Northeastern:

Centennial History

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Dedicated to
those who laid the foundation
and
maintained the educational tradition
pioneered by the Cherokees
Preface

The state of Oklahoma's second legislature established Northeastern State Normal School, one of three institutions created in 1909 to train teachers in the part of Oklahoma that had been Indian Territory. Over the next one hundred years, Northeastern experienced a roller coaster of economic booms and busts and kaleidoscopic change that saw the school evolve from little more than a high school to a regional university offering varied educational programs on campuses in Tahlequah, Broken Arrow, and Muskogee. While the courses of study offered by the university in the 21st century bear scant resemblance to the curriculum of the Cherokee National Female Seminary, the tribe's commitment to education provided the foundation for the state school that began its existence in the building occupied by the women. That structure, now named “Seminary Hall,” remains the heart of the Tahlequah campus, and its tower has been replicated in Broken Arrow and Muskogee, a tangible reminder of Northeastern State University's connection to the Cherokee institution.

Despite the historic and symbolic importance of Seminary Hall, its significance rests not on the brick and mortar from which it was constructed, but rather on the women, and later men, who studied and taught there. An unbroken line of students and faculty left a chronicle of achievement locked away in the minutes of the state board of education, personal letters and accounts, recorded recollections, old newspaper archives, records of the boards of regents, and other repositories. The broad outlines of the history of Northeastern have been reprinted in the annual catalogs, periodic reports, and recurring newspaper accounts, but as the years and the school's early students faded into the past, much of the detail and color of the school's vibrant history has been forgotten.

The goal of this centennial history is to recapture as much of the drama and color of the school's rich heritage as those records will reveal. Despite more than four years of work, only a fraction of accounts documenting Northeastern's history have been examined. Throughout northeastern Oklahoma and far beyond in trunks, closets, attics, and basements graduates and former students have left caches of letters, diaries, and other accounts of their time at
Northeastern. These documents could provide details about campus life in eras of the school's past that have not been adequately documented. In many years of Northeastern’s first half century, student newspapers and yearbooks were not published; in one year in the late 1920s, no Tahlequah newspapers have been located. Few school bulletins or other documents remain from the World War I era. The archivist of Northeastern invites graduates, former students, and relatives who have such records to share them with the university by writing to the University Archivist, John Vaughan Library, Northeastern State University, 611 North Grand Avenue, Tahlequah, OK 74464 or by contacting the archivist by email at library@nsuok.edu.

Where appropriate, information from these accounts will be used to add new perspectives, provide more detail, or correct errors in this centennial history of the school. The attempt to record the history of Northeastern and the Cherokee Female Seminary has been a daunting undertaking. Because of the constraint of time, many topics could not be researched adequately, and errors of fact and interpretation are inevitable. Footnotes, in particular, have not been double checked. After the entire book has been placed online, the author plans to revisit every footnote to ensure that each one fully supports the text. Readers who discover errors, omissions, or other problems are encouraged to contact the archives. Since the book has been published online, mistakes can be corrected and new information added quickly and with little effort. The chapters posted during the school's centennial year are a first draft. The hope of those involved in the research and writing of the history is that those who have been associated with the school can provide additional information and documents that will expand and enrich story of Northeastern's past.
Acknowledgments

A work of this scope is the result of the support and encouragement of many individuals. Several years ago when Northeastern administrators invited members of their academic community to volunteer for work on committees to plan the observation of the school's centennial, the author sent then Vice President James Pate an email suggesting that he would like to write the institution's history if no one else were interested. Pate accepted the offer and coordinated with President Larry Williams and Dean V. Lyle Haskins to provide release time. The faculty research committee funded a two-year grant that allowed the author to research in the archives of the Oklahoma Department of Libraries and to defray the costs of collecting and organizing the volume of material on which this book rests. Garry Harrington, administrative archivist, and his staff in Oklahoma City were extremely helpful in providing documents and suggestions for research.

Allen McKiel, director of the John Vaughan Library, waived the normal book checkout period for the duration of the project and authorized the author unlimited access to the newspaper archives and other resources in the library's special collections department. Tom Messner, acting director of libraries, secured a subscription to the Oklahoman Archives, a database essential to the research of Northeastern’s history and valuable to anyone interested the Sooner State, its history, culture, and government. Delores Sumner, curator of the special collections department, did everything within her power to facilitate research of the school's history, particularly the seminary years and the early decades as a state institution. The university archives became the primary focus of research for the most recent sixty years of the school's history because of its collections of presidential papers, school bulletins, regents' minutes, student newspapers and other valuable resources. Victoria Sheffler, the university archivist, also facilitated research by checking out important documents when the archives held multiple copies, providing photocopies of unique documents, and making available electronic indexes to the minutes of the board of regents and collections of presidential papers. Perhaps her most significant assistance was to provide digital copies of most of the student newspapers. Not long after research began, Brenda Cochran was
employed part time by the archives. One of her assignments was to digitize the student newspapers. Despite other urgent demands on her time, she provided searchable, electronic copies as they were needed. Her work will eventually enable the library to post the archive's entire collection of student newspapers online, a service of tremendous importance to anyone interested in Northeastern, Oklahoma history, or genealogy.

The editorial assistance of Jodie Nida, senior editor at Mullerhaus Communication Group, was particularly valuable. She read most of the manuscript and provided helpful criticism and advice. Dr. Bill Davis, professor of history at Northeastern, read the entire manuscript, and Dr. V. Lyle Haskins, emeritus professor of history, read chapters covering his years at Northeastern. Pete Henshaw, the university photographer, proofed the early chapters. All caught errors and made suggestions for revision that improved the book. Linda West, director of technical services at the John Vaughan Library, found time from her demanding job to prepare the manuscript for publication on the web, and Brenda Cochran, who is also a professional graphic artist, enhanced the appearance of the online publication. Dr. Dalton Bigbee, vice president of academic affairs, provided funding for Barbara Tabor, who served as a research assistant for the project. Her work in collecting material, developing a name index for the minutes of the state board of education, and checking and formatting footnotes was essential in completing the university’s history before the end of the centennial year. Foremost among those who assisted in the development of this centennial history, the author’s wife, Sue Agnew, spent untold hours proofreading, critiquing, offering advice, and lending support during the years required to convert an idea into a history of an institution whose roots were planted long before Oklahoma became a state.