

Transforming the Prairie: Early Tree Planting in an Oklahoma Town

Blake Gumprecht

Transforming the Prairie

Early views of Norman, Oklahoma, and the land upon which the town was built, are uniform in their starkness. In one photograph, taken before the area was opened to non-Indian settlement, a rutted wagon trail and a tiny structure on the horizon are all that interrupt a treeless prairie (Figure 1). Another photo, taken a few months after the town was founded, shows two parallel rows of unpainted frame buildings facing each other across a grassy main street. A later report said a single cottonwood grew at the town-site, but in this picture not a tree can be seen. Early photos of the campus of the University of Oklahoma, established in Norman three years after the town's founding, are similarly austere. They show a solitary two-story building standing in a grove of newly planted elms in an otherwise empty field (Figure 2).

Amid these images, the present landscape of this Oklahoma town seems remarkable. When walking today around the original campus area or any of the older residential neighborhoods nearby, nothing makes so great an impression as the trees. Giant elms form archways over the streets and lanes. Maples and a half dozen varieties of oak trees shade lush green lawns. Hackberries and sycamores rise graciously. Some of the trees stand nearly 75 feet tall and in places the dense canopy of limbs and leaves is so thick on a summer day that the blue sky is barely visible. Even in the wake of a century of development and the ravages of drought and Dutch elm disease, Norman can seem like an oasis.

The transformation of Norman from a treeless frontier outpost into an attractive college town known for its shaded streets and wooded campus can teach us much about the settlement of the Great Plains and the human modification of the prairie ecosystem.¹ Because what happened in Norman occurred all across the region to varying degrees, its story can help us better understand the attitudes of Euro-American settlers toward the grassland environment and how they sought to remake that environment to fit their conception of what constituted a home. The story of early tree planting in Norman is also instructive because, although a great deal has been written about

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Figure 1. The area upon which Norman, Oklahoma, was settled before it was opened to homesteaders in 1889 (top), and Main Street two months after the land run. Courtesy of the Western History Collections at the University of Oklahoma.

arboriculture on the rural Great Plains, remarkably little research has been conducted on tree planting in cities and towns. This study seeks to fill that gap by using one town as an example of the crucial role tree planting often played in urban development and the making of place in the grassland biome.

The case of Norman, furthermore, demonstrates the profound impact a single person can have in transforming the environment, and as such provides a compelling example of what Marwyn Samuels has called “the authorship of landscape.” David Ross Boyd, first president of the University of Oklahoma, is often remembered more for his tree planting efforts than for building the university from nothing into a respected institution. As Samuels pointed out, scholars need to acknowledge such individual imprints on the landscape. Often overlooked as well is the contemporary impact of such efforts. As William Wyckoff showed in his study of the Holland Land Company’s development of



Figure 2. The first building at the University of Oklahoma, standing in a grove of newly planted elms shortly after its completion in 1893. Courtesy of the Western History Collections at the University of Oklahoma.

western New York state, the imprint of developers and early settlers can be “pervasive and enduring.”² The landscape Boyd and others created in Norman in the years before Oklahoma became a state in 1907 established a template that subsequent generations, seeking to maintain the sylvan environment, have followed.

Finally, this study hopes to encourage scholars to expand their horizons in trying to comprehend how humans have created the landscapes in which they live. Geographers and others have been largely pragmatic in their research, devoting substantial attention to the built environment and economic activities, but have spent relatively little time examining how ordinary people re-fashion their surroundings through more subtle alterations of the natural world intended primarily to satisfy personal and aesthetic needs.³ As William Cronon has remarked, the transformation of place “is revealed not just by its new buildings, but by its shade trees, apple orchards, and gardens. The scene of a story is as fundamental to what happens in it as the actions that comprise its more visible plot.”⁴

Nothing But Land

To early tree planting advocates in Oklahoma and elsewhere, the Great Plains were something to be “conquered.” The prairie landscape was “naked” and “monotonous,” a “hopelessly barren waste,” even “painful” to the

newcomer's eyes. There was nothing to block the bright summer sun, nothing to shield the settler from the ceaseless winds, nothing to hide behind. Humans, therefore, sought to "assist" nature in "improving" the environment.⁵ Willa Cather spoke for generations of immigrants to the region when she wrote about her adopted home of Nebraska in *My Antonia*: "There seemed to be nothing to see; no fences, no creeks or trees, no hills or fields. There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made."⁶

Just as the homeowner will hang pictures when faced with a blank wall, settlers in the grasslands thought it only natural to try to fill the "empty" landscape with trees. David Lowenthal has observed that this tendency typifies the American response to the environment. "Empty, it must be filled; unfinished it must be completed; wild, it must be tamed," he wrote. The appropriateness of tree planting on the Great Plains, moreover, seems never to have been questioned—whether the watering of saplings was the best use of a scant water supply, or if perhaps the prairie could be seen to have its own innate charms. As Wallace Stegner, who spent part of his boyhood on the prairies of Saskatchewan, wrote, "Our first and hardest adaptation was to learn all over again how to see."⁷

Some saw trees as essential for civilizing the prairies. Nathaniel Egleston, chief forester for the U.S. Department of Agriculture in the late-nineteenth century, for example, wrote that "tree planting is almost the first necessity of life" on the Great Plains and suggested that without trees, "barbarism" would be "the inevitable result." Proponents of tree planting warned that the removal of forests in other parts of the world had led to the downfall of once-great societies. "The curse of God falls heavily on the people who ignore His grand designs and rob the lands of forests," wrote C.S. Harrison, who believed tree planting was so integral to the settlement of the grasslands that when he founded a town in Nebraska he optimistically named it Arborville.⁸

Trees stood as evidence of fertility, and promoters and pioneers alike believed that the planting of trees was essential for proving to outsiders that the region was arable and, therefore, habitable. Euro-Americans, in fact, began planting trees on the Great Plains even before they were legally permitted to settle there. A missionary planted fruit trees in what is now Kansas in 1838, while in present day Nebraska, squatters on Indian land planted trees as early as 1853. Nowhere was the fervor for tree planting greater than in Nebraska, which became known as "The Tree Planters State" and where the absence of trees, according to one historian, "was like a family scandal." In 1858, fully one year before homesteaders were permitted to claim land in Nebraska Territory, a steamboat delivered 55,000 trees and shrubs to squatters there.⁹

By the 1870s, tree planting on the Great Plains, in the words of a contemporary scholar, "bordered on public obsession." Nebraska authorized cities and towns to tax residents for the planting of trees along streets and made it a crime to injure or destroy a tree. In 1872, Arbor Day, the idea of Nebraska newspaperman J. Sterling Morton, was celebrated for the first time. Railroads

like the Kansas Pacific and the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe planted trees in towns along their lines to encourage settlement. In 1873, Congress lent its support to the movement when it approved the Timber Culture Act, which offered an additional 160 acres to homesteaders who planted a designated percentage of the land to trees.¹⁰

Most major tree planting campaigns on the Great Plains emphasized planting in rural areas. The benefits of trees in such areas were viewed largely in utilitarian terms. They were seen as a way to conserve moisture and increase precipitation (the belief that trees would bring rain by boosting humidity was remarkably widespread). Trees were also planted to provide protection from the wind, stabilize soils, moderate temperatures, and produce wood for fuel and construction. In cities and towns, trees were promoted primarily for their attractiveness and the shade they provided, characteristics it was believed would not only make life more pleasant, but would boost property values. A brochure promoting tree planting on the flatlands of Wyoming, for example, included a picture of two homes, one shrouded in foliage, the other sitting in the middle of a treeless tract, with the caption: "Other things being equal, which one would you rent?"¹¹

The attitudes of settlers toward the Great Plains environment often reflected their cultural heritage and geographic origins. Most had European roots and many were born or grew up in more wooded parts of the United States. The planting of a few seedlings around a homestead was simply a way to re-create a more familiar setting. Arbor Day founder Morton, a native of upstate New York, once remarked that "there is a comfort in a good orchard, in that it makes the new home more like the old home in the East." In a study of ecological adaptations in a Kansas county, James Malin noted that settlers from more humid states "missed trees possibly more than anything else." J.B. Jackson observed that Euro-Americans in the United States are all "exiles from a landscape of streams and hills and forests" and that their efforts to surround themselves with greenery are but attempts to re-create that "landscape in miniature." While the descendants of early residents of the Great Plains sometimes came to prefer the openness of the prairies, even viewing hilly or wooded areas as claustrophobic, initial settlers were often still deeply attached to the landscapes they had left behind.¹²

The human affinity for trees has still deeper roots. As Yi-Fu Tuan has noted, the preference of many people for a park-like landscape can be traced back to the savannas of Africa. "The sylvan environment," he wrote, "was... the warm nurturing womb out of which the hominids were to emerge." Trees also have a spiritual significance. They are mentioned frequently in the Bible, have served as mystical symbols and objects of worships since ancient times, and have been used as memorials in a variety of cultures. The long life of trees has left an especially deep impression on the human psyche. Standing tall when we cannot yet walk and rising still when we take our last breath, a tree can seem eternal. Simon Schama, in fact, has argued that the enduring human

attachment to trees represents a desire “to find in nature a consolation for our own mortality.”¹³

Planting a “Desert”

Norman was one of four towns platted along the tracks of the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad in what is now Oklahoma after the U.S. government announced that it would open a portion of Indian Territory, the so-called Unassigned Lands, to homesteaders on 22 April 1889. Norman grew in a hurry after the opening and by nightfall of its first day was a tent city with a few hundred residents. In subsequent months, settlers began to transform the prairie into a bustling market center. Norman was named the county seat and became site of the first cotton gin in Oklahoma Territory. By 1890, it had two banks, two newspapers, three hotels, two dozen retail stores, an opera house, a Methodist women’s college, and, according to the first census of the city, 787 residents.¹⁴

A characteristically dry Oklahoma summer and searing temperatures tested the will of settlers the first few months after the opening. It was too hot and water was too scarce in those initial days for anyone to publicly suggest the planting of trees. Residents were likely more concerned with building homes and establishing themselves economically than with beautification. The earliest mention of trees in the town’s first newspaper, the *Transcript*, did not come until seven months after the land run. “Plow up your lots and prepare to plant shrubbery and trees,” the paper wrote in November 1889. “Let us make this town the most handsome in the Territory.” A week later, the newspaper noted that “quite a few trees have been planted already.” The greatest initial push to plant trees came the following spring, when Oklahoma celebrated Arbor Day for the first time. “Today will go down in history as Oklahoma’s Arbor Day,” the *Transcript* remarked. “Plant a tree if possible.” Four weeks later, the paper reported that citizens had planted “thousands of trees” during the previous month.¹⁵

As was typical of newspapers in such frontier settlements, the *Transcript* did far more than report the news. Led by its founder and editor Ed P. Ingle, a native of England who had been raised in Pennsylvania, the paper soon took the lead in urging residents to plant trees. For several years, almost every edition of the newspaper published in spring or fall included some statement about the beauty and value of trees. Ingle often printed numerous appeals for tree planting in a single issue. In an issue published in April 1891, for example, three separate pleas for the planting of trees appeared on the front page. Ingle also sometimes criticized residents who had failed to plant trees or whose negligence had undermined the efforts of others. In May 1891, for instance, he reprimanded residents who did not keep their cattle penned up at night, noting that wandering livestock had “committed great depredations” to the trees, shrubs, and gardens of the town.¹⁶

Inspired by the regular proselytizations of Ingle, Norman residents began to organize to plant trees. Like Ingle, most early Norman residents came to Oklahoma from more naturally wooded regions. The majority of settlers in the area had migrated from forested Southern states (Arkansas, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Missouri) and the piney woods of east Texas. Seeking to create a more familiar environment, residents in 1891 founded a Norman "improvement society" for "beautifying said city by planting trees, shrubbery, etc." Civic leaders then began a campaign to promote the planting of trees in the city park, which had been used primarily for pasture and as a campground, and, in 1892, the town council ordered 750 trees for the park. Numerous trees were also planted around the town high school. By this time, three nurseries were advertising their products in town. One boasted of having "a full line of shade trees, evergreens, and shrubbery; all kinds of fruit trees and small fruit."¹⁷

The planting of trees was also integral to initial development of the University of Oklahoma. Tree planting began on the university grounds, in fact, even before construction of the school's first building. Norman won designation as site of the territorial university in 1890, though classes did not begin for two years. Town residents donated a 40-acre parcel one-half mile southwest of the townsite for a campus and, in December 1891, the Board of Regents issued a request for proposals for the design of a university building. Early the following March, town leaders organized a mass meeting to plan for the planting of trees on the campus. The *Transcript* asked local residents to contribute saplings. "Trees will be badly needed," the paper noted. "Everybody interested in this great institution is invited and urged to bring trees to the ground next week for planting." Several hundred trees were planted that spring. The following August, the *Transcript* reported that most of the trees were "alive and thrifty."¹⁸

David Ross Boyd (Figure 3), born and raised in a part of Ohio his brother described as "heavily timbered country," arrived in Norman to take charge of the University of Oklahoma in August 1892. He came to Oklahoma from Arkansas City, Kansas, where, as the school superintendent, he had helped organize a citywide beautification program that anticipated his tree planting activities in Norman. When thousands of homesteaders descended upon the Kansas town in March 1889, after President Benjamin Harrison announced that the Unassigned Lands would be opened to settlement a month later, Boyd and local businessmen devised a plan to hire many of the poor and hungry migrants to improve the town. Boyd was selected to supervise the work that included the planting of numerous maple and elm trees.¹⁹

A considerable legend has developed about Boyd's tree planting efforts in Norman. At times, he is portrayed almost as some sort of Johnny Appleseed of the Plains. Boyd himself perpetuated this notion in later recollections, though some of his statements do not hold up to scrutiny. "I landed in this prairie town when there was not a single tree or house," he wrote in an autobiographical sketch. Recalling the view from the railroad depot the day he arrived, he later said: "As far as I could see, looking to the southwest toward



Figure 3. David Ross Boyd, first president of the University of Oklahoma, is often remembered more for his tree planting activities than for his educational accomplishments. Courtesy of the Western History Collections at the University of Oklahoma.

where the university now stands, there was one vast stretch of buffalo grass. Not a tree or shrub broke the interminable monotony of that hard-pan desert.”²⁰

Newspaper accounts show that these statements had little basis in fact. The tendency of settlers like Boyd to pass on such fictions is suggestive of Euro-American perceptions of the grasslands. It shows their willingness to buy into the idea of the Great Plains as a desert, first suggested by the earliest European explorers who crossed the region, regardless of their actual experiences.²¹ In reality, Norman had a population of more than 1,000 when Boyd arrived. It had a three-block downtown and abundant buildings. Numerous trees had already been planted and many of those had survived and even thrived. Still, there can be no denying the importance of Boyd in transforming the campus and the infant town. Largely through Boyd’s work, Norman became known throughout Oklahoma and elsewhere for its trees.

With registration for the university scheduled to begin less than a month after his arrival, Boyd had little time for tree planting at first. But soon after school opened in September 1892 his thoughts turned to the beautification of the campus. “I was fresh from my tree planting experience in Arkansas City,” he later wrote, “and could not visualize a treeless university seat.” He convinced the Board of Regents to allocate \$70 to purchase 1,000 trees and, in the spring of 1893, numerous two-year old elm and ash trees were planted on

campus and along the road that had been laid out between the town and the school—now University Boulevard. Boyd himself broke up the sod with a team of oxen and watered the trees by hand. Before long, his work began to pay off and the trees started to sprout leaves. In June 1893, the *Transcript* observed that “university avenue is blossoming as the rose.”²²

About this time, Boyd purchased a lot just north of campus, and began building a house. That fall, he planted thousands of trees on the university grounds and around his home. Boyd apparently purchased the new trees with his own money because of insufficient university funds. He cultivated shade and fruit trees around his home and laid out a five-acre nursery southwest of the university building. There he began tending the seeds and seedlings that would supply the university and town for years to come. By Christmas 1893, Boyd had planted some 10,000 trees, according to the *Transcript*, which lauded his efforts. “One of the most enthusiastic laborers for the improvement of public and private property here is Prof. D.R. Boyd,” the paper wrote. “He believes in the planting of trees and if Norman had a few more public-spirited men like him, the city in a short time would present a more attractive appearance.”²³

When the trees in the nursery reached a sufficient height to be transplanted, according to a frequently repeated story, Boyd also began giving seedlings free to townspeople. They were only required to pay for the trees if the trees died, or so the story goes.²⁴ The free distribution of trees supposedly angered some local residents, who thought Boyd was spending public money to supply trees to private citizens. A local druggist, in fact, circulated a petition calling for Boyd’s ouster. The campaign collapsed when it was revealed that Boyd had purchased the trees with his own money.²⁵

Trials and Triumphs

Growing trees on the Great Plains was not without its trials and the lengths to which settlers went in their efforts to plant and care for trees suggests the value they placed on their presence. Boyd regularly refers in letters to the “unfavorable” conditions and the inadequacy of the “hard prairie” soils.²⁶ Drought was a persistent problem. The inconsistent precipitation and the imperviousness of the soils on campus limited the variety of trees that could be grown. Boyd found it necessary to regularly cultivate the ground around each tree he planted for three years to make maximum use of rainfall. Many of the trees planted along University Boulevard in 1893 had to be replanted during a severe drought two years later, after the street was resurveyed. Boyd watered them by hand throughout the summer, but left for a conference in July fearing for their survival. Rain fell during his absence, however, and when he returned the trees were heavy with foliage. He later described seeing the elm and ash trees blooming in the August moonlight when he arrived home as one of the happiest moments of his life.²⁷

As the young trees grew, they also began to attract insects. Boyd regularly stopped on his way home from the university to dig borers out of trees with his pocketknife. "When we set out the first trees there were no woodpeckers to get the insect enemies and they could hardly survive the borers," he later explained. "Finally I thought of [a] plan to haul a number of large dead trunks of cottonwood trees [probably from the banks of the Canadian River, two miles south of campus], beginning to decay and full of insects, and I 'planted' them in different locations. It was not long till the woodpeckers and other birds discovered them."²⁸

Boyd continued to plant trees every spring and fall and the campus nursery grew progressively larger. In 1897, more than 2,000 trees were planted on campus and the following spring, 13,000 trees were set out. The *Transcript* estimated in 1898 that the young trees growing in the nursery numbered 40,000. By this time, the grove of elms planted around the university building in 1893 had become so dense that only the top of the building was visible (Figure 4). The elms planted along University Boulevard had also grown con-



Figure 4. Elm and maple trees create a dense growth around the first university building in 1900. Compare this view to that in Figure 2. Courtesy of the Western History Collections at the University of Oklahoma.

siderably. Outsiders began to note the beauty of the campus. The *Kansas City Star* remarked in 1898 that "the most marked change has taken place at the territorial university of Norman. President D.R. Boyd is an enthusiast of tree culture and has transformed the campus from a treeless waste into a magnificent grove of elms, maples, ash, and other trees."²⁹



Figure 5. The symbolic importance of trees to David Ross Boyd, first president of the University of Oklahoma, is evident in the university seal, which he designed in 1902.

A scholar who examined thousands of Boyd's letters commented that "trees were almost an obsession" to the university president and called him "a pioneer ecologist." In a speech delivered in 1929, an early Norman newspaperman concurred: "One of his neighbors told me years ago that [Boyd] was so everlastingly at him with his 'Plant Trees!! Plant Trees!!' that to get rid of him he had to plant trees, and then became so interested in seeing the darn things grow that he became almost as pestiferous to his friends in telling them about it as Dr. Boyd had been." Even in the months after a fire destroyed the only university

building in 1903 and one would expect the college president to be occupied with other matters, his correspondence was filled with references to trees. Boyd also recognized the symbolic value of trees. He regularly used tree metaphors in speeches and is credited with the design of the university seal, which shows a sower scattering seeds in an empty field against a horizon of bushy trees (Figure 5).³⁰

The enthusiasm of the University of Oklahoma president for trees was infectious. Following Boyd's model, the city contracted in 1893 to have the sod in its park broken up to save the trees planted there without proper cultivation the previous year. In 1896, the city set out 1,000 white elm and 1,500 locust trees in the park and a few weeks later the *Transcript* remarked that "more trees have been planted in Norman ... this year than ever before in the history of the country." High Gate College, a Methodist women's school on the east side of town, planted 400 trees on its grounds in 1893, and several years later the property was described as "one of the most attractive places in the territory."³¹

As Norman grew, trees also became central to subdivision development and promotion. The earliest residential areas in the city clustered around the central business district. The University of Oklahoma for its first few years was essentially out in the country, a half mile from the settled part of town. But as enrollment grew and the population rose, the area between downtown and the campus began to fill in. In 1901, developers subdivided a 40-acre parcel northeast of campus for homes; builders planted 800 trees on the lots. Owners of an adjacent subdivision also took notice. They planted "several thousand" trees along streets and on home sites, and extolled the virtues of trees in advertising. "Trees protest against the child running away from home

to play,” said one such ad. “They invite him to play in their shade and this keeps him from the street. Trees almost become members of the family circle and often are interwoven in our proudest recollections of home.”³²

A Town Transformed

Photographs and descriptions of the town and campus illustrate how thoroughly tree planting transformed Norman. A photo of the president’s home taken in 1895 (Figure 6) shows a few leafless seedlings, three or four feet tall, in front of a frame house. In a photo taken 16 months later, the trees have grown considerably and nearly all have abundant foliage. In a third image, taken about 1898, the president’s home is barely visible amid the flourishing elms. The Santa Fe Railroad included a sequence of three such photos of the president’s home in a booklet it published to promote settlement in Oklahoma, no doubt to dispel the notion that trees would not grow in the area.³³



Figure 6. Elm seedlings planted along the sidewalk in front of the university president’s home in 1895 (top), and after they had grown considerably. Courtesy of the Western History Collections at the University of Oklahoma.


Perhaps nothing better exemplified the physical changes that Norman underwent than the metamorphosis of University Boulevard. Originally the only road between the town and campus, university and city officials designed the street as a grand entranceway, with elms planted on both sides and a parkway lined with trees down the middle. A wooden walk was built on one side and it, too, was lined with elms. In early photos, the elms provide little shade and appear to be struggling against the hot Oklahoma sun (Figure 7). But as the years progressed, the trees grew taller and fuller, and what was originally a dusty horse path became a shady lane. By 1900, the trees planted on each side of the walkway met overhead, making “The Walk,” as it became known, a favorite spot for a romantic stroll and the occasional subject of idyllic reflection and even poetry in the pages of student publications. The *Oklahoma State Capital* called University Boulevard “one of the most attractive in Oklahoma.”³⁴

Trees became increasingly important to the image of the university and the town, and played an integral role in promotional efforts. University catalogs included detailed descriptions of the campus. Photos sent by the university to newspapers and magazines emphasized the shaded lanes, and groves of



Figure 7. University Boulevard as it appeared in the 1890s (top), and several years later. Courtesy of the Western History Collections at the University of Oklahoma.

The Way To College



**For catalogue and full particulars
Address,
DAVID R. BOYD, Norman, Okla.**

Figure 8. The University of Oklahoma made a tree-lined walk the focus of its advertising in 1904. Source: *University Umpire*, June 1904.

elm and maple trees. Furthermore, in 1904, the university made the tree-lined walk the focus of its advertising. One ad shows a photograph of the walk under the headline “The Way to College” (Figure 8). No other details are provided. Occasionally, the educational pursuits of the university took a back seat to the beauty of the grounds. The governor of Oklahoma did not even visit a new administration building when he toured the campus in 1903, but commented in a follow-up letter to Boyd that “the tree culture around the university grounds has certainly been a great success.”³⁵

Some believed Norman’s picturesque university and tree-covered lanes also gave the city a competitive advantage over other towns in the struggle for municipal superiority. In the years before Oklahoma became a state, several cities challenged Norman’s sta-

tus as seat of the territorial university, realizing possession of such an institution would do much to assure a town’s success. In the face of such threats, Norman civic leaders viewed the city’s trees as its greatest asset and best defense. “The trees growing about the university would be the strongest argument against its removal,” the *Transcript* wrote in 1898. “Were every street in Norman duplicates of the one connecting the city with the University, the latter’s removal would forever be an impossibility.”³⁶

The ways in which Boyd has been remembered further attest to the perceived value of trees in what was once a treeless town. One of the original faculty members at the university said after Boyd’s death that his “most lasting memorial...[are] the hundreds of large trees which he grew from seedlings” (Figure 9). In recognition of such efforts, when a statuette of Boyd was later built into a niche in the university administration building, a tree was placed in one of his hands (Figure 10). The text of a historical marker erected in front of the president’s home, moreover, devotes nearly as much attention to Boyd’s tree planting activities as his educational accomplishments. Although, strangely,



Figure 9. The picturesque north oval of the University of Oklahoma, blanketed by snow in the 1930s, exemplifies the dramatic transformation of the campus by trees. Courtesy of the Western History Collections at the University of Oklahoma.

no buildings at the university are named for Boyd, a tree planting project on the campus in the 1970s bore his name. He is also frequently mentioned as an inspiration for a renewed interest in trees and landscaping on the campus in recent years.³⁷

Few of the trees Boyd and others planted in Norman during the territorial period remain, however. The only tree on campus that appears old enough to have been planted during Boyd's tenure is an elm in front of Evans Hall. A recent tree-dating project estimated that the tree dates to at least 1906. Many of the elms planted during the early years were lost to a combination of drought and Dutch elm disease, while others succumbed to development. University Boulevard looks nothing like it once did; the parkway down its center was removed long ago to make room for automobiles. Other trees died of old age. But these facts do not diminish the importance of early tree planting efforts in the town. They showed it was possible to get trees to grow and prosper, and built the foundation that gave the city a reputation as a "gardening town." They established the tradition that helped make Norman the well-shaded city it is today.³⁸

The story of early tree planting in Norman can tell us much about the human modification of the Great Plains and the attitudes that underlaid its gradual transformation. Though the efforts of Boyd and others in the Oklahoma town were noteworthy, they were hardly unique. Other places also had their tree planting advocates, perhaps a promotion-minded merchant or the wife of a banker. Nebraska had J. Sterling Morton and C.S. Harrison. Seventy-five miles north of Norman in the town of Perry, a newspaperman named Will T. Little planted 8,000 seedlings around the courthouse square in 1896.³⁹

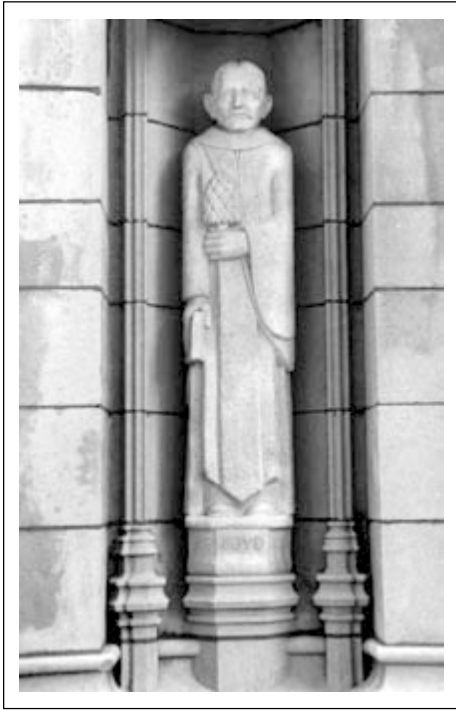


Figure 10. Suggestive of the key role tree planting played in the early history of Norman and the University of Oklahoma, a small tree was placed in the hands of first university president David Ross Boyd when this statuette of him was built into a wall of the school's administration building. Photograph by the author.

All across the region now-anonymous settlers planted trees in an effort to remake an environment that was seen as harsh and uninviting. Trees helped settlers create a place more familiar and comfortable, that they perceived as more civilized. Like wheat and petroleum, cattle and the railroads, the planting of trees was an essential element in the making of the present landscape of the Great Plains.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1. Though scholars who have attempted to delineate the boundaries of the Great Plains have sometimes excluded the part of Oklahoma that includes Norman, geographers and others in Oklahoma have generally agreed that the plains region of the state begins west of a band of sandstone hills known regionally as the Cross Timbers (for the scrubby oak woodland that characterizes them), which begin about five miles east of the original Norman town site. West of the Cross Timbers, the topography begins to level off and trees were rare at the time of Euro-American settlement, except along stream courses.
For discussions of what constitutes the Great Plains, see Nevin M. Fenneman, *Physiography of the Western United States* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1931); Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (1931; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981); Carl Frederick Kraenzel, ed., *The Great Plains in Transition* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955); G.M. Lewis, "Regional Ideas and Reality in the Cis-Rocky Mountain West," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 38 (1966): 135-150; E. Cotton Mather, "The American Great Plains," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 62:2 (June 1972): 237-257.
For regionalizations of Oklahoma, see Charles N. Gould, *Geography of Oklahoma* (Ardmore, Okla.: Bunn Brothers, 1909): 6-23; L.C. Snider, *Geography of Oklahoma*, Oklahoma Geological Survey Bulletin No. 27 (Norman: Oklahoma Geological Survey, 1917): 59-92; Neville M. Curtis Jr. and William E. Ham, "Geomorphic Provinces of Oklahoma," in *Geology and Earth Resources of Oklahoma* (Norman: Oklahoma Geological Survey, 1979): 3; John W. Morris, Charles R. Goins, and Edwin C. McReynolds, *Historical Atlas of Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986): 3.
2. Marwyn S. Samuels, "The Biography of Landscape: Cause and Culpability," in D.W. Meinig, ed., *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979): 51-88; William Wyckoff, *The Developer's Frontier: The Making of the Western New York Landscape* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1988): 173.
3. Studies focusing on the planting of trees in cities and towns include Marshall Bowen's "Trees for a Desert Town," *Virginia Geographer* 9 (1974): 3-7 and Henry W. Lawrence's "Origins of the Tree-Lined Boulevard," *Geographical Review* 78:1 (1988): 355-374.
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 18. Roy Gittinger, *The University of Oklahoma, 1892-1942: A History of Fifty Years* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1942): 8; David W. Levy, "The University of Oklahoma: A History; Part One: 1890-1920" (draft manuscript, 1997): 50-55; *Transcript*, 5 March 1892, 4; 19 March 1892, 4-5; 16 April 1892, 1; 19 August 1892, 1. The word "thrifty" was often used in the language of the day as a synonym for "thriving," a use that is less common today.
 19. Barzillia "Dill" Boyd, "Biography of David Ross Boyd," Edward Everett Dale Papers [hereafter, Dale Papers], Box 212, Folder 9, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma, Norman [hereafter, WHC]; Edward Everett Dale, "David Ross Boyd: Pioneer Educator," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* 42:2 (Summer 1964): 9; Edward Everett Dale, "Notes of an Interview with David Ross Boyd and Jennie Boyd, August 1936, Glendale, Calif.," Dale Papers, Box 212, Folder 7, WHC.
 20. David Ross Boyd, "Story of Dr. David Ross Boyd," Dale Papers, Box 212, Folder 12; George Milburn, "Planting a University: First Varsity President Recounts How He Did It," *Sooner Magazine*, November 1928, 39.
 21. For discussion of the Great Plains as the Great American Desert, see Webb, *The Great Plains*, 152-160; Martin J. Bowden, "The Great American Desert in the American Mind: The Historiography of a Geographical Notion," in David Lowenthal and Martyn J. Bowden, eds., *Geographies of the Mind: Essays in Historical Geosphy in Honor of John Kirkland Wright* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976): 119-148; Michael Williams, *Americans and Their Forests: A Historical Geography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990): 379-381.
 22. *Transcript*, 18 November 1892, 5; 9 June 1893, 12; Milburn, "Planting a University," 39-40; Dale, notes of an interview.
 23. Dale, notes of an interview; Mary Alice Boyd, recollections about her father, David Ross Boyd Papers [hereafter, Boyd Papers], Box 1, Folder 19, WHC; *Transcript*, 22 December 1893, 8.
 24. This story has been included in most every account of Boyd's years as university president. See, for example, Dale, "David Ross Boyd: Pioneer Educator," 17-18; Milburn, "Planting a University," 40; David Ross Boyd, Roy Hadsell, and Betty Kirk, "My Days as First University President," *Sooner Magazine*, December 1929, 95.
 25. Dale, notes of an interview. Searches of Norman newspapers from the period and relevant archival collections produced no evidence to support claims that Boyd gave trees to townspeople for free. By 7 February 1896, furthermore, Boyd was running weekly ads in the *Transcript* offering shade trees "for sale cheap."
 26. Though the earliest U.S. government soil survey of the area was not published until 1954, a photo printed in a university magazine in the late 1920s that shows the campus soil being "blasted out" with explosives and replaced with more fertile soil would seem to confirm the campus was originally underlaid with hardpan soil. See Zona Moore, "Making the Campus Beautiful," *Sooner Magazine*, January 1929, 118.
 27. David Ross Boyd to W.T. Little, 22 December 1904, David Ross Boyd Presidential Papers [hereafter, Boyd Presidential Papers], Box 7, WHC; Boyd to J.E. Carrier, 28 January 1905, Boyd Presidential Papers, Box 27, Folder 3; Boyd to J.R. Campbell, 12 November 1903, Boyd Presidential Papers, Box 36, Folder 3; Boyd, Hadsell, and Kirk, "My Days as First University President," 95.

28. Margaret Morse Nice, "A List of the Birds of the Campus of the University of Oklahoma," *Publications of the University of Oklahoma Biological Survey* 2:4 (15 December 1930): 195-196; Boyd, Hadsell and Kirk, "My Days as First University President," 95.
29. *Transcript*, 7 February 1896, 8; 17 June 1898, 1; 30 December 1898, 4; *El Reno News*, 19 March 1897, 4; *University Umpire*, 1 May 1898, 6.
30. Robert Stephen Morrissey, "David Ross Boyd and the University of Oklahoma: An Analysis of the Educational Contributions of the First President" (Ph.D. diss., University of Oklahoma, 1973): 208-209; J.J. Burke, "Location of the University," address to the faculty forum, University of Oklahoma, 27 March 1929, Charles N. Gould Papers, Box 34, Folder 4, WHC. In the first three months following the fire, Boyd wrote at least 23 letters about trees.
31. Womack, *Norman*, 97, 117; *Transcript*, 13 March 1896, 1; 3 April 1896, 1; 17 May 1900, 5.
32. *Transcript*, 23 May 1901, 5; 19 February 1903, 5; 5 March 1903, 5.
33. *Transcript*, 23 June 1899, 1.
34. *University Umpire* 7:2 (1904); *Oklahoma State Capital*, 29 May 1904, 3.
35. University of Oklahoma, *Catalogue, 1902-1903* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1902): 11; T.B. Ferguson to David Ross Boyd, 23 May 1903, Boyd Presidential Papers, Box 5, Folder 4.
36. *Transcript*, 2 December 1898, 4.
37. "Watermelon Christened Infant O.U.," *Oklahoma News*, 5 June 1938, 10; David G. Stapleton, interview by the author, 8 April 1997; Omer Gillham, "Did David Ross Boyd Plant That Tree?" *Sooner Magazine*, Summer 1997, 27.
38. John Fletcher, telephone conversation with the author, 19 September 1997; Robert Rucker, telephone conversation with author, 10 April 1997.
39. E.W. Jones, *Early Day History of Perry, Oklahoma* (n.p., 1931): 5. A former territorial legislator who published the first newspaper in Oklahoma, Little, like David Ross Boyd, was a native of Ohio.

