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COVEY'S COLLEGE AT CONCRETE

ROBERT W. SHOOK

The well-kept Bermuda grass lawn, rose beds and cedar trees are gone now, the white plastered walls only suggested by ruins. All that remains are a chimney, foundation outlines and a cow pasture scattered with mesquite, post oaks and empty shot gun shells. These are the remnants of what was once the best attended boarding college in Texas. The village of Concrete dates to the 1840's and was then known as Upper Cuero Creek. The first school in these low hills on the rim of the Guadalupe River Valley was conducted by James Norman Smith who had taught President James K. Polk in his native state of Tennessee. What finally developed after legislative charters in 1856 and 1873 was a typical 19th century rural college patterned after those of the North which flourished three decades earlier.

Dr. Robert Peebles and other pioneer Concrete settlers sponsored and lobbied for the school, the administration of which was entrusted under the charter of 1856 to J. M. Baker, F. M. Taylor, Josh Stevens, J. R. North and F. J. Lynch. Also appointed to the board, at a later date, were Dr. Peebles of Concrete, Col. R. W. Norton of Halletsville, T. J. Pilgrim, E. Lewis and Dr. P. C. Winn of Gonzales; Dr. A. D. Paulus, Charles A. Keesler of High Hill and James M. Doughty and J. W. Baylor, both of Rockport.²

Chimney and east wall of Concrete College, 1964.

East wall of Main Building—Concrete College, 1964.
Local folklore has it that even before the state charters Concrete settlers hauled lumber from Indianola to build an outpost of learning. Reverend John Van Epps Covey commenced teaching in the village about 1864, and by the mid-1870's a ten acre campus, impressive by standards of the day, had taken shape along Coon Hollow to replace the early structure which had burned. The main building measured 150 by 50 feet with a kitchen and dining room attached. College co-eds shared the stone house of the Covey family, and the male students were assigned to more primitive, two-room frame buildings. All these facilities were constructed by a local builder, Germandt, whose well-laid stone floors and walls—cut from the Guadalupe banks—still testify to his talent. The smaller buildings were of split and hewed logs.

In all honesty it would be unfair to describe DeWitt County as one much influenced by the 19th century industrial and urban revolutions. Still the courses of study at Concrete College indicate the commercial aspirations of the day. Cropping and grazing have always been the economic mainstays of the region, but Dr. Covey's curriculum was loaded in favor of the classical subjects embossed with the new business courses which had come in the wake of northern factories, banks and mercantile houses. Ancient languages, music, penmanship and the profit studies were offered; farming techniques were taught in a cultivated area adjacent to the college.
Experts in education appear to be much concerned today with what administrators term student-teacher ratios. Concrete College would have ranked high in this regard. More than a dozen instructors surveyed the rudiments with an annual average of perhaps a hundred students during the twenty-year life of the college. Reverend Woodlief Thomas, vice-president of the institution, and Professor J. D. Bradfors saw to it that Hebrew, Greek and Latin fundamentals were covered; Professor Grothus instructed in German; Professors Hueber, Woolsey and Bonney conducted classes in business and commerce; Misses Anna Stell and Adlia Debery watched over the students of the primary school [Some pupils were admitted prior to the age of 12] while Mrs. Eisenmeyer and Miss Tunn molded the social amenities in the "ladies department." Mrs. Covey passed on the skill of sewing, and musical talents were developed by Professors Young and Fuchs.¹

Department and scholastic endeavors at Concrete College reflected the personality of Dr. Covey just as all institutions mirror the experience of the officers of administration. Covey was a New Yorker who earned the Doctor of Divinity degree from Madison College and later taught in Tennessee. His Texas posts, as teacher and Baptist preacher, after 1854, included Palestine, Marshall, Trinity and Hallettsville before he took up duties at Concrete. The doctor required no particular religious confession of prospective students, but Concrete College was Baptist-oriented; the school’s financial status was a concern of the Texas Baptist Convention.²

Most institutions whether educational or otherwise earn their niche in history as a result of the activity of those who are skillful enough or fortunate enough to find themselves in positions of leadership. Many who carry on the yeoman’s service are forgotten, and so it was at Concrete where August Schulz labored as the twenty-five year old “man of all work.” Historians have passed up the handyman, but the census recorder of 1870 kindly noted his name as well as that of Leah Covey, a Negro domestic servant, who came to Texas with the Covey family and, along with a Mexican cook, looked after the menu, laundry and general housekeeping chores.³

The census officer who visited the campus in 1870 also recorded the names of students who resided on the campus. [Most of the boarders in that year were young men ranging in age from 12 to 20, and most were Texans.⁴ But Indiana, Germany and England also contributed to the student body.] During the peak enrollment year of 1873-1874, 250 students attended classes and the 100 boarders came from homes scattered from the Brazos to the Rio Grande representing 20 Texas counties.⁵

Unless one accepted a call to the ranks of the clergy, tuition was charged. For a 20 week session [There were two per year from September to February and February to June], $150.00 was required; this fee covered course work (except for music lessons), laundry, food and lodging.⁶ John Young converted three saddle horses and ten head of cattle to a ten-month education at Concrete. He still owed $50, and when Covey’s agent turned up at the Young Ranch to collect John paid off with money earned from breaking horses.⁷

The student’s day at Concrete was well regulated. Up at 5:00, a breakfast and stroll on the campus and religious observances at 8:00 prepared the
pupils for classwork. Several hours in the evening were reserved for study, and on Sunday church attendance was compulsory. Behavior was likely no better or worse than today with a healthy disparity between rules and real conduct. Students' attire was carefully scrutinized; all money was deposited with the college officials, and local merchants were admonished not to extend credit to students who were allowed a once-a-month Saturday visit to town. Firearms, profane language, alcohol, gambling and smoking were all strictly forbidden, but these cow country scholastics were expected to "break over."

Some of the boys were expelled for "wild parties," and whippings were often administered for fighting. It is a fair bet that John Young's trip to Cuero was not unique. Young and a friend were dispatched to the nearby town on an errand for Dr. Covey. Old Tip, the mule, was stubborn as well as contankerous from old age, but the boys, fortified with a bottle of redeye and a handful of cigars, discovered a way to encourage the beast. The whip made no impression on Tip, but firecrackers, exploding at the end of a well-directed stick set him "hitting the ground only in high places." The minutes of the Liar's Club at the college would reveal a cache of folklore; those boys with the most creative imagination were rewarded, during sessions of this story-telling clan, with a dozen tamales.

A bell which hung in the tower of the main building was a temptation to the braver boys, several of whom aroused Dr. Covey from a sound sleep to untie the bell rope from the tail of a bull calf. Jim North was kept "sitting in the middle of the floor half the time" for his mischievousness during his five-year tenure at the college, and on one occasion he "whipped the teacher and it took three of them to overcome" him. With Baptist affiliation it is not difficult to accept one student's remark that when a dance was held in the church auditorium the faculty "sure got mad about it." Dr. Covey found it necessary to admonish his faculty as well as students. A case in point was the labeling of Professor Bonney a Yankee by his colleague, vice-president Thomas.

While the morality of co-education was hotly debated elsewhere, the officials at Concrete College committed themselves without fear to the efficacy of the practice. The school's newspaper confidently stated that "two boys [would] preserve twelve girls, or two girls twelve boys, innocent, merely by that instinctive sense which is the forerunner of matured modesty. But [one can] guarantee nothing in a school where girls are alone together, and still less where boys are." Nevertheless care was exercised to ensure that dining, recreational and some academic activities were segregated as though this "instinctive sense" operated only under the strictest of supervision.

After each week's attendance at lectures and exercises on the blackboard, or with pen and paper on special occasions, students gathered at the "grading board" in the main building. There they compared academic marks and their standing in "readiest obedience." Public, oral examinations were held on Fridays, and graduation was a social event lasting three days with concerts each evening. Preparation for such ceremonies was made through the use of standard texts of the day. Montieth's Geography, Clark's Grammar, Webster's Blue Back Speller and Davie's Mathematics were the accept-
ed tones of enlightenment. According to one student of the subjects taught, military drill and ceremony supplemented the academic courses. Just how many editions of the student newspaper, the Independent, were issued is difficult to determine, but it is certain that the gilded age optimism of that era penetrated the Cuero Creek section of DeWitt County. This is proven in the declaration that “owing to its promiscuous and gratuitous distribution the Independent will be one of the most valuable advertising mediums in Western Texas.” Good advice was a major service of the journal. One issue affirmed that

The knowledge students acquire of books is worthless without habits of industry which produce men engaged in every department of business who are prompt, energetic and reliable. . . . They are the main-spring of every enterprise that is benefiting society and blessing the age. . . .

Further moral strictures were reflective of immediate conditions when DeWitt County found itself in the bloody throes of the Sutton-Taylor Feud: It is “idleness the vicious seducer who swindles our youth . . . every mental and physical wreck in town and country. . . . every youth with his belted six-shooter. . . . the vulgar and blasphemous oath. . . .” contribute to culture’s decline. It appears that, nearly a century removed from the golden age of open range and the merits of frontier virtue, complaints of youth’s decadence remain essentially the same.

Today, if school and college expenditures are an accurate barometer, the educational focus centers on the scientific laboratory and prowess of the athletic team. The hill top colleges of a century past had no such claim to excellence, and though the courses offered were few and perhaps narrow in scope there was still enough insight developed to equip the sons of cowmen and merchants for effective performance in a wide variety of occupations. Time passed more slowly for that generation and the books, lectures and exercises were attended with less tension and urgency making, we might guess, for a more thorough mastery of the subject matter presented. We were not then divided by specialities and the “two cultures” of science and humanities; humbled by the enormity of what we can never know, or hurried by social pressures for degree earning, and hence profited more, or in a different way at least, from the ancient languages, old-fashioned arithmetic and rote spelling.

Proof of Concrete College’s influence is the success of graduates like Rudolph Kleberg who once received from Reverend Covey a Bible as token of academic achievement. John Ishmier served as a state department official during World War I; William Henry Crain, a notable South Texas lawyer and U. S. congressman, and George W. Saunders, one time president of the Old Time Trail Drivers Association, were both alumni. Thomas M. Stell, a turn-of-the century sheriff of DeWitt County, was the champion orator of the college; in 1939 he penned, as proof of his “concrete” foundation in letters, the most objective, lucid and even philosophical treatise ever produced on the complex Sutton-Taylor Feud. Stell’s generation was the last to recall the mixed experience of open range ranching and Latin grammar which produced a now extinct type of wisdom.
History conspired against Concrete just as it did against dozens of other institutions of its breed. The year 1881 saw the last of the Concrete scholars. Disease, ever present on the frontier, struck in 1871 and 1872 in the form of measles and influenza, and several students died of the latter malady.  

On March 4, 1873, the first passenger train of the Gulf, Western Texas and Pacific Railroad arrived in the new town of Cuero, and from that time on interest and effort shifted south. Covey completed the last phase of his long westward migration taking up the crusade at McMullen College at Tilden; eight years later, after returning to the ministry, he died at Cotulla where he lived for a time with his daughter. Jane Covey had married Woodlief Thomas, Concrete's vice-president and one time friend of Sam Houston, whose career included a term in the state legislature.  

Stones in the main building were bartered for a Jersey cow and then scattered along county roads to check erosion. To those who revere the old campus—located now by a barely visible chimney just east of the cross roads at Concrete—it is some consolation to know that the waters to be backed up by a projected Cuero dam will spare Covey's academy.

NOTES


4Concrete College Independent, 4. Young, "History of Education in DeWitt County", 167.

5Carl Bassett Wilson, "Baptist Educational Efforts in Texas" (Doctoral dissertation, University of Texas, 1934), 244-245. Young, "History of Education in DeWitt County", 164, 179, 180, 182. Wildman "Concrete College and its Founders," 16-16.

6Covey's brother taught school at nearby Crossensville. Young, "History of Education in DeWitt County", 193; Wilson, "Baptist Educational Efforts in Texas", 241-244. Wildman's work, "Concrete College and its Founders", on Covey is the most extensive, pp. 1-5.

7Ninth Census of the United States, DeWitt County, Texas, 1870, p. 13, microfilm Barker Center, University of Texas.

8Ibid.
Wilson, “Baptist Educational Efforts in Texas”, 248; Young, “History of Education in DeWitt County”, 191.

Ibid., 185, Wilson, “Baptist Educational Efforts in Texas”, 245.


Wilson, “Baptist Educational Efforts in Texas”, 247; Young, “History of Education in DeWitt County”, 170, 179, 186; Wildman, “Concrete College and its Founders”, 25.

Ibid., 27; Young, “History of Education in DeWitt County”, 182.

Ibid.

Mody C. Boatright, *Tall Tales from Texas Cow Camps* (Dallas, 1934), c-xii.

Young, “History of Education in DeWitt County”, 176, 177, 179.

Concrete College Independent, 1; Young, “History of Education in DeWitt County”, 178.

Ibid., 165, 170, 175, 179; Wilson, “Baptist Educational Efforts in Texas”, 246; Wildman, “Concrete College and its Founders”, 18.

Concrete College Independent, 1.

Ibid.


Young, “History of Education in DeWitt County”, 191; Wildman, “Concrete College and its Founders”, 30.


Students began transferring to other institutions about 1878. Covey “preached all over Southwest Texas” after the college closed in 1881. Young, “History of Education in DeWitt County”, 189, 191.

Wilson, “Baptist Educational Efforts in Texas”, 243-244.

Wildman, “Concrete College and its Founders”, 32.