



Buffalo Tales



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AUGUSTUS ORLOFF THOMAS: PIONEER EDUCATOR

by Philip S. Holmgren

For over a quarter of a century Dr. Thomas served public education in Nebraska. This native of Old Oxford, Illinois was a child of the Civil War, born in 1863, and his name is a product of that great struggle. His mother's brother, Augustus Cox, died in a Confederate prison. The middle name, Orloff, was for a Russian Admiral who brought his fleet to America during that war, an act generally interpreted as a sign of support for the Union cause. A. O. Thomas, as he was known through most of his adult life, was the grandson of Welsh immigrants. His family was very much interested in education. Both of his parents had been teachers. Young Augustus was a graduate of Western Normal School of Shenandoah, Iowa, and Amity College. He continued his education until he was awarded his Ph.D.

Following his marriage to Ellamay Calvin, a school teacher, in the Calvin family home in Arapahoe in June of 1894 he returned to St. Paul, Nebraska for two more years. In 1896 he became Superintendent of Schools in Minden, Nebraska and in 1901 he was elected as Superintendent of the Kearney Public Schools. This is the position he was in when the Nebraska legislature enacted House Roll No. 1 in March 1903 providing for the establishment of a new normal school to serve western Nebraska. He was very active on several committees which worked for the location of the school in Kearney. His administrative and public relations skills were a significant part of the successful campaign to present the state with an offer which they eventually accepted. He continued to work with other community leaders to put Green Terrace, the building given to the state as part of the package for locating the Normal School in Kearney, into acceptable shape as well as working toward the construction of a college building. When the contracts were finally awarded in 1904 for the new building the Kearney Hydraulic Stone Company was selected to provide the man-made stone used in that construction. Dr. Thomas owned some shares in that company.

Late in May of 1905 A. O. Thomas was selected to be the first president of the new Normal School. He had less than a month to prepare for the opening of school scheduled for June 19, 1905. Under his capable leadership the problems of the first session in the summer of 1905 were met and they moved on to the fall term. These problems would seem insurmountable to a person of lesser stature than Dr. Thomas. The Longfellow Building, used during the summer session, was now being used by the public schools and the college building was far from completion. Windows were in place only on the third floor - access to the second and third floors was by ladder only. There was no heat in the building. Classes met in the confusion and dirt of construction and the student body, much larger than had been anticipated, and its teachers survived these conditions with the aid and encouragement of Dr. Thomas. Under his capable direction the problems of the first year were met and the school prospered.

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WITH THE SOCIETY

The Buffalo County Historical Society will meet October 28 at 2:00 p.m. at Shelton in the meeting room of the First National Bank. The program "Women in History" will be given by Dr. Ann Young. These meetings are open to anyone interested in attending.

AT THE MUSEUM

Although the tourist season is over and the visitors are few, Trails and Rails Museum is still a busy place. During the past month the Loup River Freighters' Hotel has been insulated and reshingled. Also, some window frames were repaired so all the windows are now tight. All that remains of this phase of work on the Hotel is to paint the exterior. How soon that will be done depends on the weather.

Meanwhile, at the Depot, paint is being scraped in preparation for applying a fresh coat of Union Pacific yellow. The painting of the Shelton Depot this fall was made possible by the addition of \$2000 to our budget by the Buffalo County Board of Supervisors. Next time you see your Supervisor, tell him or her "Thank you".

4th Grade Goes Back in Time

Fourth graders from Kenwood and Central schools in Kearney will be attending school at District 1 on the museum grounds for a day each during October. They will be taught lessons from books used 100 years ago and use slates instead of paper. They will hear about country schools 50 years ago from a retired teacher and see a demonstration of spinning. As other fourth grades come to the museum to use the schoolhouse, we would like to develop a list of volunteers who would be willing to meet with them for about a half an hour to relate their experiences in either teaching or attending country school thirty or more years ago. If you would like to be included on this list of resource volunteers, please contact the Trails and Rails Museum.

The 1908 Blue and Gold had this to say about him, in addition to his past accomplishments, "...his power lies...in his kindly feeling towards those about him...His sense and his sympathy, his hand and his purse are always on the move in the interest of those about him...He has an unbounding confidence in the goodness of humanity...Words of censure he rarely uses, but words of praise are constantly on his lips. He leads often, seldom drives."

The College, under the direction of Dr. Thomas incorporated into the class day a chapel period which all students and faculty were to attend. A. O. Thomas, himself a prominent Methodist layman, often spoke at the chapel sessions. When Catholic students were discouraged by their priests from attending these sessions, Dr. Thomas strove to make them acceptable to all and still retain the educational, inspirational, and religious nature which he felt was so important in the education of these future teachers of Nebraska's school children.

Dr. Thomas was a strict disciplinarian and insisted on the students following a code of conduct that would be acceptable for teachers in any community of the state. One restriction placed on the students was that they must stay out of pool halls. When a student was caught entering such an establishment he begged for forgiveness and was permitted to remain in school but when a second one violated this regulation and was reported on by a citizen of the community Dr. Thomas went downtown into the pool hall and brought the erring one out and all his pleadings for forgiveness were turned aside and his educational career at the Nebraska State Normal School at Kearney was terminated. Paul Thomas, the son of A. O. Thomas wrote in 1982 that after all these years he still remembered his father saying "stay out of pool halls."



A. O. Thomas School

A. O. Thomas built a large home just a block off campus of the same materials and architecture similar to that found in the first college building. Faculty and students were frequently invited to his home. Faculty members who were seriously ill were taken to his home and cared for. He would visit students in their homes and those that were ill he did what he could to make them more comfortable. While visiting one seriously ill student he noted his mattress was in very poor condition, so he returned to his home, got a mattress and was seen walking up the street with the mattress on his back. He delivered it to the young man's room so that he would be more comfortable. This same person, whose compassion was so great for the comfort of students, could drop them from school for entering a pool hall.

Throughout his tenure as president of the Normal School at Kearney he found it necessary to plead for funds to provide for the facilities to take care of the large number of students who wanted to come to Kearney. Although he saw two major additions made to the original building he was never able to get adequate funding for the total operation. All of this intensified the factionalism on the governing board between the Peru and Kearney factions. When Wayne and Chadron were added the situation became more complicated. The information was circulated in the fall of 1913 that President Thomas was being considered by the University of Arkansas for Chancellor of their University. When he returned from a short trip he faced a hostile board whose actions were reported by the press in the following manner:

Lincoln, Nebraska, October 20, 1913. Dr. A. O. Thomas was discharged today as head of the State Normal School at Kearney. His displacement is to become effective October 25 and he is to be succeeded temporarily by M. R. Snodgrass, present Dean of the State Normal School. The action was taken this morning by the State Board of Education (by a four to three vote) and Dr. Thomas was removed, "for the best results to the Normal Schools of Nebraska, it is best that Dr. Thomas be removed."

Aroused to indignation by the summary action on the part of the Board of Education, the papers of the state printed protests against inflicting such "injustice and insult" upon Dr. Thomas who was hailed as "an educator without a superior and very few peers." Additional comments made on the dismissal included, "the worst blunder perpetrated in this state," and "the haste with which it was done makes this action as brutal as blundering." The **Nebraska State Journal** pointed out that Dr. Thomas had "forced exceedingly rapid growth at Kearney and that perhaps this had something to do with his downfall." The **Journal** added that partly because of the "jealousy of the competing normals and partly because of a feeling among educators that such swift development could not be accomplished by the solidity that is considered so important in all state educational work" might also be a reason for his dismissal.

On October 21, 1913 President Thomas addressed an overflow crowd in the Chapel. The **Antelope** of October 24, 1913 describes his address as follows: "Without rancor or bitterness, the President merely referred to the actions of the Board...If any sense of injustice rankled in his heart, none was expressed and he addressed himself to the students on their own behalf."

Immediately after the meeting in the Chapel a mass meeting of the students was convened and resolutions were drawn up embodying a petition to the Board that its action be reconsidered. A mass meeting was held in the Opera House that night. An

account of that meeting describes the group as including "Kearney's most substantial citizens and men from all walks of life." One of the distinguished attorneys present described himself as a former political opponent of Dr. Thomas. Resolutions adopted at that meeting included the request to the Board for reasons for their actions and if they were not forthcoming they would "resist your apparent arbitrary and dictatorial edict peacefully through the courts of our state."

Thus threatened with a court fight the Board presented some "charges" against Dr. Thomas which according to Judge W. D. Oldham were both "insufficient and untrue." Judge Oldham announced that Dr. Thomas would not give up his office until granted a hearing. One of the charges made was that Dr. Thomas had "urged himself upon" the Board of the University of Arkansas in order to "induce a raise in his salary in Nebraska" (his salary was \$3,000 a year). It appears that officials from Arkansas had been in contact with Kearney people for nearly a year before Dr. Thomas agreed to talk to them about the position as chancellor of their University.

Faced with a long court fight, which President Thomas felt could only hurt the school, and being privy to an investigation which indicated as one attorney said "the Board appears to be a law itself, and, no matter how arbitrary its action may be, it is not subject to review in the courts," Dr. Thomas on November 12, 1913 turned over his office to the State Board of Education "for the best interests of the school."



Augustus O. Thomas
1863 - 1935



Ellamay Colvin Thomas
1872 - 1957

Whatever the reason stated for the dismissal of President Thomas it was evident that the Board would tolerate no strong administrator who demonstrated any degree of independence. It is also evident that the departure of no other administrator or faculty from the Kearney campus, regardless of the circumstance, has ever resulted in any such reaction by students or community people as did the departure of President Thomas.

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In the fall of 1914 Dr. Thomas was elected Nebraska's Superintendent of Public Instruction and thus he took his place on the very Board which had dismissed him from the presidency at Kearney just a few months earlier. On July 1, 1917, he assumed the duties of State Superintendent of Schools for the State of Maine, a position he held until 1931.

A. O. Thomas was always interested in teacher and education associations. He was frequently in attendance and participated in their meetings on both the state and national level. At the convention of the National Education Association in San Francisco in 1923, Dr. Thomas was instrumental in the founding of the World Federation of Education Associations. This, according to "*Notes on the Thomas Family History*" was the "...crowning honor of his career." He was elected first president and presided over four Biennial World Conferences, in Edinburgh in 1925, Toronto in 1927, Geneva in 1929, and in Denver in 1931. The purpose of the W.F.E.A. was "to promote international understanding and to make education the hand-maiden of universal peace." At the conference in Denver in 1931 the association was reorganized and Dr. Thomas was elected Secretary General, to devote full time to the work of the association with its headquarters in Washington, D.C. He traveled and lectured a great deal and remained in this position until his death in 1935.

On June 19 and 20, 1930 the college celebrated its silver anniversary. The celebration was marked by the triumphant return to the campus of its first president, A. O. Thomas, who was the convocation speaker. He was part of a celebration which was described by one of the original faculty members as "...two days of pure joy, of bubbling enthusiasm on the part of students, faculty, patrons and guests." The students and faculty of the laboratory school requested, and on November 21, 1932, the State Board of Education for Normal Schools got around to approving the request that their school be called the A. O. Thomas Laboratory School and the building in which it was housed the A. O. Thomas Building. Thus it became the first building on campus to be named after a former faculty member. Dr. Thomas responded to this action in a letter to the council of the school in this fashion, "it is a great honor to have such a school bear one's name. I appreciate the honor and the spirit of the pupils and I trust that the A. O. Thomas School may always conduct itself with such high honor and efficiency that it will be an outstanding school." Even with the receipt of this honor the hurt of earlier treatment must have been very real and deep. It may account for one very evident omission in "*Notes on the Thomas Family History*." There is no mention of his ever having been in Kearney, Nebraska.