

# CHENEY STATE NORMAL SCHOOL

NOT YOUR NORMAL SCHOOL



WILLIAM J. SUTTON

BENJAMIN P. CHENEY

NOAH D. SHOWALTER

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by Blythe Thimsen

**I**N 1879, DEPOT SPRINGS—later referred to as Willow Springs—was an up and coming town, experiencing growth thanks to the Northern Pacific.

“Admittedly, the Cheney’s Sate Normal School was conceived in ambition, both personal and civic, and in the inordinate desire to recover prestige lost in the county seat contest with Spokane Falls,” wrote Cecil Dryden in her book *Light for an Empire: The Story of Eastern Washington State College*.

Though Cheney suffered a loss when the county seat went to Spokane Falls in 1886, they still had great hope that Washington Territory would become a state. In 1889, the Enabling Act was passed, which put forth requirements for becoming a state. One requirement was for the presence of normal schools, and Cheney wanted to house one.

Cheney was a strong united town, which reflected the spirit of its namesake, Benjamin P. Cheney. Founder of the United States and Canada Express Company, a stagecoach and freight company, which in 1879 he merged into the American Express Company, Cheney was the largest shareholder as well as the treasurer and director of American Express. He was also a director and major stockholder in the Northern Pacific Railroad.

“Mr. Cheney had all the qualities which made for a successful career,” wrote Dryden. “From his youth, he was hard-working and persevering. Since he had to earn every dollar he spent, he early learned the value of money; he developed an acute business sense, and became an almost infallible judge of character and motives of men.”

Cheney not only had business sense and



THE IMAGE IS OF THE CAMPUS ABOUT 1908 OR 1909. THE MAIN BUILDING, WITH ITS CENTRAL CLOCK TOWER WAS DESTROYED IN 1912 BY FIRE. THE TRAINING SCHOOL, TO THE LEFT OF THE PHOTO, HOUSED THE CAMPUS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL. AFTER THE FIRE, THE NORMAL SCHOOL MOVED INTO THE TRAINING SCHOOL BUILDING UNTIL THE NEW ADMINISTRATION BUILDING (SHOWALTER HALL) WAS COMPLETED IN 1915.

success, he also had a town named after him. In 1880, Depot Springs changed its name to Cheney, honoring the man who ran the railroad on which the livelihood of their community existed.

Though he was not a resident, Cheney had an interest in the town and its people. When, in 1881, it became apparent the town needed a school to educate its young, he was approached as a potential patron for the school. He eagerly gave a \$10,000 donation, which was prompted by his desire for “the children of Cheney to have the educational opportunities, which were denied to him,” wrote Dryden. Northern Pacific Company donated more than eight acres of land on which the school would be built.

Construction on the building began in 1881, and the two-story brick building named Benjamin P. Cheney Academy was completed

and ready for students on April 3, 1882.

The Academy had formed a partnership with the Cheney School District in 1883, with the academy serving the district in exchange for much needed funds to pay for maintenance and teacher’s wages that were not covered by the original \$10,000. That relationship began to unravel in the late 1880s, at which time the Academy turned its focus to recruiting a State Normal School to Cheney.

## NORMAL SCHOOL

A normal school was a school established especially for training high school graduates to be teachers. It was meant to establish teaching standards, or norms, from which the name comes. The normal school had to be established with the goal of training teachers, and instruction

was mandatory in “the mechanical arts and husbandry and the fundamental laws of the United States.”

The people of Cheney believed, “nature endorsed the town by providing beautiful surroundings and health conditions unparalleled by any other community in the state. The place was easily accessible by rail, yet isolated enough to remove the students from the baleful influence of a city,” wrote Dryden.

The fact that the Benjamin P. Cheney Academy was already built and established in the town was an added benefit and a draw.

The trustees of the Benjamin P. Cheney Academy offered the building as well as the surrounding eight acres of land, to the state of Washington, “on the condition that an institution for the training of teachers be established in Cheney and maintained in

perpetuity.” That clause would later come back to haunt the state.

A bill to create a Normal School in Cheney was introduced in the state House of Representatives, January 16, 1890 and passed on March 18, 1890, with 23 in favor, two opposed, and ten not voting.

Admission to the Normal School was based on “good moral character” and successfully passing the entrance exam. Students had to be at least 16 years old, and they had to come with a recommendation from a county school superintendent. Teaching certificates were obtained after at least 22 weeks of satisfactory work and study, although, students then had to apply to the state for their teaching license.

The school year would be divided into two 18-week terms. Students who passed the entrance exam and signed a contract committing them to teaching in





THE 1903 FOOTBALL SEASON OPENER. THE PATRONS OF THE GAME ARE CONSIDERABLY MORE FORMALLY ATTIRED THAN THE ONES WE SAW IN ROOS FIELD THIS LAST FALL.

Washing State for two years after graduation, would receive tuition, textbooks and library access for free. Those who did not pass the entrance exam had to pay \$10 for preparatory (high school) classes and \$15 for the regular normal school academic program.

Cheney Sate Normal School opened on October 13, 1890 and welcomed 50 students – 29 women and 21 men.

#### FLAMES AND FINANCES

Only \$18,300 had been provided by the legislature in 1890 for the cost of the school, but that was not enough, leaving some of the financial responsibility to fall on the townspeople's generosity. The school population continued to grow, so on faith that the legislature would approve more funding, an addition on the building was commissioned. This brought a new library, meeting room, laboratory and housing.

As the building neared completion, tragedy struck when fire erupted on August 27, 1891, destroying not just the addition, but also the original Benjamin P. Cheney Academy building. With the building and all of their equipment destroyed, the Normal School had to start from scratch.

They begged and borrowed stray pieces of equipment from different schools throughout the state, and space was rented out as a temporary schoolhouse in the Pomeroy Building, on 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue in Cheney, a building that is still in use today. Small, cramped and ill fitting for the school's needs, the small space and pieced-together collection of equipment had to make do from 1891 to 1893.

During this time, in January 1892, William J. Sutton became principal of the Normal School. While the building was ill fitting, Sutton's relationship with the school proved to be a great fit and one that later would be essential to the success of the school.

In 1893, the school bid adieu to the Pomeroy Building, moving into the Cheney Junior High School building, which had been recently finished. This was just a temporary home, as \$60,000 in funding from the state legislature was approved in 1895, and would be used to build a new home for the school. Though the two-and-a-half story brick building with a bell tower was new, it had ties to its predecessors; it was built on the same site the original academy had occupied before it burned down. After this building

was completed in 1896, it was another 11 years before the sound of hammers and saws were heard again, this time for the addition of a tin-clad heating plant and a two-story brick building.

The 1893-1894 school catalogue proclaimed "teaching is the highest science, the finest art, the noblest profession." Apparently, it wasn't considered noble enough to pay well. On September 20, 1893, the school year started with local businessmen having to loan over \$3,000 to help cover salaries.

The school expected funding from the state legislature would help them rebuild from the fire two years earlier, and cover expenses. In 1891, Representative Louis Walter presented the Normal School Bill asking for over \$85,000 of much needed financial support. There was great celebration when word came that the bill has passed. Sadly, Governor John H. McGraw decided to veto the bill when it got to him, which, in Dryden's words, left "the school, so recently created, to fend for itself or die."

At the end of the 1893 school year, Mr. Sutton, the principal, presented a case to the Emergency Board, which consisted of the governor, state auditor, state

treasurer, secretary of state, and attorney general, pleading for funds for the school. He pointed out that the State of Washington had entered into an agreement with the Benjamin P. Cheney Academy trustees, to locate a school on the donated land. "If the state fails to maintain the school at Cheney, she fails to perform her part of the contract," declared Sutton.

Despite the state's promise to maintain the school when they were given the land and building, the board voted no on the funding. In order for Cheney State Normal School to stay afloat, sacrifices were made. Faculty willingly reduced their salaries to "only enough to meet the bare needs of living," wrote Dryden. "In fact, the faculty received less than one half of their stipulated salary, trusting that a future legislature would reimburse them."

In 1895, the Cheney Normal appropriation was finally passed, providing funds to pay its debts and cover its bills, as well as provide a new building to replace the one that burned, at a cost of \$60,000.

Cheney State Normal School continually had to fight, not only for funding, but also for a secure

future. Aiming to keep an eye on spending, there seemed to always be a low-level rumble of threats coming from the west side to close Cheney State Normal School. The expense as well as the belief that all the state normal schools should be on the west side of the state, were given as reasons.

By September 1897, the rumblings were growing louder and the funding was growing smaller, and there was great in-fighting among the people of Cheney about how to run the school. As a result, the school closed for the year. Most of the faculty, convinced the school had no hope of continuing, began looking for jobs elsewhere, as students left the school. "The new, towered brick building stood locked and silent, gazing eternally down Normal Avenue as if in expectation of the students that never appeared," wrote Dryden.

"During that long bleak year, when Normal was closed, the townspeople had ample time to look back and consider the consequences of their dissensions. It was the consensus of many people throughout the state that the factional strife in Cheney, broadcast through so many channels, played an important part in the closing of the institution. In Olympia... where an economy-minded governor sat watching for every opportunity to pare the budget, the petty strife over the Cheney Normal sounded loud indeed," wrote Dryden.

The loss of the school, which with it took a portion of the population, was an economic sucker punch, but most noticeable, it was a blow to the community's civic pride. Nursing their wounds from the loss, the community rallied, coming together with a common goal of seeing the school open again. They selected six faculty members and a principal, and decided the school would be funded by a \$15 tuition charge.

Residents of Cheney contributed their own money to get the school re-established. Twenty-eight businessmen pledged money to pay for "incidentals," pooling together \$875. Other things were contributed

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WOMEN'S BASKETBALL TEAM IN 1907. LEAGUE CHAMPIONS.

as well. According to Dryden, "Mr. Louis Walker, former board member and the town's harness-maker, contributed wood enough to heat the Normal building for some months." A local attorney, J.M. Adams, had a new practice in town, and as he worked to build his practice, he offered to teach law, history and civics.

The school decided to ease back into existence by offering a summer school session in 1898, to test the waters of operating without state aid to keep the doors opened. The school then reopened for the 1898-1899 school term. That was enough to impress the legislature, which, on February 24, 1899, secured an appropriation of \$25,000 for two years' maintenance. The school continued growing until 1912, when it was dealt another blow.

#### ENCORE FLAMES

Fire struck again on April 24, 1912, in the administration building. "The alarm was sounded about 1:30 (a.m.) by Mr. N.E. Hinch, head of the English department ... His attention being arrested by the cracking of glass, he looked out to see smoke and tongues of fire issuing from the manual training department on the northeast end of the building."

Two faculty members, Max Miranda and J.R. Work, were sleeping in the upper level music room, which left them unable to escape the flames any other way than jumping out of the window. That was a daunting option considering the only thing between them and the ground was a rug stretched between the hands of the volunteer fire crew. Injured in the jump they at least were saved, which was more than could be said of the building. Piano teacher Max Miranda had to take a leave of absence because his injuries were so severe he could not return to work for quite some time. Work was injured but recovered quickly.

After the fire, the school had to take up residence in makeshift classrooms found in churches, buildings and homes throughout the town. The generosity of the townspeople in providing space ensured the school continued. Only one day of classes was missed.

The school building had been insured for \$5,500, but because the policy was not written in-state, in order to get the money the school had to wait for a special act of the legislature. In addition to the insurance money, the board of trustees requested \$25,000 to

cover maintenance expenses for the school and \$60,000 to cover the cost of a new building.

Governor M.E. Hay was visiting Eastern Washington at the time of the fire, and he immediately called a public meeting to discuss the loss. He showed much needed support when he said he would be in favor of appropriations "to make Normal School bigger and better."

According to the City of Cheney history site, "The fact that the institution weathered this [second fire] and subsequent hardship was largely due to the efforts of two men: William J. Sutton ... and Noah D. Showalter." Showalter was the first president of Cheney State Normal School, and Sutton, who had been principal of the school, later went on to become a state senator and helped obtain a \$300,000 appropriation bill to pay for new construction at the school. Unfortunately, Governor Ernest Lister, who did not see the need to keep Cheney's State Normal School open, vetoed that bill. "Due to the untiring exertion of Senator Sutton, the State Legislature was moved to pass the bill over the governor's veto. Once

again the local hero had saved the school from extinction."

With funding secured, the school was ready to build a new administration building, with the responsibility for the task falling on the shoulders of architect Julius Zittel. Mr. Zittel, who in 1897 was named State Architect, became the go-to architect for most of the construction done on campus during the early 1900s.

Selecting the same site where the two previous, burned buildings had stood, the trustees must have felt confident that the third time's a charm. The site overlooked the city, standing as a beacon atop a hill, proudly proclaiming to the residents of Cheney that this was a place of great prominence. The building not only showcased the best of the city, but the best of the state; all the materials used in the construction, save for some Alaskan marble, were from the state of Washington. In 1915, the building, which was later named Showalter Hall, was completed.

stone pillars and walls, which lined the campus entrance, drawing the eye to Showalter Hall at the end of the road, were installed in 1915. These were



STUDENTS AND FACULTY GATHER TO VIEW THE DAMAGED ADMISSION BUILDING AFTER A FIRE DESTROYED IT ON APRIL 24, 1912.

contributed by members of the Alumni Association who raised over \$1,200 to pay for the memorial to the original Normal School building. Granite from that building was used in the construction of the walls and pillars, tying the old to the new.

Construction didn't stop, as student enrollment continued to climb during these years, and 1916 brought with it the opening of the first student dormitory. Designed by Zittel, the dorm had room for 90 women, and included a kitchen, dining room and social lounge. Within three years, the dorm was overflowing and a second women's dormitory had to be built. It wasn't until 1922 that the male student population was large enough to warrant a men's dormitory. Though the numbers were there, state funding was not. To pay for the dorm, the Cheney Building Company, a group of local businessmen, financed the project. Familiar names were associated with the dorm, with Zittel serving as architect and the building named Sutton Hall, after the school's first principal.

As the population of Cheney State Normal School grew, changes continued to be seen on campus, with the addition of buildings to meet the growing school's needs. Changes came to the school's academic program and name as well. Becoming a four-year accredited school, in 1937, the school became known as Eastern Washington College of Education, and after WWII it changed to Eastern Washington State College. Finally, in 1977 the Washington State Legislature changed the name to Eastern Washington University. Though the name of the school has changed, the pride with which it was established, and the pride of Cheney, the town that fought for its school, remains strong today. ■

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