes in that attic,” Doctor Buchanan says. “It was poorly lighted and ventilated and there was no fire escape leading to it.”

The process of education had to be carried on, however, and the handicaps were dismissed with smiles, though those smiles were often forced.

About 1908 Doctor Boyd was succeeded as president by Dr. A. Grant Evans.

The university had grown through hardships, and it was a different school to which Doctor Evans came, than that which Doctor Buchanan found upon his arrival here.

Trees had been planted. The boulevard had been extended to the entrance of the main building and double rows of trees were planted along its border.

About this time, the idea of an oval was conceived, and the present oval was outlined.

“We see now that we made it too small,” Doctor Buchanan says. “We had all the land we needed, but the present planned oval looked big enough then.”

It was with the coming of Doctor Evans that the university was divided into schools and colleges. Until that time there had been no division and curricula were decided upon by the general faculty rather than by separate groups.

In 1909 the legislature appropriated $200,000 for the erection of an administration building. The result of this appropriation was the present administration building.

Doctor Buchanan pointed out that the building could not be duplicated for less than four times that much under present conditions. It was the joy of a university when it was built.

Vines have covered the walls that shone forth in their proud glory when first built, and what is the happy new possession of the students of 1910 is the revered father to students of 1928.

That is a brief outline of the building of the university up to the age of 1910.

Much of what went on within and about the campus during those years would make interesting history, but the lives of students must often be private. There was much of that Doctor Buchanan didn't know. There is probably much that he did which he didn't tell.

Wherever there is a university there is a university spirit, and “pep” is the way we moderns manifest that spirit.

The first university yell became evident during the year of 1896. Many have claimed the honor of originating the now famous Sooner

“Hi Rickety Hoop Te Doo
Boomer Sooner Okla. U.”

Doctor Buchanan’s version is that it was the outgrowth of a Sigma Nu yell and was brought to the campus by a group of students from Winfield, Kansas.

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Dads Sponsor Auditorium

University Dads, in their fourth annual meeting October 27 proposed the construction of a new university auditorium for their 1929 project. Hygeia Hall, the new infirmary was sponsored by the Dads' association last year.

Officers of the organization elected for 1929 are Ed Overholser, Oklahoma City, president; H. L. Muldrow, Norman, secretary; H. O. Wilson, Norman, treasurer; vice-presidents from the judicial districts: C. W. Brewer, Tulsa; Robert Lee Simpson, Eufaula; H. L. Crockett, Ardmore; George C. Abernathy, Shawnee; J. T. Blanton, Pauls Valley; R. V. Conley, Kingfisher; T. M. Robinson, Altus; and John G. Gurlac, Woodward.

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Among them were: J. D. Lydick, now an attorney in Oklahoma City and F. S. Elder, a graduate student and professor of mathematics at the time.

Doctor Buchanan did not first hear this yell ringing from a crowded stadium as a Sooner eleven prepared to do battle.

His first memory of it was at an oratorical contest with Central teachers. In addition to the Sooner yell, the students parodied the yells of the visiting teachers.

"I can't tell you exactly where the first football game was played here," Doctor Buchanan said. "I have been called a liar before for trying to remember that. There is a difference of opinion.

'However it was in a square either about where the present fine arts building or the present library was located. It was a rougher game then.'

Doctor Buchanan was on the committee that selected the first university colors. With him on the committee was Miss Mary Liverstreet, a professor of English in the preparatory school.

Crimson and corn were the colors selected. The corn color varied from white to yellow, until it was finally changed to white without formal action.

Thus the red and white to which all Sooners now pay homage, were not planned as the original university colors, but were an outgrowth of inability of merchants to fill the students' demands.

Doctor Buchanan has been known to thousands of recent Sooners as "Uncle Buck." He will probably be known, loved and revered by countless more before he retires.

He has given his service to the university. Its results form a monument to him.

It's Your Alma Mater--So Back It!
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Sure they are good fellows but they like to stay on their own range. So I told the boy: "Go to the University of Oklahoma. They're turning out real men down there." And I believed every word of it. Probably I was not thinking so much of what he might absorb there as I was of the little extras he would pick up at all the cross roads in later life.

The boy came right back at me. "But," he said, "I have never seen anyone from the University of Oklahoma who has made any special name for himself." Though the story is not finished I will leave it with you at this point. But before dropping the matter let me call attention to the fact that The Sooner Magazine carries a page devoted to graduates and former students of the University of Oklahoma who have made noteworthy records in their own chosen fields. But like water and air Sooners are so common to us that we do not notice what they have done until special mention is made of them.

The men and women who appear on that page have done something well worth while. Those who get there are by invitation only. There are many Sooners entitled to mention on that page who have a hesitancy in permitting their records to be printed, feeling that they were rushing a little personal publicity. The editors have been handicapped by this hesitancy. They have asked for data which have not been furnished. That page should prove a fine service to Sooners and to the University of Oklahoma. Those of you who have the honor of an invitation to that page can help wonderfully by a prompt and frank return of the data requested.