

“FROM HIGH ON THE HILLTOP..”



A BRIEF HISTORY OF SMU

MARSHALL TERRY

1 FOUNDING

The SMU story has to do with the growth of this original prairie college into a nationally recognized university in so short a time through the efforts of dedicated people who in one way or another shared SMU's vision.

The one who brought this vision of a great university to be built on a sea of Johnson grass outside a young, still-frontier city in Texas was a research scientist and educator and SMU's founding president, Dr. Robert Stewart Hyer. Such was the scope of his belief in the future of this new university that he (as the story goes) chose for it the colors of Harvard and Yale and the Latin motto "Veritas liberabit vos"—"the truth will make you free"—a Biblical quote that was echoed by Methodist leader Charles Wesley in his saying, "Let us unite those two so long divided, truth and vital piety."

Dr. Hyer also conceived a magnificent building in the style, no less, of Thomas Jefferson's University of Virginia to be the original home and forever the symbol of SMU. For a while, after the miracle of it being actually built, it would sit almost alone on the prairie campus and house the whole new university. Recognizing the early very real financial commitment of the city of Dallas to SMU, it would be named Dallas Hall.

In the four years between the university's founding in 1911 and the opening of its doors to students in 1915, the indefatigable Hyer managed somehow to build the key building and put up a couple more, bring in a small endowment and engage a lively faculty. But first let's look at the facts of SMU's founding, which is an interesting story in itself and one in which this fascinating figure of Hyer, this reserved academic and retiring physicist more at home in the laboratory experimenting with radio waves than dealing with the affairs of the world, was crucially involved.

Southern Methodist University was founded in 1911 by a special educational commission of the five annual conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, in Texas. (If you look at the brass plaque on the west side of the main entrance of Dallas Hall you'll see the names of these founders, led by Bishop Atkins, for whom Atkins Hall was named before it was changed to Clements Hall.) Both Dallas and Fort Worth were under consideration as site for the new university; the gift of a 133 acre campus and the early promise of sustaining funds by Dallas citizens were instrumental in placing SMU in Dallas.

When SMU opened in 1915, a faculty of 35 had been assembled; the two buildings, Dallas Hall and the Women's Building (subsequently Atkins and Clements) had been erected with funds collected by Dallas supporters; and

the initial endowment fund of slightly more than \$200,000 garnered. When the doors were opened that fall, lo and behold, there appeared 706 students, mostly from near Dallas and all from Texas, the largest opening enrollment of any American university except the University of Chicago to that time.

"SMU" might have been "TWU" for the members of the founding educational commission of the Church first voted to name the new university Texas Wesleyan before reversing themselves and choosing the present name.

The original campus was acquired by a gift of 100 acres from a Dallas individual and the purchase of 33 acres, the present upper campus, with money provided by the city of Dallas. At the same time, in 1911, the Caruth family of Dallas gave SMU a half interest in 722 acres just north of the campus, as well as an outright gift of 47.9 acres east of the campus. Unfortunately most of this land was sold to aid cash flow during the hard times of the Depression in the thirties.

The person chosen to lead the new university was this man Hyer, a native of Georgia and graduate of Emory College. He came to SMU from Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas (which remains a premier Methodist institution dedicated to the liberal arts), where he had served as president since 1898. Hyer immediately and significantly for all the future articulated the principle that while Southern Methodist University is denominational and cherishes the spiritual and moral values and traditions of the Church, it is by design non-sectarian. As Hyer said in 1916, "Religious denominations may properly establish institutions of higher learning, but any institution which is dedicated solely to the perpetuation of a narrow, sectarian point of view falls far short of the standards of higher learning."

Our first president, and for this we may eternally give thanks, not only had a keen intellect and embraced a broad perspective on education but also embodied the human side of the founding of our University. He reminds us that such ventures are not possible without vision and persistence.

In a sense he sacrificed himself to his vision and to the task, for he interrupted his research career and was later relieved of his presidential duties, in a twist of dramatic irony, in favor of Hiram Abiff Boaz, his old adversary who had tried to sell the new university to Fort Worth and whom Hyer had brought into the SMU tent to help him out promotionally. But like a Stoic, no emotion showing, like Cincinnatus back to the plow, Hyer then returned to his laboratory and his teaching. As a matter of fact, he had taught all SMU's courses in physics even during his presidency.

In the best photograph we have of him, Robert Hyer, as a man of 50 or so—he was 50 when he engineered SMU's birth in Dallas and in his fifties presiding over a young faculty whose average age was 35—looks both austere and gentle, firm but kind. You may see him with this same look in the bust of him that appropriately sits now in the Hyer Room in Dallas Hall, which was his office as president.

It's interesting that the prime mover in SMU's founding was a scientist not a theologian, a teacher not a preacher. SMU would have to wait until 1939, and Dr. Umphrey Lee, to have such a real educator as leader again. Of course, we should recognize that fresh winds were blowing in America, and in Texas, in Hyer's time, in the 1890s and early 1900s, and breezing into higher education. The elective system was opening up learning. There were distinctive new academic disciplines. There was a new breed of liberal scientists who knew what the discipline of learning and research in a university might be, and Hyer was of that company. Fear of higher education on the recent frontier was diminishing, a little, giving way to a more middle class desire for its practical benefits. Even Methodists were beginning to think that their preachers should be educated, like other professionals. All this centrally concerned Hyer's definition and his context.

After Hyer graduated from Emory College, he came as a science professor to Southwestern at Georgetown in 1882. In 1898 he read a report, "Some New Measurements of Electric Waves," before the Texas Academy of Science concerning his experiments with X-rays and ether waves. In 1904 he designed the first wireless station in Texas.

In her book (which should be read by all students of SMU history and to which I am in respectful debt) *Southern Methodist University: Founding and Early Years*, Mary Martha Hosford Thomas writes that "as early as 1906 Hyer was convinced that Southwestern should eventually be located in Dallas." That is, the early drama had to do with whether Southwestern would be moved from Georgetown and then when it was decided there would be a new Methodist university, whether it would go to Fort Worth or Dallas. The man behind the scenes was probably one Wallace Buttrick, who told Hyer around 1905, "Dallas is the best unoccupied territory in the south. Some day someone will build a university in Dallas and you Methodists are the ones who should do it." Buttrick was executive secretary of the General Education Board of New York, organized by John D. Rockefeller to aid southern as well as other education. Buttrick had at the same time put a negative eye on

Southwestern, saying that a "great university" could never be built there.

It may be that Buttrick led Hyer to consult with President David Starr Jordan of Stanford and President Pratt Judson of the University of Chicago in 1911 and to come up with his large scheme for 30 buildings on the new campus, even though SMU's early pledges totaled \$1 million as compared to Stanford's initial endowment of \$20 million and Chicago's \$30 million.

As Mary Martha Thomas writes, "Hyer and Southern Methodist University did not fit into the same category as Chicago or Stanford. Instead of one enormously wealthy benefactor, SMU had to rely on the Methodists of Texas and the citizens of Dallas who contributed money in relatively small amounts. Nevertheless, President Hyer designed a campus and buildings on a grand scale that would cost the kind of money Chicago and Stanford had." She goes on to say that, even though the ambitious plan nearly ended in financial disaster in SMU's difficult early years, "the remarkable feature about this plan is not that it was visionary but that the university developed very much as President Hyer wished."

Meanwhile, the national activating circumstance in the plot was that Vanderbilt University had severed its connection with the Methodist Church and the Methodists were looking for a new "connectional institution" west of the Mississippi, meaning a university with a theology school in which to train ministers. In 1910, when the Texas commission was to meet to determine where the main Methodist University should be, Hyer found himself holding a strange hand as president of Southwestern, if indeed he did feel that the university should be in Dallas. But when Buttrick's General Board of Education said that it would give its pledge of \$200,000 for a *new* university in North Texas, Southwestern was finessed right out of the picture and the game switched to a poker hand between Hyer and Hiram Boaz.

Hyer played off Boaz brilliantly. Boaz it was who had first raised the issue of a "great university" in 1910. He wanted it to be Polytechnic in Fort Worth, where he was president. His backing of Fort Worth as site for the new university of course inspired Dallas to want it more. As our wonderful long-time chairman of History and SMU graduate Herbert Gambrell, the chief Wag and Wise Man of SMU for many years, said in a memoir done in his inimitable style in 1955, "The Fathers — SMU was something of a prodigy because she had many Fathers and no Mother — the Fathers skillfully planted among the Dallasites a Desire for a University; did it so well that a clear majority of bank depositors began waking up in the middle of the night

Yearning for a University. When the Yearning reached epidemic proportions, Fort Worth got into the act and did some Audible Yearning herself. That did it."

What did it was that Dallas citizens pledged \$300,000 in cash (an amazing Dallas-like \$276,000 of it actually collected on time) and W.W. Caruth pledged some more land that upped Dallas' Highland Park proposal to shares in and actual acreage of 662 acres for the new campus. This was in addition to the Board of Education pledge and that of the Texas Methodists, all of which brought the prospect to a package consisting of the campus and \$1 million.

That set, and with SMU designated to be the "connectional institution" for Methodist theological education west of the Mississippi, Hyer had the deal and could begin playing in earnest for his "great university."

The symbol and future reality of Hyer's vision was Dallas Hall and the entire scheme of other buildings he projected for the future. It remains an almost incredible vision. After the first pledges were in and the first buildings built, he said truly and prophetically, "While we rejoice over our success, we must remember that the task to which we have set ourselves has only begun. The victory we have won is Bunker Hill — it is yet a long way to Yorktown, and Valley Forge may lie between. We review the past and make claim to victory only to encourage ourselves to press on to greater things." And he said, "The buildings under construction are being built for the ages. Architects, contractors and workmen are all agreed that Dallas Hall should last for a thousand years."

Of Dr. Hyer and his proudest creation Herbert Gambrell said in his serious but waggish way, "The first president was called Hyer partly because he hired the first faculty and partly because that was his family name He hired some people . . . and selected Georgian architecture in preference to Railroad or Sunbaked Gothic then popular in Texas. Some say he was frightened by the Rotunda of the University of Virginia or the Parthenon just before he designed Dallas Hall, for which we may be thankful. This building was the University."

What was it like around here just before the new university was laid out and Dallas Hall was built?

George P. Cullum Sr., an SMU graduate and longtime SMU supporter, recalled the scene in a memoir of his early years. "When the Country Club," he wrote, "moved to its present location and Flippen and Prather Realty

Company opened a new subdivision called Highland Park it completely changed the direction of the growth of Dallas. Prior to this the growth was to the east because of the Munger Place development. Preston Road in the vicinity of the new Highland Park area was a narrow gravel road leading to the north. Some of the cheapest lots ever sold in Dallas were those along Preston Road, Wycliff and Herschell immediately adjoining the entrance to Highland Park.

"During the summer of 1911, a cousin of mine, L.H. (Shine) Cullum, hired me to help him survey some land several miles out from Dallas. We left our homes in Oak Lawn and drove in a horse and buggy out Preston Road to a narrow lane lined with bois d'arc trees now known as Lovers Lane. Nearly a mile east of Preston Road we scratched around in a hedgerow until we found a wooden stake. From this point we started our survey which eventually outlined the campus of what was to be Southern Methodist University. My only recollection of any houses in the area was the Caruth home on Coit Road and Lovers Lane, which was later subdivided. To the west and south of Mockingbird Lane was the Exall farm which was noted for raising fine blooded race horses. The horse barns were located on a high spot next to the Cotton Belt Railroad and could be seen for miles.

"On the east side of the camps there were an old rundown mule barn and an adjacent shack occupied by a man named Mullins. After the University was started and the development came his way, he abandoned the place and left the old barns standing. Part of these old buildings were incorporated into the early SMU maintenance workshops."

It is, as we might say now, awesome to view the building of Dallas Hall on this setting or the completed magnificent building standing by itself on the prairie in those first years in the photographs we have and which are basic to our sense of this history.

Truly idealistic and moving as the building of Dallas Hall was to Hyer and is to all of us still — for the building remains a real home of learning for us and has long been also our symbol as part of our university seal, itself set securely in the main floor of the very building pictured as the symbol — we can still delight in our historian Herbert Gambrell's loving spoof of this "great vision."

"So," this loyal alumnus and great teacher Gambrell reminisced, tongue in cheek, "Dallas got the University and endowed it with 133 acres of farm land redolent with Johnson grass and latent with termites. There was one

serious problem. Hills are scarce hereabouts, and in America if a university does not Crown a Hill it looks like a phony. . . . Careful surveys with calipers disclosed that the old Daniel Farm rose slightly toward the north. It could be seen through instruments if not with the naked eye. Dirt excavated for the first building was carefully saved and neatly piled up into a fair illusion of a Hill — an early instance of the use of Falsies in academic business. In the many years since, all members of the University have sworn they can 'see the Varsity as she towers o'er the Hill over there.' This was a Psychological Hill, quite adequate for normal nostalgic and academic purposes."

Jay B. Hubbell, an early SMU faculty member and later a leading scholar in American literature at Duke University, has written of our founding president's academic ability and vision. Hubbell said, "President Hyer was a liberal and enlightened scientist. He put together a fine faculty made up largely of young men of widely different backgrounds, but all of them energetic, ambitious and well-trained and all of them with ideas as to the proper aims and organization of a university. He resigned in 1919. The university was in desperate need of money, and at 59 he was neither willing nor able to stage a big moneyraising campaign. He was spending too much time worrying about the unreliable second-hand pump in the university's artesian well. He was seldom in his office

"There were nevertheless elements of greatness in Robert Stewart Hyer. He had done a fine job of organizing a new institution of learning. He was a trained scientist and he thoroughly understood the nature and purpose of a university. Under his two successors we were often to remember that he had no interest in church politics, in heresy-hunting, or in employing paid athletes to beat Texas A&M."

Having weathered the war years as SMU president, Hyer was asked to resign and in 1920 made way for the new president, Hiram Boaz. Hyer said, "The president of a tax-supported institution must be a politician; the president of a private institution must be a financier; the president of a denominational university must be both. Since I am neither, I resign."

For ten years then before his death Hyer continued to teach physics at SMU and keep the pump repaired.

It must have been interesting for him, as Boaz quickly passed out of sight as president and Selecman began to build the buildings and the campus and the student body grew towards his vision, to reflect sometimes on the Ideal and the Real. He had known something of X-rays and ether waves and

unseen forces in relation to hard substances. He was no promoter but he knew that men's and women's hearts and minds are moved most by a true and therefore a beautiful conception

Hyer was asked, after the building of Dallas Hall, "When will the university be completed, Dr. Hyer?"

"After the city of Dallas is completed," he replied.

And that has been the continuing story of SMU.