4. New Statute, New Campus at the Airport

Looking back after three decades had passed, Chaffee remembered the years the college was a corporate enterprise (1934-1939) as a “five-year interim of uncertainty and anxiety.” Students enrolling in increasing numbers each fall were eager and optimistic, however, community enthusiasm waned; the carnival-like Jamborees were discontinued, and only so many ten dollar memberships could be drummed up around town. Soliciting funds outside of Boise was a hopeless chore, since there was considerable community rivalry, just as the three sections of the state, the northern panhandle, the southeast and southwest remained partisan.

Some citizens in neighboring towns resented the legislative attention given the capital city and the material growth taking place there. Nampa and Caldwell had their own colleges. Thus, financing Boise Junior College was a local problem, a constant challenge Chaffee faced daily as he entered his office, and particularly each summer when he and his assistants prepared for the fall semester. It was difficult to plan with precision before students paid their tuition, the major source of income. The community contributed about $10,000 during these five years while the average annual budget was almost $20,000.1

Quite certain the student body would continue to grow, Chaffee and the trustees could anticipate additional revenues each fall. But how much? There was never enough money to entirely meet academic needs let alone popular athletic programs. “Football Deficit Gives Basketball Black Outlook,” The Roundup lamented in December, 1938. Fielding the team cost almost $700 that fall, a large sum it seemed. And almost half of that was lost on a single game, making it necessary to cancel one with Lewiston Normal and place the fate of the upcoming basketball season in question. Also frustrating was inadequate funding for the social and cultural activities zestful students wanted to bring to campus.2

Calling on Driscoll one morning at his banking office, Chaffee produced several letters from educators inviting him to consider another position at a larger salary. Glancing over this correspondence, Driscoll brusquely reminded him Boise could not meet these offers. Anticipating this reaction, Chaffee said that he was not using the letters as a financial lever for himself, because he and Lois preferred to remain in Boise, but the funding effort was exhausting him. Student fees, high considering the money problems parents were having at home, were inadequate and too uncertain. Constantly seeking the means to keep the college operational, Chaffee had pushed himself too far, and spent two weeks hospitalized and at home. Additional leisure, following a ten-day horseback trip the previous summer with Lois into Idaho’s primitive area, had been resisted.
The trustees were confident a junior college law would be passed during the next session of the legislature. Oliver O. Haga, principal of the High School before entering law, drafted the statute that was lobbied through with the aid of Driscoll, Oscar Worthwine, Walter York, Senator Ed Baird and Postmaster Harry Yost. While garnering votes, they entertained legislators at several Hotel Boise dinners early in the session and a majority favored the bill. Acceptable to both houses, Governor C.A. Bottolfsen was unwilling to sign it until he was satisfied Boise would not become involved in the annual battle for higher education funds. The statute, the governor was reminded, provided for local financing through taxation upon a voter-approved district levy.

The formation of the taxing district was overwhelmingly approved despite the negativism of novelist and newspaper columnist Vardis Fisher, who had recently edited the first state guide book for the Writer's Project of the Work's Progress Administration. Also the compiler of the *Idaho Encyclopedia*, Fisher had just completed his *Children of God*. He felt the college law was being "shoved down the throats" of the people in the district although dozens of students were successfully circulating a petition around town when the governor finally signed the bill. Commenting on Fisher's criticisms, plain spoken Lynn Driscoll amused Chaffee with this abrupt summation, "Gene, never enter a pissing contest with a skunk."

Fisher, characteristically critical when the college moved to the airport the following year, said the land should be turned into a cow pasture where quality cheese products might be the end result since BJC was not a bona fide collegiate institution. Ignored by the administration and trustees, the well-known author made no further attacks. As the college grew, he became friendly when invited to speak on campus. After Fisher's death, his widow stated she intended to give some of his papers and publications to the college.

*The Roundup* revealed in the campus reaction to the passage of the junior college statute which made it possible to reduce tuition. While paying sixty dollars per semester in the fall of 1938, plus fees for laboratory courses, and a student body activity card ($7.50), residents of the newly formed district were charged two-thirds less when they registered for the 1939 fall semester. The fee for students living in Ada County but outside of the district was $25, and residents of other counties paid $40, while activity cards were reduced to five dollars. Scholarships, ranging upward to full annual expenses, were awarded by the Exchange, Kiwanis and Columbian clubs, the Daughters of the American Revolution, and a local savings and loan company. Three of the graduates received grants to continue their studies at the University of Idaho, Whitman College in Washington and Chaffee's alma mater, Occidental College in California.

Enrollment more than doubled, increasing to over four hundred students when the school became a public college. Reduced tuition, made possible by *ad valorem* tax revenue and one-half of the county's profits from liquor sales ("tainted money," some people said), brought about the sudden growth of the student body. Since the economy was improving by the fall of 1939, and unemployment dropped the next year as defense jobs were created, BJC would have enrolled more students anyway, but not nearly so many.

Fall semester, 1939, was the beginning of a "new era" in the history of education in and around Boise *The Roundup* believed. Harry Morrison had become a trustee along with legislator Ed D. Baird, who had introduced Haga's junior college bill in the Senate. These men and the other trustees would take Boise's original municipal airport off of the mayor's hands the following year. But, the semester was a "new
era," according to The Roundup because of curricula expansion and additional faculty. Forestry and business courses were offered in classrooms that had been renovated during the summer. The campus presented a "strange face" to returning sophomores as well as the freshmen, because of the work that had been done despite the search for a new campus, underway for several months. Bettina Kroeger and her Roundup reporters, keeping an eye on the situation, announced in November the selection of the airport site, an "ideal location."

The school's landmark year would be 1940, when classes opened in the structure erected on the airport campus, nevertheless, the previous year was a "milestone," Chaffee told students and faculty. Once a "sickly child" which some people thought to be doomed to certain extinction, BJC had become a healthy youth destined for a permanent life of service. Forty years later, after he succeeded John Barnes as the fourth president, John Keiser concluded that Barnwell, Chaffee and their faculties had trained students to serve their fellow man, not just to make money. This "irresistable purpose of producing true service" had sustained Boise Junior College as it became Boise College (1965), Boise State College (1969), and Boise State University (1974).6

W HY T HE A IRPORT? 

It was evident during the fall of 1939, when enrollment doubled, that St. Margaret's facilities were inadequate, but this was not the only reason the college was moved so quickly. Officials had known for some time that the school's days on Idaho Street were numbered. Barnwell had vigorously led the strengthening of St. Luke's Hospital and his successor Bishop Bartlett, also sympathetic with college goals, urged the expansion of hospital programs. St. Margaret's was urgently needed for St. Luke's nurses training school.

Chaffee had been told in the spring of 1938, that the hospital intended to occupy the college's quarters after the close of the 1939-1940 school year. Thus, the search
for a new location began before the junior college law was adopted the following February. Passage of the statute was critical for the funding of new campus construction. Had the lobbying effort not been successful, the college would have indeed become an "orphan." All of Idaho's nurses were trained at hospitals until the colleges and universities began offering degrees several decades later. The Episcopalians could not compromise. They had to have St. Margaret's for St. Luke's nurses school and the college had to move.

Had the junior college law been vetoed as the statute was in 1937, raising money to create another campus would have been difficult and discouraging even though the economy was slowly improving toward the end of the decade. Buildings, if constructed, would have been smaller and less costly. If not constructed, the college might have continued in rented quarters scattered over several blocks around Boise since a single structure large enough to accommodate four hundred learners and their faculty was not available. Moving to the high school, as had been advocated by some people before Barnwell opened the school, was not seriously considered.

Several possible sites were recommended by individuals with a variety of motives ranging from pecuniary to civic. Among the places suggested were the wooded and grassy acres against the northern foothills once occupied by Fort Boise, just a few blocks from the center of the city. Considered an ideal location, the federal
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government was unwilling to cede enough of the broad, sweeping green acres with towering trees along Fort Street, surrounding the Veteran’s Hospital established during the 1920s. Instead, the land was reserved for a high-rise federal building constructed at Fort and Sixth streets in 1967, ending the spirited lobbying of business and professional people who preferred a site closer to the State House.

Since Fort Boise (Boise Barracks after Cavalry-Indian days) land was not available, the trustees thought they might use the Idaho Soldier’s Home and grounds, utilizing the seasoned red brick structure and expanding around it. However, this acreage on State Street beyond the city limits was destined to become popular Veteran’s Park after the Soldier’s Home was demolished.

The trustees looked at the Ridenbaugh estate in South Boise east of the Union Pacific Depot, although first choice for Eugene Chaffee and Oscar Worthwine was the airport along Boise River between Capitol Boulevard and Broadway, where pioneer airmail planes began landing in April, 1926. Chaffee had his eye on this over one hundred acre site when he outlined for Worthwine the “prime requisites.” Accessibility was number one, a place with easy access by auto and bus from farms and communities within commuting distance. At the same time, a location near the business district was preferred so that students might find part-time employment. Citing another college president, Chaffee concluded that “the ideal environment for young people during their ... years in college would be a campus in the middle of a park close to the home city.” As for the amount of land required, about seventy-five acres might be sufficient for the next twenty years, nonetheless, the entire tract should be acquired.

Asking Driscoll to seek federal aid for construction, the trustees petitioned Mayor James Straight and the council for the municipal airport, “or a substantial part of it.” Nearly a mile long, with the airstrip extending diagonally from the east end to the northwest, most of the land was vacant. Prominent on the south side near the center was a gymnasium-size hangar. Several smaller ones and frame auxiliary repair shops were scattered along the edge of the field. Private planes and military trainers would land there during the war, disturbing teachers and students, since Gowen Field on benchland south of the city became a military base.

The Roundup, concluding Boise’s original airport was an “ideal” location, thought it was vast. Crowded with structures after the college became a state school, the one hundred-plus acres were more than enough at the time. Compared to the Episcopal campus, a single city block surrounded by homes, the historic Assay Office and the hospital, the airport was huge. Another reason for considering it ideal was Julia Davis Park across the river and facile access for out-of-town students, Mayor Straight told a reporter. The proximity of the uncluttered site to downtown was also a positive factor for both students and merchants, the mayor believed, while he expected the tract to be donated.7

HANGARS AND COLLEGIATE GOTHIC

Acquiring the land required no investment. However, plant construction was contingent upon taxpayer approval of a $260,000 bond issue, which was achieved with student assistance in November, 1939, by a wide margin. Architects were appointed and the construction of a flat top, two-story structure, with a bell tower alongside a third floor in the center, was soon under way. Designed to accommodate
every function, it was rushed forward that spring and summer. Money and labor for auxiliary groundwork were furnished by the Works Progress Administration (W.P.A.), which had by this time made loans and grants amounting to several million dollars to improve thirty-nine junior colleges in eleven states, including four in Utah, one in Montana, but none as yet in Idaho or the other contiguous states. For BJC, the W.P.A. initially provided $57,000 for desert-soil landfill, sidewalks, street paving and curbing.

Surveying the building site west of the airfield, the W.P.A.'s State Administrator Dean Miller reminded Haga that portions of the nearby ground were spongy and soft because the water table was near the surface. This section which was once the municipal rubbish dump (where the Morrison Center would rise in the 1980s) was an unsuitable fill, and the existing impervious dyke running parallel to the river held water ponded on the land side. Steps must be taken to eliminate this water, Miller told Haga, and this was done after the main building was completed.

The dark red brick collegiate Gothic structure was described in a January, 1940, issue of The Roundup. The Administrative Building, as it was called (later named in honor of Oliver Haga but seldom called that), housing all of the classes, the library, laboratories, offices and a fairly large room for the student union, was finished in time for the fall, 1940, semester. W.P.A. money was made available for the construction of a separate heating plant and tunnels, completed before cold weather arrived. This federal agency also financed more than half the cost of the Assembly Hall named for trustee Ella Budge, or the Music Building as it was called after a pipe-organ was installed. Chaffee and several faculty "carpenters" hammered the ceiling panels in place during the 1941 Christmas vacation, and this red brick structure was in use the following February.

The largest hangar, purchased from Johnson Flying Service for $600, was converted into the gymnasium and served this purpose for fifteen years. Football and baseball fields were platted a few rods west of the refurbished hangar and several smaller frame buildings became auto, woodworking, ceramic, machine and welding shops. The Student Union in the Administration Building was renovated for classes and offices after another brick building ("The Corral") was erected. Located a few steps north of the similar Assembly Hall and financed by bonds sold within the community, the popular union opened in April, 1942. These structures and a Health Center completed that year served faculty and student needs without any permanent additions until the new gymnasium was completed in 1956. The several "temporary" frame surplus buildings moved onto campus shortly after the war were occupied until the 1970s.8
ACCREDITATION, THE LIFEBLOOD

Although the college was now the recipient of tax dollars, the Chamber of Commerce college committee, which included several of the trustees, remained significantly influential. Also helpful in various ways, the Boise Junior Chamber of Commerce presented Chaffee with a distinguished community service award in the spring of 1940. By this time, the annual fall receptions usually held at the Owyhee or Boise hotels, and formal benefit dances were highly regarded social events. At the same time, most campus activities were deemed newsworthy. No local institution received better press coverage, evidence that the college, no longer an orphan, was a valued community possession.

Crucial for the institution was the certification of the curriculum by a regional association, the "life-blood" of any college or university. As Chaffee put it, accreditation was as important to educators as credit was to a businessman. With courses certified by the University of Idaho since 1936, Chaffee waited before seeking broader approval until the legislative statute naming the school a public institution was passed in February, 1939.

The Northwest Association of Secondary and Higher Schools at Seattle, one of five such groups covering the nation, had told Dean Clites in 1936, shortly before Chaffee took over, that BJC could expect nothing more than "provisional accreditation" by that organization until Boise taxpayers provided a stable source of revenue and adequate salaries. "No educational institution can exist on a high plane on tuition fees alone," Clites had been told. Well aware of this, Chaffee promptly sought recognition in Seattle just a month after the Idaho statute corrected the revenue problem. The trustees, agreeing the following May that salaries were far too low, gave the teachers with three years of service or more and those with a doctorate a $400 raise from $1,400 to $1,800. The minimum salary for teachers with a masters degree was placed at $1,600, while Chaffee received $3,600 for the 1939-1940 school year.
The accreditation process, and the travail associated with it, took considerable time. Frustrating was Moscow's President Harrison Dale's February, 1940, letter wherein Dale told Chaffee he felt his request for accreditation should be withdrawn until the building on the new campus was properly equipped. "I can say emphatically and categorically," Dale wrote, "that the University will not oppose in any way Boise Junior College's application for accreditation when it appears to have met the qualifications and standards set up by the Association." A week later, Chaffee received a letter from Frederick Bolton of Seattle, who advised him to wait another year before asking for accreditation. Chaffee reluctantly accepted his recommendation.

Elected Idaho's junior college representative to the Northwest Association, Chaffee arranged an official visitation for March, 1941. The participants wrote a positive evaluation and accreditation was granted the following month. Elated, Chaffee telegraphed Haga from Spokane, where he had made the final presentation before the association. BJC, having won "the ultimate in scholastic recognition," was now a fully accredited public college on a permanent campus with a stable source of income. Appropriate recognition of this achievement was awarded when Chaffee was elected president of a national junior college association after students and faculty returned from active military duty.9