The attention that legislators lavished on the Sam Houston Normal Institute during its formative years was matched by an unfortunate neglect of the state's public schools. Public education into the 1880s writhed in confusion as a violent debate centered on how to replace the elaborately financed and intricately organized system that liberal Republicans had foisted upon an unwilling populace. Most Texans believed in state-supported free public schools, but the backlash against the heavy-handed policies of the recently ousted regime invited an equally radical minority of conservatives to obstruct any effort to move forward.

Quite simply, the reactionaries did not believe in public education. They railed against it as a form of tyranny that “taxed one man to educate the children of another.” The concept of free schools, they argued, also violated the law of God by stripping parents of their divine right to control what their sons and daughters would learn. At best they expressed a willingness to provide modest subsidies for private and denominational schools. At worst they were content to let the children of Texas wallow in ignorance.

Facing such a volatile political climate, it was all that men of reason could do to negotiate a compromise. What emerged was a loose and unworkable “community system” that prevailed until the legislature passed a new school law in 1884. The temporary solution allowed parents and concerned citizens at the local level to set standards and dictate curriculum. On the other hand it cultivated the kinds of petty jealousies and prejudices that too often divided communities, rather than foster cooperation. With no provisions for compulsory attendance or fixed boundaries, and local boards subject to annual elections, the system wheezed along while it slowly suffocated under the weight of extralegal alternatives and the incremental passage of some sensible, but minor legislation.

The Peabody Education Fund led the way out of this educational morass, encouraging men and women in cities and larger towns to circumvent state laws and take charge of their own destinies. With the connivance of their state representatives, many communities acted on the philanthropy’s wise counsel and began organizing viable public school systems. By the time graduates of the Sam Houston
Normal Institute began their teaching careers, most of them found enthusiastic receptions in urban centers where local leaders had established district boundaries and imposed tolerable property taxes to finance buildings and salaries.

In this welcoming environment SHNI graduates quickly earned reputations as capable classroom teachers as well as efficient superintendents heading school systems that offered up to eight grades and normally operated nine months out of the year. Harry Estill, in fact, helped organize the schools at Navasota, while up the road, the town of Bryan hired Percy Pennybacker and his soon-to-be wife Anna Hardwicke as superintendent and teacher, respectively.

In a state where the vast majority of people lived on farms, however, the one-room schoolhouse remained the predominant feature on the educational landscape. Until the new laws of 1884 came into effect, the development of most country schools was limited by caps on teachers’ salaries and a prohibition against raising taxes for the building and maintenance of already meager facilities. Moreover, supervision came at the discretion of county judges whose lack of knowledge in school affairs was equaled only by their general disinterest in education.

Compounding the miserable situation was a teaching force of roughly seven thousand men and women. Only a handful had enjoyed any kind of formal pedagogical training. Most of them relied on the Lancasterian Monitor system of tutorial learning that concentrated on memorization and used older students to help the younger ones. In such a woeful environment, the graduates of SHNI made the first significant dent in this monolith of incompetence, heralding a new standard for their noble calling.

To help bridge the gap in teacher preparation between urban and rural schools, the Peabody Education Fund during the summer of 1881 sponsored a series of four-week “summer normals” for county teachers whose circumstances prevented them from pursuing a formal education. It was this program that lured Joseph A. Baldwin to Texas from Missouri, where he had served for fourteen years as president of the state normal school at Kirksville. Conducting a session at San Marcos, Baldwin struck up a friendship with Henry Pritchett of the private Coronal Institute there. The local educator was well aware of Hildreth Smith’s troubles in Huntsville and no doubt anticipated his removal. With Baldwin’s blessings, Pritchett took it upon himself to push the Missourian as a suitable replacement for the embattled principal. At the very same meeting where the State Board of Education released Smith from a suitable replacement for the embattled principal. At the very same

At a hastily convened July meeting the board liked what they saw, and Baldwin promptly accepted the challenge set before him. All that was left for him to do was resign his long-held position at the Missouri normal and prepare his family for the move to Huntsville. If news of the sudden relocation came as a bit of a shock to Baldwin’s wife and five children, their layover at the Phelps junction must have given them pause to consider what others had surely told them to expect from this frontier state. While the principal himself waited for them in Huntsville, the rest of the family was being received by some inquisitive pigs, whose curiosity was cut short at the first whistle of the distant locomotive. Squealing and scrambling, the porkers made a dash for the safety of the crawlspace beneath the general store. By comparison, the sight of Huntsville must have come as no small relief.

Going into the fall of 1881, then, the Sam Houston Normal Institute greeted its third principal in as many years. Joseph Baldwin hit the ground running in a way his immediate predecessor would have envied. Unencumbered by distant administrators who came to realize that if they truly wanted a “Lee or Jackson,” as Barnas Sears had put it, they would have to give their new principal unfettered power. The resolve Baldwin demonstrated in reorganizing the curriculum and defining the responsibilities of the faculty certainly won the immediate confidence of the state board and local trustees.

Even before the academic year of 1881-1882 began, he refocused the course of study around the school’s stated mission of teacher training, subordinating classes that emphasized the classical liberal arts education. He also divided the curriculum by departments, including such seemingly inconsequential subjects as penmanship, elocution, and calisthenics. To the new principal,
and of course, they tracked the progress of their policies and celebrations, such as the annual San Jacinto Day festivities, for speakers to address assemblies, they organized commencements. Members arranged their genial Saturday meetings were numerous. Members arranged.

Baldwin also rewarded him in other ways, notably by taking him as a kind of informal executive secretary. In turn, the many nights Baldwin quickly cultivated him as a protégé, using the younger man.

Baldwin quickly cultivated him as a protégé, using the younger man.

When he covered most of the young man’s expenses.

...accompany him to a conference of the National Education Agency, to board meetings in Austin. On one occasion he invited Estill to be hired to replace his father. Upon returning to Huntsville, he engaged the faculty in regular Saturday meetings provided an indication of the mutual respect that formed the bedrock of their association.

Some faculty changes made the transition smoother as well. The strong-willed Oscar Cooper, who had hoped to ascend to the principalship upon Bernard Mallon’s death and was passed over once again when Baldwin became head of the school, resigned his position to pursue further studies at Yale. The return of the amiable Charles P. Estill along with the appointment of Baldwin’s first champion, Henry Carr Pritchett, also helped clear the air. Both of them came on board at the same time as the new principal.

Just before the 1882 term began, Sam Houston went into mourning once more. This time it was Charles P. Estill who died after contracting typhoid fever. Baldwin personally recommended to the board that Harry Estill—valedictorian of the first class—be hired to replace his father. Upon returning to Huntsville, the younger Estill joined the faculty as First Male Assistant. His renewed association with Sam Houston would last for sixty years.

During Baldwin’s ten years at Sam Houston, the faculty grew from four to ten, and as the circle widened, so too did the atmosphere of camaraderie. The issues that consumed the faculty at their genial Saturday meetings were numerous. Members arranged for speakers to address assemblies, they organized commencements and celebrations, such as the annual San Jacinto Day festivities, and of course, they tracked the progress of their policies and discussed the merits of new ones. Nothing, however, commanded as much attention as monitoring the affairs of the students, of which over 2,650 of them had received their diplomas by the time Baldwin’s tenure ended.

Well into the twentieth century virtually every institution of higher education embraced the concept of in loco parentis, Latin for “in the place of a parent.” Consequently, the responsibility for assuming the students’ moral instruction fell to the school’s faculty. The fourth annual catalogue of the Sam Houston Normal Institute admonished students to remember that as future teachers each should “act as he will wish his pupils to act.” Appealing to their highest instincts, the faculty reminded that “no institution has a nobler class of students, a higher moral tone, or a better means for moral culture.”

With few exceptions the three hundred-or-so students enrolled during any particular semester aspired to meet the high expectations placed on them. Most were regular churchgoers and eschewed coarse language and boorish behavior. At the same time, Texas during the 1880s was experiencing a railroad boom, and the emergence of a market economy established ties to a world beyond the state’s borders that loosened social mores. Sam Houston students from the cities and larger towns often brought to Huntsville a more liberal sense of propriety than their instructors could appreciate. Then, there were the country students. Any number of clichés beginning, “Once you get them off the farm…” certainly applied to a student body composed three-fourths of the sons and daughters of men who tilled the soil. All were subject to disciplinary action for suffering a lapse in judgment, but on the rare occasions when true reprobates emerged, the faculty did not hesitate to send them home.

Every student was keenly aware of Sam Houston’s rigorous code of conduct. Baldwin personally required each of them upon entering the institution to take a pledge that bound them to “comply cheerfully with the regulations of the school.” Violations inevitably resulted in points deducted from

Oscar H. Cooper: A native East Texan, born in Panola County, near Carthage. Oscar Cooper was the son of a prominent doctor and a doting mother. The couple sent their fifteen-year-old son to Yale University, where he earned a B.A. degree in 1872. The next year he returned to Texas as president of the Henderson Male and Female College, where he remained until joining the first faculty at SHIN. Disappointed with being passed over by Hildreth Smith and Joseph Baldwin when the principal’s office became vacant, he resigned his teaching position “with regrets” and reenrolled at his alma mater. After studying abroad at the University of Berlin in 1884-1885, he came back to Texas once again. As State Superintendent of Education between 1886 and 1896, he renewed his commitment to SHIN, even if indirectly, by extending to the school every resource that his high office allowed. Eventually, he attained presidencies at Baylor University and Simmons College in Ablene. Cooper also served on a number of statewide committees dedicated to cultivating higher education in Texas and joined Harry Estill as co-author of the textbook History of Our Country, published in 1895. Along the way he picked up an honorary doctorate from the University of Nashville in recognition of his long and distinguished career.

Keeping good teachers in the classroom, he warned, would remain a challenge “so long as the (monetary) rewards of the teacher’s life are inferior to those of other occupations.” Oscar Cooper died at Abilene in 1932 in his eightieth year.
their deportment grades. When the time came for them to apply for teaching positions, the students’ records of conduct—whether good or bad—could provide as weighty a recommendation as their course grades.

Topping the principal’s list of “dons’” was “dancing, drinking, and card playing.” In instances when individuals tested the rules, the faculty responded swiftly and unequivocally. In one case, a young man accused of drunkenness withstood a withering interrogation, and after some others testified against him, he admitted to the charge. When the student realized he might well lose his scholarship, however, he retracted his confession, stating “his words had been misconstrued.” Without elaborating, the minutes of the next faculty meeting noted the disposition of the case: “Reignition of B[____], a student from the IX Dist., was accepted.” Similarly, the Registrar noted that two young women suffered “indefinite suspension” for admitting “they had danced repeatedly and openly” in defiance of their pledge.

Members of the faculty took their roles as surrogate parents to lengths that sound oppressive today, but in their own time they met with the approbation of mothers and fathers who likewise demanded high moral standards of their offspring. In 1883 the Registrar noted that instructors began paying personal visits to the boarding houses in order to “make inquiries in a quiet way, as to the general deportment of the students.” Even rumors of off-campus “imprudence and undignified conduct” brought a summons to one student for “some kind and wholesome advice in regard to his conduct in the future.”

More seriously, when another male student during calisthenics openly challenged the authority of his instructor, Mrs. A. A. Reynolds, she forbade him to return to class until he made a full and sincere apology. That did not satisfy her colleagues, however, who reprimanded the young man publicly and lowered his deportment grade by half.

More typical of the students who attended Sam Houston Academy was one J. J. Rushing. His letters projected the confident enthusiasm of a student who was making the most of college life. “I am well and as happy as a dead pig in the sunshine,” one particular note began. In others he said: “I never studied so hard in my life as I have been studying since I came back home…Excuse this badly written letter. It is thundering and lightening so that I can scarcely write at all… I am sorry to learn of Sallie being afflicted as she is. I hope she will be restored to good health ere long… quite lonesome this week…”

As Rushing successfully adjusted to his new circumstances, his letters projected the confident enthusiasm of a student who was making the most of college life. “I am well and as happy as a dead pig in the sunshine,” one particular note began. In others he said: “I never studied so hard in my life as I have been studying these past two weeks, and I think I have been greatly rewarded for it… I like my change of boarding houses very well. I have a good old steady room mate and a church member… We were visited by the Committee on education this week. Some of them delivered some very good speeches… We take a lesson every day on Civil Government, taught by Dr. Baldwin; it is one of the most interesting studies that I have…”

By the time he got into the swing of the social life at Sam Houston, Rushing’s curiosity about what was going on back home contracted to inquiries about crops and farm animals and the health and well being of family members. Without relating a single example, one remark he made to his brother bespoke a young man attuned to his surroundings: “I have no news of importance to impart to you though if I could see you I could tell you many
Two frame structures of a temporary nature arose just south of the once-elegant building. As planned, one housed the music department, the other served as a gymnasium and assembly hall. As they marched out of the Chapel after the morning exercise was over, he explained, they determined “to march on horse.” About half of them, in fact, did. But the others, “when the time came, got scared and backed out, and J. J. R. was among those that backed.” He needn’t have been so concerned. The instructors who “took it as an April fool and said nothing about it” evidently prevailed over their colleagues, and the prank brought no reprisal.

In another newsworthy item Rushing declared: “Huntsville is on the skate.” Swept into the fad of the day, some businessmen in town had built a roller rink. Certain that his brother had never seen a pair of skates, he explained how “they are buckled on the feet and roll on rollers.” More of an observer than a participator, Rushing related what he saw: “It is a great show to see them fall around in every direction, some time four and five in a pile, but they will get up and try it over.”

Skating quickly became a pastime enjoyed by the male students only. The unladylike efforts of maintaining their balance, and the act of getting up when they could not, impelled the faculty to add skating to its list of prohibited diversions for girls.

The success of the Sam Houston Normal Institute, reflected particularly in the growth of its student body, brought attention to the campus’s meager facilities. When a committee of legislators in 1887 paid a call on the school to conduct a formal review of its operations, the visitors heaped praise on the training plant. A remodeling of Austin Hall, initiated during Hildreth Smith’s tenure and completed in 1882, represented the only substantive improvement to the campus. The unfortunate result came at the expense of upsetting the simple, classic lines of the original design. The modification also meant sacrificing the bell tower and balcony.

Two frame structures of a temporary nature arose just south of the once-elegant building. As planned, one housed the music department, the other served as a gymnasium and assembly hall. Yet by the time the class of ’85 matriculated, they faced a three-year course of study. Along with a natural increase in enrollment, the added pressure of the third year stretched available space beyond its limits.

Juggling the demands of his instructors also gave Dr. Baldwin unending headaches. Among the notations dealing with facilities arrangements, the Registrar noted: “Miss Elliot being unwilling to give up her room on Callisthenic days, another arrangement seemed necessary.” The solution demonstrated the magnitude of the problem. “On Wednesday and Fridays Prof. Estill agrees to yield to Prof. Pritchett, the first three hours, and to take his classes to No. 11. The fourth hour, Miss Elliot consents to give her room to Prof. Pritchett, conducting her recitation for that hour in No. 11.”

In his report to the legislature, the State Superintendent wrote: “So little has been done for the school in the way of permanent improvements that it is not unreasonable to ask that it now be furnished with a building worthy of its high rank and eminent usefulness.” The superintendent, an office just recently created by the new school laws of 1884, happened to be Oscar Cooper, whose affection for Sam Houston had not flagged, despite his abrupt departure. Joining him in lobbying the Texas congress on the school’s behalf was L. A. Abercrombie of Huntsville, an original trustee of SHNI who, by 1888, had become a popular state senator.

Their resolute appeal for a new building convinced state representatives to pass a $40,000 allocation, a seemingly small sum now that can be appreciated only by contrasting it with the school’s first operating budget of $22,000. For two years, beginning with the fall term of 1889, students and faculty and townspeople watched with keen interest as the massive brick and stone structure took shape on the north-most lip of College Hill. So close to Austin Hall did it arise, that the cacophony of saws, hammers, and shouts of workers at times made it difficult for students in nearby classrooms to think. Gradually the expansive façade, from which its steep-pitched roof and towering spires reached skyward, began to outawe its neighbor, until the smaller structure could be seen only as an outline against the backside of the new landmark.

Not only did Main, it was called, solve the institution’s space problem, but it also endowed SHNI with an imposing, dignified identity that would endure for almost a century. The commodious and high-ceiledinged three-story building provided classrooms, offices, a library, and a grand auditorium—the Sam Houston Memorial Hall—that seated more than 1,200 people. Workers put the finishing touches on this Gothic cathedral of
knowledge in time for the beginning of the 1890-1891 academic year. Its dedication on September 22 provided the crowning achievement of Joseph Baldwin's successful tenure as principal.

As the academic year came to a close, Baldwin had grown weary from ten years at the helm of an institution he had led from a stage of experimentation to one that had become a model for normal school training. Much of the success he enjoyed in affecting a decade of steady and logical growth came largely behind the scenes as a result of enervating meetings and late-night correspondence with trustees, legislators, and state officials. He had accomplished at this point all that anyone from the outset would have expected of him and more. When the University of Texas offered him the newly created chair of pedagogy just before the 1892-1893 school year began, Dr. Baldwin seized the opportunity and stepped down as principal of the Sam Houston Normal Institute.

It was no surprise that upon the news of his resignation, important individuals representing official bodies composed effusive tributes extolling Baldwin's accomplishments. Nevertheless, the words of former student George Hunter Smith, written in 1934 after a lifetime of reflection, probably came closer to encapsulating what the principal truly considered his most important work. "I do not hesitate to declare Dr. Baldwin the greatest educator I have ever known, and I have known many great teachers," Smith expressed. "I have known many who had more mere 'book learning,' more 'scholarship,' but I have never known even one who could inspire young men and women as Dr. Baldwin could." Certainly many hundreds of teachers commanding classrooms in public schools across Texas bore evidence of that simple testimony long after Baldwin had passed from the scene.22

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Old Main