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THE HISTORY OF OREGON'S LAND GRANT COLLEGE

1850-1892

by

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The History of Oregon's Land Grant College

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The institution that we know as Oregon State College had its inception in the dreams of the early settlers in the territory, a vision of higher education for their children and their children's children. The story of their struggle is an inspiring one for those of us who proudly view their legacy today.

That the pioneer legislators were interested in higher education is evinced by the fact that at the second session of the Legislative Assembly, Jan. 16, 1851, Mr. Weymire introduced Council Bill No. 23 entitled "An act to accept the lands donated for the purpose of the endowment of a University."¹ This was in accord with the Donation Act of Sept. 27, 1850, in which the Federal Government made a grant for use and support of a State University of two townships, and the "Oregon City Claims" bequeathed by Dr. John McLoughlin. This bill was unanimously adopted Feb. 6, 1851.² At the third session, Jan. 16, 1852, further action was taken when "A bill to create the office of Commissioner to sell and control the lands donated by Congress to the Territory of Oregon for the endowment of a university and

¹Oregon, State of, Journal of the Council of the Territory of Oregon during the Second Regular Session of the Legislative AssemblyDec. 2, 1850. Oregon City, Asahel Bush, 1851, p. 68.

²Ibid., p. 113

defining his duties..." was passed.³ At the subsequent sessions, The Assembly voted to acquire land in Marysville, as Corvallis was then known, for a university, and the property where Snell Hall now stands was chosen. However, the 1855 Assembly voted to move the State Capitol to Corvallis from Salem, and the University to Jacksonville. Mr. N. Huber, University Land Commissioner, tells in his report of going to Corvallis and selling the timber, brick and stone that had been delivered preparatory to building, and of receiving \$1400 for the materials.⁴ Again the State Capitol was moved, back to Salem, and the one building erected in Jacksonville for the college was later converted to the County Courthouse.

When Oregon became a State on Feb. 14, 1859 by Act of Congress, the second proposition put to the people for acceptance provided that "Seventy two sections of land for the use and support of the State University, to be selected by the Governor and disposed by the legislature" be approved.⁵ Then with the passage of the Morrill Act, signed by President Lincoln July 2, 1862, Oregon became entitled to 30,000 acres of land for every Representative in Congress, or a total of 90,000 acres, for the establishment of a university.

Meanwhile, the townspeople of Corvallis, deprived of their anticipated state college in 1855, established their own academy in 1856, with John Wesley Johnson of Yale as principal, who later

³ Oregon, State of, Journal of the Council of the Territory of Oregon during the Third Regular Session of the Legislative AssemblyDec. 1, 1951. Oregon City, Asahel Bush, 1852, p. 65.

⁴ Huber, N., University Land Commissioner of Oregon, Report, 8 p. leaflet. Asahel Bush, Salem, Oregon, 1856.

⁵ United States Statutes at Large, 11:385.

became the first president of the University of Oregon. In 1858, the Academy was incorporated as Corvallis College, graduating in that year a class of three: J.K.P. Currin, Robert M. Veatch, and Alice Biddle.⁶

In the fifties and sixties, there was great interest on the part of the various church denominations in establishing colleges to strengthen the religious beliefs of their young people, and in 1865, the Methodist Episcopal Church South took over control of Corvallis College, with William A. Finley as its first president under the new regime. In 1868, W. W. Moreland was made principal of the preparatory school in connection with the college, and it was thanks to his alertness that the time for accepting the Morrill Act benefits did not expire.⁷ In his 1864 message to the Legislature, Gov. Gibbs had announced that "I consider it a paramount importance to select lands for benefit of the common schools...Therefore, no lands have yet been selected for the benefit of the agricultural college."⁸ Because of his feeling, Oregon had been tardy in taking action.

Mr. John G. Flock introduced House Resolution No. 25, which was the first act of the Legislature anticipating an agricultural college, and it was passed Sept. 1868. The committee approached Willamette University to determine if it were willing to accept the terms of the Morrill Act with respect to the required courses, which it agreed to

⁶ Gearhart, Dick, ed., The Orange and Black, Oregon State College Alumni Assoc., Corvallis, Oregon, 1948, p. 11.

⁷ Ibid., p. 13-14.

⁸ Young, F. G., "Financial History of the State of Oregon," The Oregon Historical Quarterly, 10:374-5, December, 1909, p. 375.

include, were it chosen. Many other private colleges were eager to receive the forthcoming largesse, also, but Mr. Flook tells how the decision was finally made:

Senator C. B. Bellinger of Benton County, who later became U.S. District Judge in Portland, had a laudable desire to confer a favor on his own country. Being of the majority party, he experienced little trouble in striking out the words "Willamette University" and inserting "Corvallis College."⁹

This bill took effect on Oct. 27, 1868 and marks the birthday of Oregon State College.

These formalities having been accomplished, three commissioners were appointed to locate the lands, the proceeds from the sale of which would create an irreducible fund for the support of the state college. And funds would be needed immediately, as a legislative act also provided that each state senator would be empowered to appoint one student who would receive free tuition for two years, a sum amounting to \$11.25 payable quarterly. (There were no minimum entrance requirements!) Mr. Carey has stated the financial situation clearly:

The funds so advanced were to be repaid from the first interest accruing upon the college land funds. Instead of using the golden opportunity to acquire valuable timber lands which would in time be worth millions of money for the fund, the land commissioners promptly proceeded to locate 89,907 acres, mostly in Lake County, which was then remote from the settlements, about 10,000 acres subsequently proving to be within the limits of the Klamath Indian reservation. The Lake County lands found no market for a time and could never be expected to have great money value.¹⁰

⁹ Horner, John B., "History of Oregon State College, 1865-1907," The Oregon Historical Quarterly, 31:42-50, *passim*.

¹⁰ Carey, Charles Henry, History of Oregon. Chicago-Portland, Pioneer Historical Publishing Co., c1922, pp. 738-739.

Although there was little money with which to operate, at least the college was a going concern. During the school year 1869-70, there were thirty-one trustees, two professors, and twenty college students, besides one hundred and one children in the preparatory school. It was fully co-educational, with fees ranging from \$10 to \$15 per term. President Finley continued as head of the institution until May 4, 1872, when he was succeeded by Dr. B. L. Arnold, who was to serve the agricultural college faithfully for twenty years.¹¹

When Dr. Arnold assumed the presidency, the struggling institution was greatly in debt, with no money and few resources. On Oct. 15, 1872, the Legislature appropriated \$5,000, but it was too late in the year to do much more than to fulfill the letter of the Morrill Act: to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts. Two general departments were set up: the Literary Department, which included the School of Ancient Languages, School of Modern Languages, and the School of History and Literature; and the Scientific Department, which included the School of Mathematics, the School of Practical Mechanics and Technology, the School of Engineering, the School of Physical Sciences, and the School of Moral Science.

During the first two years, there were forty-four young men "of fine muscle and brain", and since any youth of sixteen was eligible for entrance, some had to be taught to read, others to do simple arithmetic, before they could proceed with college work. Dr. Arnold himself taught Chemistry, Chemical Physics, Natural Philosophy,

¹¹ Horner, op. cit., p.44.

Biology and Agricultural farming, also Political Economy, Social Science, Logic, Ethics, Philosophy, Latin, Greek, German and English Grammar. He normally had eight recitations a day, six days a week.¹²

Mr. Boswell of the Military Department had three major obstacles to overcome, in that there was no suitable room for drilling; there were no books on military science and tactics in the city; and that since most of the boys were farmers' sons, they went home on good days to help with planting or harvesting when the weather was best for drilling.¹³

Included in this first biennial report is the treasurer's report, signed by A. Cauthorn, in which he reports an income of \$8333.31 from the State of Oregon in warrants, of which President Arnold received \$3,000 for salary for two years.¹⁴

During the second biennium of the college, a committee was sent to Corvallis by the Oregon State Senate to see what progress was being made. Mr. J. S. Palmer, chairman, was enthusiastic about "the splendid new building, worth not less than \$10,000 fitted out with chemical apparatus worth \$2500.00."¹⁵ Furthermore, upon his return to Salem, he recommended that \$1000 in addition to the budgeted \$5000 be given to President Arnold for the purchase of a library.

¹² First Biennial Report of the State Agricultural College (1872-74), Salem, Oregon, Martin V. Brown, 1874, passim.

¹³ Ibid., passim.

¹⁴ Ibid., passim

¹⁵ Second Biennial Report of the State Agricultural College (1874-76), Salem, Oregon, Martin V. Brown, 1876, passim.

The college continued to flourish, with additional faculty members added, departments expanded, and additional land acquired. And once again, the Congress of the United States was to benefit the fledgling Land Grant Colleges in the country. Several had set up agricultural experiment stations, and the Committee on Agriculture of the House of Representatives reported favorably on the Hatch Bill, saying that "a very large number of the colleges established under the Act of 1862 are doing important work of precisely similar kind." The bill, adopted in 1887, "granted \$15,000 to each state and territory for support of experiment stations 'to conduct original research.... bearing directly on the agricultural industry of the United States.'"¹⁶

On Jan. 31, 1889, the Oregon Legislature authorized the purchase of a 200 acre tract for a model farm for Oregon Agricultural College. By 1890, the number of students enrolled had reached a total of 152, composed of 105 men and 47 women, and the annual budget had been increased to \$33,480.¹⁷ President Arnold had, indeed, been an efficient administrator and a far-seeing educator, a man beloved by his students and respected by officials of Oregon. His death in 1892 brought forth tribute from W. S. Ladd, President of the Board of Regents of Oregon Agricultural College: "To the high character and thorough scholarship of this gentleman, the college owes much. His rule was just, kind and courteous, his habits those of constant industry and conscientiousness. The extent and depth of his influence over his

¹⁶ Englund, Eric, "Agricultural Experiment Stations," Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, ed. by E.R.A. Seligman. New York, Macmillan, c1930. Vol. 1, p. 543.

¹⁷ [Ninth] Biennial Report of the State Agricultural College, (1888-90), Frank Baker, Salem, Oregon, 1890, passim.

students were only demonstrated by his unexpected death in January, 1892."¹⁸

After the demise of President Arnold, the Board of Regents chose John M. Bloss of the Topeka Public Schools to succeed him, and he took over his duties in May 1892. With his advent, the curtain was rung down on the first period of growth of Oregon Agricultural College, forty years of trial and error, in the new field of public higher education. To the pioneer legislators and civic minded citizens we owe much, and their courage should be an example to modern Oregonians, faced with educational problems that loom large, but surely no larger than those of former years in the nineteenth century.

In re-appraising the legal basis of the present Oregon State College, it is interesting to note that it has no single charter, but rather six basic documents which together make it the unique institution that it is. Let us consider them.

No. 1. The Morrill Act, signed by President Lincoln July 2, 1862, is the basic charter for all Land Grant Colleges.

No. 2. The Legislative action taken by Oregon in accepting the provisions of the Morrill Act on Aug. 9, 1862 is the second document.

No. 3. The Articles of Incorporation signed on Aug. 22, 1868 had had its object the acquisition and holding of property in trust for the Methodist Episcopal Church, and the building up and maintaining an institution for educational purposes. The name Corvallis College was given to this institution.

No. 4. The Legislative Act, approved Oct. 27, 1868, provided for a

¹⁸ Ibid., [Tenth] 1892., passim.

Board of Commissioners to locate all lands to which the state might be entitled through the Morrill Act, and to take the necessary steps for establishing a Land Grant College. This date marks the beginning of state supported higher education and the founding of Oregon Agricultural College.

No. 5. This is a confirmation of document No. 4, locating the college at Corvallis and signed by Governor L. F. Grover.

No. 6. A Legislative Act approved Feb. 11, 1885 setting the permanent location of the college in Corvallis, providing for a Board of Regents, and asking the citizens of Corvallis to erect a \$25,000 building to be known as Agricultural College Farm is the final document of authorization.¹⁹

A graphic presentation of its growth since 1887 is contained in the following paragraph:

The 35 acre campus and its one building of 1887 has grown to a main central campus of approximately 4,000 acres. The campus proper includes 80 building chiefly of brick or stone. Many temporary buildings are in use until additional permanent ones can be provided. For the use of the agricultural experimental station, including eight branch stations, 24,000 acres are utilized, most of which is owned by the counties or the federal government. The Peavey Arboretum and other tracts of the school of forestry total 13,300 acres.²⁰

Oh, Pioneers! Would that you could see the reality that your dream has become!

¹⁹ "The Charter of Oregon State College." Oregon State Bulletin, No. 21, October 1951. 47. pamphlet with facsimiles.

²⁰ "Founding of Oregon Agricultural College," Champoeg Pioneer, Champoeg, Oregon, March 1958, p.2.

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