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These Fifty Years: A History of the College of Agriculture of the University of Nebraska

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Chapter Two: THE FOUNDING OF THE UNIVERSITY

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II

THE FOUNDING OF THE UNIVERSITY

A HISTORY of the Agricultural College of Nebraska is also a history of the University of Nebraska. From the earliest years to the present day the two have been inseparably connected. The Agricultural College was established as one of the colleges of the University, later, in 1877, being incorporated in the Industrial College, and still later, in 1909, again becoming a separate college of the University, the College of Agriculture.

The University and Agricultural College received their endowment from two sources. The Enabling Act of 1864, providing for the state's admission into the Union, declared that seventy-two sections (46,080 acres) should be "set apart and reserved for the use and support of a state university, and to be appropriated and applied as the Legislature may prescribe." The Land Grant Act of 1862, referred to in our preceding chapter, allotted 30,000 acres of land to each state for each representative and senator in Congress, for the purpose of "endowment, support, and maintenance of at least one college, where the leading object shall be, without excluding other scientific and classical studies and including military tactics, to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts."

An act of 1866 provided "that when any Territory shall become a State and be admitted into the Union such new State shall be entitled to the benefits of the said act of July 2, 1862, by expressing the acceptance therein required within three years from the date of its admission into the Union, and providing the college or colleges within five years after such acceptance." Under the Land Grant Act of 1862 Nebraska was entitled to 90,000 acres, making a

total of 136,080 acres available for the support of a university and agricultural college. Nebraska was admitted as a state on March 1, 1867.

THE LEGISLATURE PROVIDES FOR THE UNIVERSITY

February 15, 1869 marks the establishment of the University. It was on this day, now known as Charter Day in the history of the University, that the Nebraska Legislature passed definite legislation for its establishment. Before this time, however, the Legislature had had in mind the establishment of a University. In an act of the Legislature, approved June 14, 1867, authorizing the selection of 640 acres for the site of the capital city, there was this provision:

"The State University and State Agricultural College shall be united as one educational institution, and shall be located upon a reservation selected by said Commissioners, in said 'Lincoln,' and the necessary buildings shall be erected thereon as soon as funds can be secured by the sale of lands donated to the State for the purposes or from other sources."

In the summer of 1867 the site for the city of Lincoln was selected and four blocks in the north part of the town were set aside for the University. Under the United States law the land grant of the Government had to be accepted within three years after the admission of the state. So Governor Butler in his message of January 9, 1869 had called attention to the necessity of taking immediate action for the organization of the University and Agricultural College.

The Act of February 15, 1869 provided "that there shall be established in this state an institution under the name and style of 'The University of Nebraska.' The object of such institution shall be to afford to the inhabitants of this State, the means of acquiring a thorough knowledge of the various branches of literature, science and the arts."

The Legislature was certainly ambitious enough for the

University, for no less than six colleges and some fifty "chairs" or professorships were established. There was to be a College of Ancient and Modern Literature, Mathematics and the Natural Sciences; a College of Agriculture; a College of Law; a College of Medicine; a College of Practical Science, Civil Engineering and Mechanics; and a College of Fine Arts. In the College of Ancient and Modern Literature, Mathematics and the Natural Sciences there were to be two chairs of ancient languages, two chairs of modern languages, a chair of rhetoric, oratory and logic, a chair of history and geography, a chair of philosophy of the human mind, a chair of moral philosophy, a chair of natural theology and the history of all religions, a chair of the mathematics, a chair of natural philosophy, a chair of chemistry, and a chair of political economy.

In the College of Agriculture there were to be a chair of applied chemistry, a chair of botany, a chair of agriculture, a chair of horticulture, a chair of meteorology and climatology, a chair of veterinary surgery, and a superintendent of the model farm.

The ambitious nature of this program was somewhat tempered by the provision that the regents should fill only such chairs in the College of Ancient and Modern Literature, Mathematics and the Natural Sciences, the College of Agriculture, and the College of Practical Science, Civil Engineering and Mechanics as the wants of the institution should demand. They might require the professors to serve in more than one department or college, until the students increased to sufficient numbers. This law also provided that "no new professorship shall be established without the authority of the Legislature." The College of Fine Arts was not to be established until the annual income of the University Fund reached $100,000.

For the College of Agriculture, there was this additional provision:

"The Governor shall set apart two sections of any Agricultural College land, or Saline land [the salt lands in the early days were

considered of value], belonging to the State, and shall notify the State Land Commissioner of such reservation, for the purpose of a Model Farm, as a part of the College of Agriculture, and such land, so set apart, shall not be disposed of for any other purpose."

The Legislature also provided "for the sale of the unsold lots and blocks on the town site of Lincoln, and for the location and erection of a state university and agricultural college and state lunatic asylum." Sixteen thousand dollars from the proceeds of the lot sale was to be devoted to constructing the capitol dome, and some finishing touches on the capitol, $50,000 was to be devoted to the "state lunatic" asylum, and $100,000 to the erection of a suitable building for the state university and agricultural college. Forty sections of saline lands might also be sold in case the lots did not yield sufficient revenue.

The dream of a great university was now to be realized. Its endowment was to be provided thru the land grants, the actual construction of its first building thru the sale of town lots, and the legislature in 1869 had also provided a one mill tax levy for the support of the institution.

THE UNIVERSITY BUILDING

The sale of lots began on June 5, 1869. The first day $30,000 worth of lots were sold and it seemed evident that the future of the institution would be assured. The plans of the building were drawn by J. M. McBird of Logansport, Ind. The structure was to follow the "Franco-Italian" style of architecture. The contract was let to Silver & Son, August 18, 1869, for $128,480; $28,480 more than the legislative appropriation called for. This brought considerable criticism, which was to increase year by year as the construction of the building became more and more apparent. The cornerstone was laid September 23, 1869. The Masons were in charge of the exercises, Professor Caldwell tells us in his history, and a brass band was

imported from Omaha for the occasion. A banquet, and a dance that lasted from 10 p. m. to 4 a. m., concluded the day's festivities.

It was not an easy task to erect the building, since with Nebraska's meager railroad facilities, the lumber had to be hauled overland. "The contractors for the University pushed the work with remarkable energy," Samuel Aughey tells us in an address which was delivered on Charter Day, February 15, 1881.

"At this day it is hard to realize the disadvantages under which they labored. The lumber was shipped from Chicago to East Nebraska City, four miles east of the Missouri in Iowa, opposite to the present Nebraska City. It was hauled to Lincoln in wagons, over wretched roads, a distance of sixty-five miles. The contractors paid $10 a cord for wood with which to burn brick, and which was hauled from twenty to thirty-five miles. On April 7, 1870, the brick work was commenced and though there was an interruption of three weeks for want of brick, the walls were completed and the roof on by the middle of the following August. In eighty-two days 1,500,000 brick were made and put in these University walls."

The building had been completed by January 6, 1871, for there is this notation in the report of the Board of Regents for that day:

"The Board accepted the invitation of D. J. Silver & Son, to visit and examine the University building. On returning to their room, they passed the following resolution:

" 'Resolved, That the visit of this Board to the University building has been made today with great satisfaction; that to us the building appears to be well constructed and substantial, and that its general plan, as well as the details, are eminently well fitted to answer the purpose for which the same was erected.' "

There was considerable question as to the safety of the new building and on June 13, 1871, three professional architects were employed to examine the building. They pronounced the building safe for years to come, but recommended some minor changes, which were made.

EARLY STUDENT DAYS

The University was now ready to receive students and this significant statement appears in the announcement of the University for 1871-72:

> " . . . the Regents, February 7, 1871 resolved to open the first department of the University in the Fall, and on the 4th of April they selected a corps of competent and experienced professors, and fixed the time of opening September 7, 1871."

Only one college of the six came into being at this time, that of Ancient and Modern Languages, Mathematics, and Natural Science. The announcement stated that "the Agricultural College will be organized at the earliest practicable time, to meet the requirements of the law, and the needs of the University. The model farm will soon be located." A Latin school was established, which aimed to take care of those students who did not have sufficient preparation to enter the regular University course.

The members of the faculty were Allen R. Benton, chancellor and professor of intellectual and moral science; S. H. Manley, professor of ancient languages and literature; O. C. Dake, professor of rhetoric and English literature; Samuel Aughey, professor of chemistry and natural sciences; and George E. Church, principal of the Latin school. Mr. Church is said to have taught whatever mathematics and modern languages were given that year.

There were twenty college students in attendance the first year, one junior, two sophomores, five freshmen and twelve who were students in the University classes, but "not entirely regular in the course." The "junior" in the University was J. Stuart Dales, who for fifty years has been a prominent figure in the official life of the University and who is now corporation secretary of the Board of Regents. Mr. Dales and W. H. Snell were the first graduates of the University, receiving their degrees in 1873. The Latin school was the largest division of the University, with 110 students. That was doubtless due to the fact that

there were as yet comparatively few secondary schools in Nebraska which could prepare their students for entrance to the University. The University attendance remained rather small for several years, the number of students enrolled from 1871 to 1877 being 20, 46, 43, 48, 66, and 67. The enrollment in the Latin school for those years was 110, 77, 57, 69, 198, 161.

For the first year three courses were advertised, the classical, the scientific, and the selected. In the last course the students chose such subjects as they preferred, "with the advice and under the direction of the faculty." As might be expected, Latin and Greek were by no means neglected in the University. "The classical course," read the announcement, "is earnestly recommended by the faculty, as that which experience and the practice of the best institutions have shown to be best suited to secure a sound and systematic education." Military drill provided for in the Land Grant Act was to be added later.

TROUBLE WITH THE BUILDING

There was considerable difficulty with the University building beginning the first year. In his first report Chancellor Benton was obliged to report that "some difficulty has been experienced in making the roof impervious to rain. A violent hail storm broke more than twenty panes of glass, and injured the tin roof so that it has been quite difficult to repair the damage." There was also trouble with the furnaces used to heat the building.

The impression seemed to grow that the building was insecure. On July 6, 1877, the Board of Regents resolved to tear down the building and erect a new one, but their action was stayed by the arrival of an architect from Chicago and another from Dubuque, Iowa, who declared that the structure could be readily repaired. New foundation walls were put in and with other improvements which have been made from time to time, the building still stands to-

day. For years it was the headquarters of everything connected with the University—Agricultural College as well as classical course.

CONTROL OF THE UNIVERSITY

In the beginning the general supervision of the University was vested in a board of twelve regents. Nine of them under the law were to be chosen by the Legislature in joint session, three from each judicial district. The chancellor of the University, the governor, and the superintendent of public instruction were the other three members, who served *ex officio*. The new State Constitution of 1875 changed the manner of choosing regents, arranging for six to be chosen by vote of the people, two of them retiring every two years. The first Board of Regents was, however, appointed by the Governor. The name of R. W. Furnas is probably the most conspicuous among those of the first regents, because for years he was to wield important influence in the agricultural affairs of the state.

EARLY FINANCES

The Legislature in 1869 had provided a one-mill tax for the support of the institution. There was evidently some feeling that this tax was too high, especially since the institution had not yet opened for students, and we find the Regents themselves agreeing to a reduction. This notation is found in the report of their meeting February 7, 1871:

> "On motion of Regent Fuller, a bill was ordered to be drafted and presented to the Legislature for adoption reducing the one mill tax for the benefit of the University to one-half a mill. The bill was prepared and intrusted to Senator Thomas."

But the Legislature went one better and reduced the levy to one-fourth of a mill. There it remained until 1877, when the Legislature increased it to three-eighths of a mill, at the pressing request of the Board of Regents. It was not

until 1899 that the tax was restored to the one-mill levy on the dollar of valuation.

From the beginning the University derived practically no money from tuition fees. "To all residents of the State the tuition will be free," read the University's first announcement. "An entrance fee of $5 is paid by every student at the time of his matriculation. Non-residents of the State are charged $8 per term." At that time there were three terms of school, a fall, winter, and spring term. A few years later this fee charged outsiders was abolished, it being felt that most of those coming from other states were prospective residents for Nebraska. From 1876 to 1879 an incidental fee of $2 was charged students.

The salaries of the faculty were comparatively liberal for that day. In fact, it was a long period of years before there was much of an increase over those salaries paid the first few years. At a meeting of the Board of Regents held in December, 1870, the salary of the chancellor was fixed at $5,000. But at a meeting April 4, 1871, the salary of the chancellor was fixed at $4,000, and that of the professors at $2,000. At a meeting in June, 1878, the salary of the chancellor was reduced to $3,500 and all $2,000 salaries were cut to $1,800.

THE LANDED ENDOWMENT

During the early years the University had not begun to receive any income from its landed endowment. Governor David Butler on December 23, 1870, reported that the endowment lands "are now being selected." However, the report of the Board of Regents for February 28, 1871, contains this notation:

"The Committee reported that the grant for the seventy-two sections was complete, but that an additional act of Congress was necessary to entitle the State to the 90,000 acres. A joint resolution was ordered to be drafted for presentation to the Legislature asking of Congress such an act."

On March 4, 1871, the Legislature formally petitioned Congress for the grant of land. William Adair, for many years president of the Board of Regents of the University, personally selected the lands to be included in the government's grants of land for the endowment of the institution. Unfortunately, these lands which had been carefully selected for the University were merged with the common school lands, under a state board other than the Board of Regents,—all called educational lands. The amount of land belonging to the common schools was always so great that there was a constant clamor on the part of the people to sell it. The idea was to attract people to the state and at the same time reduce the taxes. Could the University lands have been divorced from the common school lands they could have been retained until they would have brought large sums.

The Constitution of 1875 provided that none of the lands could be sold for less than $7 an acre. For many years the educational school lands were subject to lease for twenty-five years at 6 per cent of the appraised value, subject to reappraisement every five years, and the lessee had the right of purchase at the appraised value. As the value approached the constitutional minimum of $7 an acre, people found it more advantageous to purchase. The sale of the University lands, along with the common school lands, was made for one-tenth down and twenty years time on the balance. The Legislature of 1897 prohibited the further sale of the University lands, but unfortunately most of them had been disposed of before that time.

THE FIRST CHANCELLOR

Allen R. Benton, the University's first chancellor, undoubtedly had more foresight than most of the people of the time gave him credit for. It was the chancellor who in the second year of the University's history suggested the holding of farmers' institutes, the first instance of agricultural extension instruction in Nebraska and a movement

which in forty years was to grow to unusual pretensions. It was Chancellor Benton who at one time amazed the people of the state by suggesting the possibility that a larger campus should be secured for the institution, because of the rapid growth anticipated. While the institution did not grow as rapidly as Chancellor Benton had anticipated, there did come a time when it became necessary either to enlarge the uptown campus by purchasing high-priced land or else to remove the University bodily to the Agricultural College campus. In his first report the chancellor recommended that a woman be employed on the faculty, which was to find realization some years later.

Chancellor Benton was born in Cayuga County, New York in 1822. He was graduated in 1847 from Bethany College, Virginia, now in West Virginia, with first honors in mathematics and languages. For several years he was professor of ancient languages at Northwestern Christian University, Indianapolis, Ind. He was chancellor of the University of Nebraska from 1871 to 1876, resigning to return to Indiana where he later became president of the Northwestern Christian University, later Butler College.

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