An Era of Growth and Progress

The Administration of Henry Carr Pritchett, 1891-1908

Just before Joseph Baldwin in 1890 began the last year of his tenure as principal of the Sam Houston Normal Institute, Henry Carr Pritchett left the podium and succeeded Oscar Cooper as State Superintendent of Public Instruction. His duties also included serving as secretary on the State Board of Education and State Agent for the Peabody Education Fund. His new office made him imminently aware of the conditions that prevailed in the state’s public schools. It also enabled him to appreciate more fully how Baldwin had shaped the mission of the normal school to meet the changing educational requirements of a growing state that was in economic and social transition. When the third principal stepped down to take the chair of pedagogy at the University of Texas, Pritchett had gained enough seasoning to take up where his old friend had left off.

The like-minded colleague of the former principal continued the same conservative course, providing a sense of continuity, while at the same time striving to meet the evolving demands of the public school system. Increasingly he felt the pressure for turning out teachers who could pass on the kinds of “real world” skills to students who would soon find themselves in jobs that required knowledge of the manual arts, agriculture, and home economics. But while legislators discussed the merits of funding the expansion of normal school training to encompass the practical sciences, expenditures routinely fell short.

To his credit, Pritchett compensated for the lack of material support by maintaining a dialogue with educators at public schools around the state and responding to their needs as best he could. “Our course of study has not extended so as to include additional subjects,” he conceded in a report to the Peabody trustees just before the turn of the century, “but it has broadened and deepened by more careful, thorough study of such branches as pertain specifically to the work of the Public School.” In turn, his successor at the state superintendent’s post responded by praising Sam Houston for “rendering an indispensable public service” and further expressed that the institute was “making full and ample returns for the State’s bounty”—or, more accurately, despite its parsimony.
Under Pritchett’s direction, SHNI fine-tuned its three-year course of study. All students, upon arrival, continued to take an entrance examination that determined whether they would enter the institution as freshmen, juniors, or seniors. Occasionally, experienced teachers who set their sights on obtaining a lifetime certificate matriculated straight into the senior class. The more typical students, “fresh” off the farm, did not come equipped with an adequate educational background and routinely spent a rigorous first year just mastering the basics of such courses as grammar and rhetoric, history and geography, and math and science. Another examination elevated them to the junior year that introduced classes such as school management, civics, English literature, and Latin. Passing one last qualifying exam made them seniors. Classes during that final year focused on refining the students’ pedagogical skills and imprinted upon them the methodologies that prepared them for the classroom. Even so, Sam Houston graduates had to gain a year of actual classroom experience before their diplomas conveyed the privilege of that all-important lifetime certificate. Despite the demanding standards, students who passed the examinations following their freshman and junior years could still obtain a “graded” certificate that allowed them to reach at the elementary level for three years.

If the overview of the Pritchett years sounds somewhat pedestrian, in many ways it was. Historians of Sam Houston State University have tended to look somewhat narrowly at the seventeen-year tenure of Henry Carr Pritchett, but not on account of any administrative shortcomings. Far from it. Pritchett’s success in continuing the policies of Joseph Baldwin left the record unmarked by the kinds of crises that characterized the near past as well as the revolutionary Progressive agenda that lay in the immediate future.

The one great crisis that arose during Pritchett’s tenure actually provided a cause for redemption, sounding a clarion whose echoes still reverberate ninety-nine years later in the good work of progressive agenda that lay in the immediate future.

Drawing on her students and Principal Pritchett for encouragement, Kirkley soon mobilized the entire community behind an effort to purchase the original home and surrounding property, convincing everyone involved that it was an inheritance rightly due the Sam Houston Normal Institute.

The old general’s Woodland Home literally rested in the morning shadows cast by the school that carried his name. In an article Harry Estill penned for the state’s historical journal in 1900, he acknowledged that it was still “pointed out to strangers as ‘the old Sam Houston place.’” Yet at the same time he confessed obliquely that its later owners had subordinated the home’s architectural integrity out of practical necessity. By the time Kirkley had seized upon her cause, the structure was known as the Smedes Boarding and Valley House for Girls. Siding and cosmetic repairs as well as several enclosures and additions that tripled its size left no trace of the Woodland Home the Houstons had known.

By 1910, two years after Principal Pritchett died, the noble cause he had supported through Professor Kirkley appeared within reach of its final triumph. The activist and her students had pulled together three small tracts totaling about fifteen acres. They had also talked prominent banker W. S. Gibbs into extending them a loan to hasten the final purchase and restoration of the house. Some of the outbuildings were beginning to return as well. Professor Joe Pritchett, the principal’s brother, for example, had managed to locate Sam Houston’s law office and return it to its original spot. By 1910. two years after Principal Pritchett died, the noble cause he had supported through Professor Kirkley appeared within reach of its final triumph. The activist and her students had pulled together three small tracts totaling about fifteen acres. They had also talked prominent banker W. S. Gibbs into extending them a loan to hasten the final purchase and restoration of the house. Some of the outbuildings were beginning to return as well. Professor Joe Pritchett, the principal’s brother, for example, had managed to locate Sam Houston’s law office and return it to its original spot.

The next March 2nd the annual pilgrimage to Sam Houston’s grave marked the seventy-fifth anniversary of his victory at San Jacinto. On hand to dedicate a monument to the general’s glory was the “people’s politician” William Jennings Bryan. Swept away in his own burst of oratory, he pledged to deliver his celebrated evangelical speech, “Prince of Peace,” at the Main auditorium to help retire the remaining debt on the Woodland Home and grounds. The event proved successful and lingered as a heart-quickening, but tranquil moment in the collective memory of the community.

Although the Pritchett era has been recalled as the “Halcyon Years of the Institute,” the world beyond the campus was anything but tranquil. The countryside, from which most of the students hailed, provided a bitter political arena where Populists challenged the Democratic Party for control of the hearts and minds of average
It was also a time when the entire country was struggling with an economic depression following the Panic of 1893. Abroad, the stirrings of American Imperialism left the world looking ever smaller and more perilous.

During these years Texas came to boast more miles of railroad tracks than any other state. The many connecting lines that led to the little junction at Phelps put Huntsville within convenient reach of almost any place from where students hailed. School catalogs sent to prospective applicants included timetables that coordinated their journeys along the International & Great Northern, the Katy, the Cotton Belt, the Texas & Pacific, the Southern, the Santa Fe and other major roads and short lines. Before the Pritchett era ended, moreover, the first automobiles began sputtering up and down the streets of Huntsville, attracting the interest of curious observers.

If the campus provided a safe harbor of sorts against the swift and inexorable currents on which the new century rode in, the Galveston hurricane of 1900 swept away any pretensions of students who believed themselves insulated from events that made headlines. Among five students from the island city enrolled at Sam Houston that year, Aglae Edwards and Isabell Mitchell took small comfort in the commiseration of classmates whose words could do little to soothe the pain of losing loved ones and acquaintances as well as their homes and all their belongings.

The following year, the great oil gusher at Spindletop blew in, certainly casting Jefferson County students such as Josie Francis into a black sea of giddy distractions. She left school after one year, but whether it was because the oil boom lured her back home, or the first grade certificate she earned fulfilled some personal goal, the records remain silent.

Beyond doubt, the most enduring testament to Pritchett's leadership is that he was able to project to subsequent generations the impression that on the hilltop, at least, an atmosphere of calm and stability prevailed during these turbulent times. If conditions indeed remained "normal," it seems amusing to note that about this time some local people had taken to calling the eminence Normal Hill. Certainly it was no illusion that Sam Houston continued to produce well-trained teachers who entered Texas classrooms where the expectations placed on them grew in proportion to the social and economic horizons expanding all about them.

At ground level the emerging modernity did not seem to overtake the students so quickly. In particular, the typical rural applicants seemed no worldlier than those who had enrolled before them. Mary Kerr's recounting of her first Sunday afternoon as a lonely seventeen-year-old freshman during the fall of 1904 brings to mind the homesick J. J. Rushing. After church and a "sumptuous meal" with the rest of the girls at Mrs. L. C. Vinson's boarding house, Mary retired to her room, where she pictured her home folks "gathering for Christian Endeavor services" way out in the West Texas town of Seymour, between Wichita Falls and Abilene. "I got to crying, and I cried all afternoon," she later wrote.

That is how Mrs. Vinson found her when she went upstairs to check on the girl. No doubt, the matron had seen it all before. "So she came up and put her arms around me," Kerr recalled, "and gave me one of the sweetest talks a girl ever got." Reconciling herself to the fact that she would not see her family again until after May, she determined to "dry her tears" and "learn to make the best of everything and be thankful...for the privilege of being in college."

Edna Turley, who enrolled at Sam Houston in the fall of 1893, was more representative of students who had already taught in the state's public schools and determined to come to Huntsville to hone their skills and earn the lifetime certificate. She was already teaching at the tiny Travis County community of Manchaca—pronounced "Man-shack" in a way that only Texans can mangle the spoken word—when her temporary certificate expired. "I had reached one of the crossroads in my life," she later reflected. "I could follow most of the country schoolteachers of the period back into one of the summer institutes and thus obtain..."
Huntsville, 1910
Public Hanging,

Pritchett

32

in the classroom, it was that she knew little about the subject and attempt to secure a certificate that would be good for life another temporary teaching certificate,…or I could aim higher of our Manchaca home to be placed on the train for Huntsville," Turley intoned, "Ma bitterly remarked, 'It is just like they are taking your coffin out.'" Once on the SHNI campus, however, turley declared, "was as stealthy as a mama bobcat and just as successful." Together they serenaded housemates and their gentleman callers with a "frog orchestra—each girl singing a different song simultaneously." Her own turn came when a "town boy" dropped by the boarding house to take her riding in "an elegant carriage" pulled by a "pair of prancing, matched bays." For most of the girls the boarding house was their holiday home as well, because of the short break between semesters. Turley's brother spoke for many disappointed relatives, when he wrote: "Seems to me that they are crowding the monkey by giving no holiday Xmas."

The full schedule, just as H. Carr Pritchett said, reflected a "more careful, thorough study" of the curriculum. And even if the annual bulletin did not include an array of additional subjects, the growth of the student body compelled the stingy legislature to add "more careful, thorough study" of the curriculum. And even if the annual bulletin did not include an array of additional subjects, the growth of the student body compelled the stingy legislature to add

First Faculty Authors. As educators who had trained many hundreds of working schoolteachers, several early members of the Sam Houston Normal Institute faculty further enhanced their prestige by authoring textbooks that were widely used in public schools throughout Texas and in many Southern states as well. The most prolific was Turley. Their History of Our Country. A Textbook for Schools grew out of the dissatisfaction that Principal Henry Carr Pritchett expressed over prevailing interpretations of the Civil War and Reconstruction, penned exclusively by northeastern authors. When Ginn and Company of Boston completed the proof copy, Estill traveled to New England as the coauthors' representative. As predicted, the new book met with the same approval in the South and was widely adopted. Nevertheless, it attracted controversy of its own. Occasionally, a Confederate veteran of some particular battle wrote the publisher to complain that Estill, et al., did not find the engagement as important as it surely loomed in his own memory. In 1901 Estill revised the work for fifth grade students, which the Southern Publishing Company titled as the Beginner's History of Our Country. The book went through several editions and remained a standard text throughout schools in most former Confederate states until just before World War II. Along the way, Estill became an officer and primary stockholder in the local publishing company. Then, in 1905, a state law forbade such arrangements, compelling him to liquidate his shares.
of her old classmates met in Dallas for a state teachers’ conference where Halley was speaking. “We were anxious to see if he would know us,” she said. “When he came to me, he faltered, and I was afraid he was going to disappoint me. ‘Just a minute,’ he said, ‘I’ll recall your name.’” After relating what he remembered about her, Halley finally got it: “You’re Miss Kerr.” The old teacher smiled: “We all thought that was super.”

By all reports though, Harry Estill, who “pounded Latin into the students’ heads with equal amounts of gravity and good humor, remained the overwhelming favorite. Kerr recalled a particular class in which Estill asked one Charles Gates to interpret a line from the lesson. Standing up, the “handsome young man” as Kerr remembered him said: “Cæsar had a darned hard time crossing the Alps.” As the student slumped into his chair, everyone remained still until the genial professor registered his approval with a hearty laugh. Over the sudden outburst of clucking and commotion, Estill exclaimed: “That was a good reading Charles, and I agree with you!”

There was one young woman on the campus, Loulie Sexton, who found Mr. Estill especially charming. He returned the affections of this winsome professor of grammar and rhetoric, and soon the two were married. With no expressions of regret, she resigned her job to set up a household for the couple near the foot of Normal Hill.

Of the principal, Mary Kerr insisted that Henry Carr Pritchett was “much revered” by the student body. “He was my teacher in psychology, and he certainly knew his subject,” she insisted. Edna Turley echoed her sentiments, even if describing him frankly as a “very smart, short, fat man.” Kerr recalled that he was an accomplished lecturer, but that the young men “delighted to get him off on a discourse, far from our lesson.” The principal knew what he was doing, however, and frequently used the tangents to introduce ideas outside of the course content. “He often reminded us, ‘If you ever learn a thing you will never forget it.’” When a student once asked Pritchett why the class was having such a hard time remembering some of the information, she remembered him simply replying: “You never learned it, or you would not have forgotten it!”

Pritchett, by all accounts, exercised considerable measures of compassion as well. Upon learning that a young, promising student had returned to his boarding house roaring drunk, the principal paid him a late-night visit. Rather than bring up the boy’s disciplinary offense, he asked the young man on discipline charges, he admonished him to think about the spiritual consequences of his actions. Together, principal and student prayed, the former “commending him to the only One who would succeed.” A Missourian by birth and a Virginian by heritage, Pritchett hailed from a family that boasted strong ties to the field of education. An uncle, in fact, had founded the Pritchett Academy at Glasgow, Missouri, from which the future SHNI principal graduated in 1873. Before coming to Texas, he taught four years at Morrisville College in Missouri. It was at SHNI where he gained the reputation as a thorough teacher who, in the words of his biographer Augusta Lawrence, possessed an “appreciation of the value of the individual personality of his students.” That was quite a compliment, considering that between 1881 and 1890 alone Pritchett had prepared over two thousand students to teach mathematics to the schoolchildren of Texas. He continued as principal. During the 1880-1891 academic year he held the post of State a position that uniquely qualified the Huntsville and led the school into the quietly, yet forcefully, implementing changing needs of public schools introducing vocational classes helped organize the Conference on Education in Texas that provided the Peabody Education Fund with the Peabody Education Fund.

Henry Carr Pritchett. The fourth principal of the Sam Houston Normal Institute stepped into the job at a place where he already enjoyed the familiarity and support of colleagues, students, and friends. His roots in Huntsville, however, reached even deeper than his association with the school. It was at the local Methodist Church where the father of his bride presided over their marriage in 1876. Four years later, after serving as co-principal of the private Coronal Institute at San Marcos, Pritchett joined the faculty at the same time as Principal Joseph Baldwin, whom he would succeed. A Missourian by birth and a Virginian by heritage, Pritchett hailed from a family that boasted strong ties to the field of education. An uncle, in fact, had founded the Pritchett Academy at Glasgow, Missouri, from which the future SHNI principal graduated in 1873. Before coming to Texas, he taught four years at Morrisville College in Missouri. It was at SHNI where he gained the reputation as a thorough teacher who, in the words of his biographer Augusta Lawrence, possessed an “appreciation of the value of the individual personality of his students.” That was quite a compliment, considering that between 1881 and 1890 alone Pritchett had prepared over two thousand students to teach mathematics to the schoolchildren of Texas. He continued as principal. During the 1880-1891 academic year he held the post of State a position that uniquely qualified the Huntsville and led the school into the quietly, yet forcefully, implementing changing needs of public schools introducing vocational classes helped organize the Conference on Education in Texas that provided the Peabody Education Fund with the Peabody Education Fund.

35
class.” Ever so slowly she ascended the hill, the questions of her fate “gnawing” inside her, until she stood before the principal “pale and wan.” Standing to greet her, Pritchett uttered the obvious: “You look nervous,” to which the young woman affirmed, in fact, that she was “scared senseless.” Putting her at ease, the principal patted Turley’s shoulder, she recalled, “and told me, ‘Don’t you know, child, that anyone who has worked as faithfully as you have could never fail?’"

All that stood between Turley and the lifetime teacher’s certificate she so resolutely pursued was the formality of graduation. The spring commencement exercises provided an occasion for all to enjoy their successes collectively. The annual graduation. The spring commencement exercises provided an occasion for all to enjoy their successes collectively.

The library provided a material legacy marking the success of the fourth principal’s administration. Yet perhaps Pritchett’s most important achievement lay not in what he did for the Sam Houston Normal Institute, but for public school teachers throughout the state. As a founding member of the Conference for Education in Texas, organized in 1907, he joined State Superintendent R. B. Cousins, Oscar Cooper, and four other advocates for reform. The spirit of Progressivism had not yet seized the average Texan, but it certainly inspired the leaders of public education to make citizens receptive to the idea of improving the ailing public school system. Mobilizing likeminded laypeople and organizations ranging from the Texas Farmers Congress to the presidents of six denominational colleges, the board launched a vigorous campaign to make voters aware of the impending crisis in education. They put together a bulletin depicting in graphic terms Texas’s abysmal ranking among the states in such categories as local funding through taxation, expenditures per capita, and average attendance. They covered the lobbies of depots, hotels, and post offices with placards and mailed a hundred thousand postcards to potential voters. They also sent speakers into communities to make personal appeals on behalf of their worthy cause.

On Election Day the board met with success at every turn. Texans approved constitutional amendments raising by 150% the limit that districts could tax property for maintaining efficient schools and authorized the state to issue building bonds. Voters abolished the backward community system that had so inhibited progress in rural schools, and they passed an amendment to enlarge the state curriculum to introduce into public classrooms agriculture, home economics, and manual training. The normal schools benefited by a corresponding measure that allowed them to begin training their students to teach the new subjects.

In 1901 the town gladly surrendered its claim to another distinction. Friends of education in Huntsville and particularly those atop Normal Hill applauded the creation of sister schools at San Marcos and Denton, where Southwest Texas State Normal School and North Texas State Normal School both opened, respectively. Enrollment at Sam Houston dipped only slightly for one year before resuming its steady course of growth.

The next year, in fact, a significant construction project expanded the physical plant. “A good library is new reckoned as one of the most important possessions of a school, and we expect to make it of the greatest service to our students.” So read the 1901-1902 academic catalog introducing the new Peabody Memorial Library to the entering class. The continuing growth of the student body and the happy realization that the institute’s funds were sufficient for adding a new building to the campus convinced the state and local boards to authorize the construction of a library honoring its earliest and most fervent supporter. The Romanesque and Colonial Revival building came in on a budget of just under $10,000 and provided a spacious area for a reading room and the office of the president as well as rows of shelves that housed the books. Stained glass windows and the busts of several literary giants punctuated its air of dignity and importance. Officials were quick to agree with observers who contended: “no school of this kind in the South has a building equal to it.” In fact, for a while it would be the only separate facility of its kind in Texas.

The Peabody Memorial Library, 1905

The library provided a material legacy marking the success of the fourth principal’s administration. Yet perhaps Pritchett’s most important achievement lay not in what he did for the Sam Houston Normal Institute, but for public school teachers throughout the state. As a founding member of the Conference for Education in Texas, organized in 1907, he joined State Superintendent R. B. Cousins, Oscar Cooper, and four other advocates for reform. The spirit of Progressivism had not yet seized the average Texan, but it certainly inspired the leaders of public education to make citizens receptive to the idea of improving the ailing public school system. Mobilizing likeminded laypeople and organizations ranging from the Texas Farmers Congress to the presidents of six denominational colleges, the board launched a vigorous campaign to make voters aware of the impending crisis in education. They put together a bulletin depicting in graphic terms Texas’s abysmal ranking among the states in such categories as local funding through taxation, expenditures per capita, and average attendance. They covered the lobbies of depots, hotels, and post offices with placards and mailed a hundred thousand postcards to potential voters. They also sent speakers into communities to make personal appeals on behalf of their worthy cause.

On Election Day the board met with success at every turn. Texans approved constitutional amendments raising by 150% the limit that districts could tax property for maintaining efficient schools and authorized the state to issue building bonds. Voters abolished the backward community system that had so inhibited progress in rural schools, and they passed an amendment to enlarge the state curriculum to introduce into public classrooms agriculture, home economics, and manual training. The normal schools benefited by a corresponding measure that allowed them to begin training their students to teach the new subjects.
Tragically, Principal Pritchett was unable to revel in the fruits of his labor. Toward the end of the 1908 spring semester, he finally admitted to suffering from an illness he had long concealed. In all that time, he confided to a friend, he had “not known what it was to be without pain.” At St. Mary’s Infirmary in Galveston, doctors operated on him only to discover an incurable cancer. The next day, May 9, he died.

An outpouring of grief followed the news of his passing. Henry Carr Pritchett, who had so engendered the best nature in others, inspired them now to recognize what many exclaimed they had taken for granted. Colleague Augusta Lawrence remarked: “It seemed so natural that he should do the good thing, the kind thing, the helpful thing, that, too often one took it as a matter of course and forgot to speak the word of appreciation. Even as death neared, the fate of the school remained foremost on his mind, and several times he expressed hope to the visitors at his bedside that Harry Estill would succeed him. He did, of course, and one of the new principal’s early acts was soliciting an appropriate inscription to be engraved on a memorial window to be placed in the Main building chapel. It was Lawrence who suggested “The Measure of a Life Is Its Service.” Hailed as the keynote of President Pritchett’s great life,” it also became the motto of the Sam Houston Normal Institute.