

# *“She Has Surely Done Her Share”*



## *Miss Bessie Huff and the Muskogee Junior College*

*By Dana Eversole\**

As the first Muskogee, Oklahoma, Central High School graduate to return to Muskogee to begin a teaching career, Bessie Marie Huff was a pioneer woman educator in the Muskogee I-20 School District, but her legacy extended far beyond that role.<sup>1</sup> In 1915 she began teaching English and journalism at Central High School. As adviser to the school newspaper and the annual, Huff also organized the Press Association, an honorary organization for journalism students. In 1923, while still teaching at the

high school, Huff began instructing English and journalism classes at Muskogee Junior College. In 1928 she was named dean of the college and worked to receive accreditation to turn the one-year college into a two-year institution. She remained as dean and instructor until the college was closed in 1962.<sup>2</sup> In the course of her forty-seven-year career, Huff touched the lives of hundreds of students, many of whom followed her career path or otherwise became leaders in their community.

Huff was born on December 4, 1892, in Hancock, Iowa. She moved to Oklahoma with her parents, James Lewis Huff and Laura D. Newman Huff, in 1904 from Iowa. Huff was an only child and attended school in Lawton and Muskogee. She graduated from Muskogee Central High School in 1911 as salutatorian. At Central High School she was secretary of her class two years and served as literary editor of the school magazine.<sup>3</sup>

Huff then attended the University of Kansas and received her bachelor of arts degree in three and one-half years.<sup>4</sup> Her first teaching job was at a school on the Kansas-Nebraska line where she received seventy-five dollars per month. Although the salary was very good at the time, she missed Oklahoma and decided to return.<sup>5</sup>

After Huff returned to Muskogee in 1915, she was hired to teach English at Central High School. In 1919 she started a journalism class which began publishing *The Scout*, a monthly magazine that eventually became a weekly newspaper.<sup>6</sup> In the 1921 edition of the *Chieftain* yearbook, which she also advised, staff members wrote about the newspaper: "For the second successive year the honors of the publication contest of the University of Oklahoma went to *The Scout* of Muskogee. It was graded 90 1/3 percent perfect at the state scholastic contest—the highest record a high school publication in Oklahoma has ever made."<sup>7</sup>

When Huff started the journalism class she ordered and studied all the books she could find on high school journalism. She soon decided to write her own book for her students. *A Laboratory Manual for Journalism in High Schools*, copyrighted in 1921, was so successful Huff was asked to join the faculty of Columbia University in New York. She taught several summer sessions at Columbia and received her master's degree during that time. She returned each school year to Central High School of Muskogee to teach and advise. The journalism program had grown to three classes of thirty students each by 1922, and her students had high praise for their instructor:

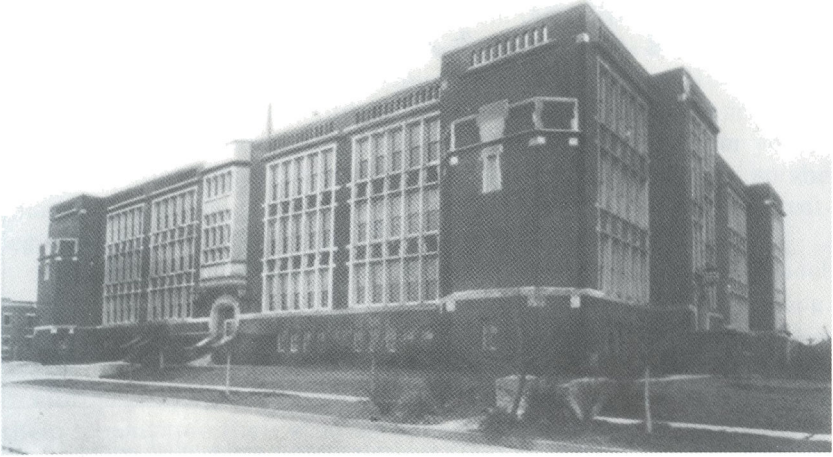
## THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

Everyone connected with the *Chieftain* and *The Scout* knows and appreciates Miss Huff's guidance. She is unflinching in her work, though she claims no praise for herself, merely saying that it is her business. It's the little deeds of kindness that make the world go around and Miss Huff has surely done her share.<sup>8</sup>

In 1922 Huff formed the Press Association, an honorary organization for students who wrote specified amounts of published literature. Only journalism students were eligible. To become a member, a student who was taking journalism for the first time had to have published five columns of news in *The Scout*; second-semester students had to have seven columns and third-semester students nine. Membership for one semester did not entitle a student to continue membership. To remain a member, the student had to make the press again. Huff approved space in the *Chieftain* toward the requirement. The main objective of the association was to encourage students to write more good news.<sup>9</sup> In an article in *The English Journal*, Huff noted, "The Press Association which I started as an honorary Organization, has served a splendid purpose in keeping up the enthusiasm of the class members. If a student makes the



*In 1911 during her senior year at Muskogee's Central High School (opposite), Bessie Huff (l) was literary editor of The Scout. She could not have known then that she would return to Muskogee later as teacher and dean of the junior college (Courtesy Oklahoma Historical Society, No. 18827.714, opposite; Taken from The Scout, 1910, left, courtesy Muskogee Public Library).*



Press Association, he is excused from writing a term paper in the course.”<sup>10</sup>

While continuing to teach at Central High School, in 1923 Huff joined the staff of Muskogee Junior College, which was created in 1920 by the Muskogee Board of Education. It prospered until 1928 as a one-year institution sponsored by the University of Oklahoma.<sup>11</sup> In 1928 many school patrons led by Huff made an insistent demand that the one-year college be extended to a two-year junior college. Upon the recommendation of the State Board of Education, the Muskogee Junior College was accredited as a two-year institution. Named dean of the college in 1928, Huff left Central High School to teach and carry out the duties of dean full-time.<sup>12</sup>

The college was located in a wing of the high school. Dorothy Moore, former youth service coordinator for Muskogee Public Library, recalled, “The high school students didn’t come to the part of the building where the college was located and the college students didn’t invade their territory.”<sup>13</sup>

Huff made it possible for many people who would not otherwise have attended college to attend Muskogee Junior College, according to Charles Bowman, a former student and later president of the Muskogee Chamber of Commerce. He said, “Although some students completed only one year of work, others received the associate of arts degree. At least they had some college background.”<sup>14</sup>

# *THE SCOUT*



*The Scout provided an outlet for Huff's students to write and publish original pieces for credit and valuable experience (Taken from The Scout, courtesy Muskogee Public Library).*

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The college did receive some money from the board of education but relied mainly on tuition from the students to keep it going. According to Bowman, "Miss Huff never prevented anyone from attending Muskogee Junior College because of cost. She would allow a student to pay tuition when he could. As long as you told her you would pay you could attend."<sup>15</sup>

Dr. James Christian, also a former student and eventually superintendent of Muskogee District I-20 Schools, recalled, "Miss Huff helped me get through school by letting me pay my tuition on the installment plan. She took an interest in each student."<sup>16</sup>

Muskogee Junior College graduates also remember the type of teacher Huff was. Christian regarded her as a "caring person and an excellent teacher who would extend herself to the limit to see that each student achieved an education."<sup>17</sup> David Miller, president of Cross Telephone Company, declared, "When I attended Muskogee Junior College, Miss Huff had unlimited energy. At the time I knew her she was in her sixties. She felt like her life was a true calling to help her students obtain an education."<sup>18</sup>

Former United States Second District congressman and Muskogee attorney Ed Edmondson said, "Bessie Huff could take a student who was casual about school and get him interested. Many students who would have dropped out of high school became interested in

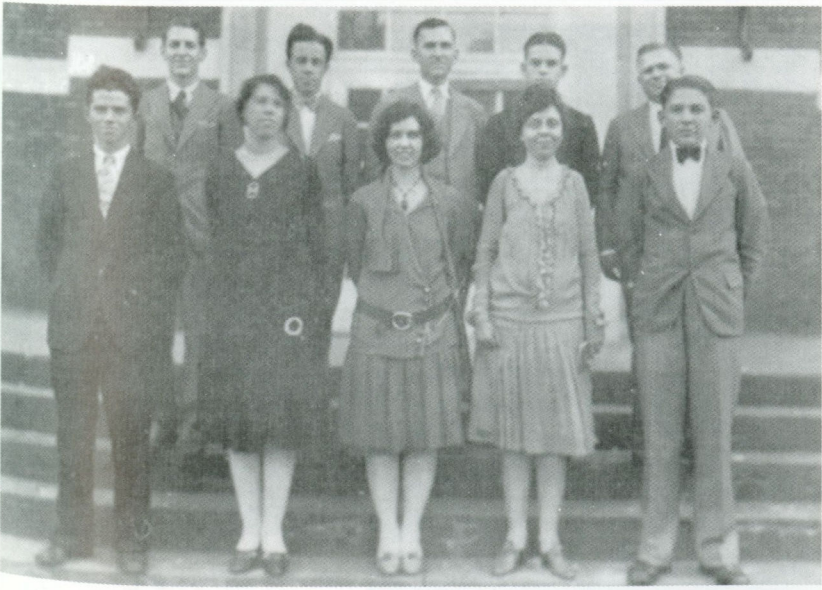
## MISS BESSIE HUFF

school when they saw that Bessie Huff was interested in them. She had the ability to inspire scholarship and effort in her students.”<sup>19</sup>

During the 1950s many students began referring to the college as “Bessie Huff University.” Bowman remembered that Huff “took a special interest in each student. She would arrange your schedule to fit your work hours. She knew that it was important for you to have a job to support yourself and in many cases a family, so she [made] the college . . . fit your work instead of the work fit your college.”<sup>20</sup>

Miller stated that “each morning at college everyone would meet together in the social hall and have a Bible reading and sing a song. Everyone joined in and no one had their feelings hurt because a prayer was said or a religious song was sung.”<sup>21</sup>

Huff kept track of her students after graduation and encouraged them to continue their studies. “She demanded that I continue my education,” said Christian. “She wanted her students to be successful because of her investment in them. When I returned to Musko-



*The Board of Publications for the 1930 Chieftain included (back row) J. C. Buchanan, Jr., K. R. Burchard, W. V. Martin, Bennie Jones, and L. M. Speaker, and (front row) Venable Harding, Eva Curtis, Naomi White, Bessie M. Huff, and Francis Clampitt (Taken from the Chieftain, 1930, courtesy Muskogee Public Library).*

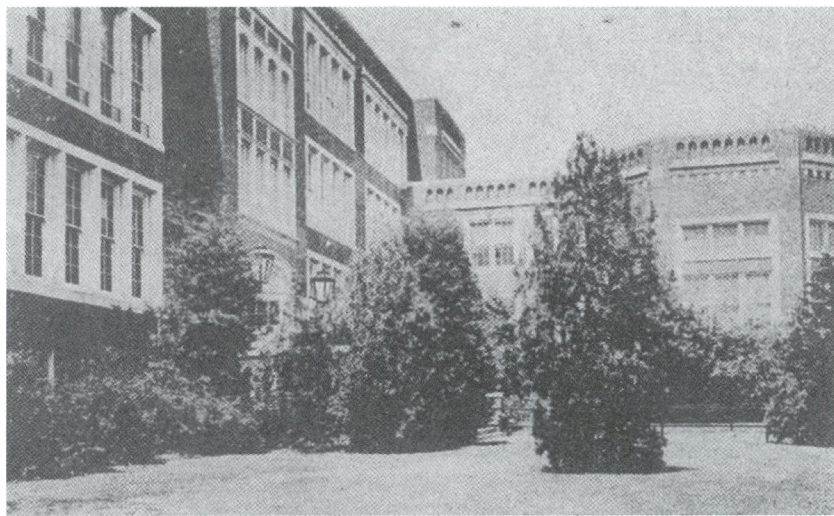
## THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

gee as a teacher, she kept in contact with me. If I didn't call her, she called me."<sup>22</sup>

Opal Harrison, an English teacher at Alice Robertson Junior High School from 1946 to 1976, recalled visiting Huff each Christmas: "My brother-in-law had Bessie as an instructor at the college and each Christmas he sent nuts and fruit to me to deliver to Bessie. When I took the gifts to her home and visited with her, there were always table tops full of gifts from former students."<sup>23</sup>

In 1958 Huff was named an outstanding educator by the local Optimist Club. A "This Is Your Day" program was held in her honor, and she received many gifts from friends and local merchants. More than 100 people who could not attend the program sent letters and telegrams.<sup>24</sup>

In 1961 the high school decided to move the college into vacant houses near the school; shortly after, there was talk of leasing the abandoned nurses' home of the old Muskogee General Hospital. Huff obtained a key to the building to look it over and before talking to anyone moved the school into the building. To all queries con-



*When Huff (p. 430) saw an opportunity in 1961, she moved Muskogee Junior College into a vacant hospital building, but unfortunately the school did not survive long. The Muskogee Board of Education closed the college in October, 1962 (Taken from Muskogee Junior College, The Polliwog, 1948, above; taken from C. W. West, Muskogee From Statehood to Pearl Harbor, p. 430, both courtesy Three Rivers Museum, Muskogee).*

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cerning authorization for the move, she replied, "Don't ask me technical questions, I just moved in."<sup>25</sup>

The school continued to operate for more than a year after the move despite efforts by the city to close it down because it was not making money. In a letter dated June 27, 1962, to Muskogee Board of Education president Raymond Holcomb, Huff wrote:

There is not a college in the United States making its way on its fees, but Muskogee Junior College did that with some assistance from me.

The piece in the paper on the last official board meeting would lead me to believe you are not satisfied with our progress. I think the school did a good job, considering we were almost squeezed out in those terrible quarters we did have.

Here are the possibilities open to me personally:

1. I can continue to underwrite salaries and incidental expenses as I have this year. Under this plan I take my regular check in order to pay social security. . . . What I paid for this year was only \$711.21 plus \$400 expenses in moving, \$12 in advertising and \$62 in paper. I am willing to pay more.

2. I can take my retirement and my social security and carry on my present work as a volunteer worker. (I would prefer that kind of volunteer work to church work or hospital about which I know nothing.)

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*In doing "her share" and more, Miss Bessie Huff gained the lasting admiration and respect of her students and colleagues (Taken from The Polliwog, 1949, courtesy Three Rivers Museum, Muskogee).*





## THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

This plan might be cheaper for me and would give the school my whole salary. Perhaps I could pay on heat, light and water that way.

What do you and the board say? No other part of a school system is a paying proposition. Why should Muskogee Junior College make money? It is a municipal junior college. The municipal junior colleges are never big. I think we are a good size. . . .<sup>26</sup>

Huff continued to plead with the board of education but the school was closed in October, 1962. With the delivery of the school finances and records to the board of education, she wrote a letter on October 8, 1962, to Holcomb: "I sever my relations with the Muskogee City Schools. I feel somewhat like the parents who stand on their front porch and watch their young people after the wedding drive off with tin cans tied to the back of their car marked 'Just Married.' I am proud, happy and sad."<sup>27</sup>

Huff fulfilled her calling as an educator to the Muskogee School District and retired at the age of seventy. She had taught at West Junior High School and Muskogee Central High School and was dean of Muskogee Junior College when she retired in 1963.<sup>28</sup>

Huff was an active member of St. Paul United Methodist Church, the B&PW Sunday School Class, and the United Methodist Women. She was a life member of the Oklahoma Education Association and the National Education Association. She was a member of the University of Kansas Alumni, Halcyon, the Shakespeare Club, and the Knife and Fork Club. After her retirement she devoted more time to her church and club activities.<sup>29</sup>

Huff never married but considered the thousands of people she taught her children. She died at her home in Muskogee on March 28, 1983, at the age of ninety.<sup>30</sup> She helped many students to obtain an education who otherwise would not have had such an opportunity; she surely did her share.

### ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> C. W. West, *Muskogee From Statehood to Pearl Harbor* (Muskogee, Oklahoma: Muskogee Publishing Company, 1975), 158.

<sup>2</sup> *Muskogee Junior College Bulletin*, June, 1961, 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Muskogee* (Oklahoma) *Daily Phoenix*, March 30, 1983.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> West, *From Statehood to Pearl Harbor*, 158.

<sup>6</sup> *The Scout*, 6 (May, 1911): 62.

<sup>7</sup> Central High School *Chieftain*, 5 (1921): 143.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 6 (1922): 128.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

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<sup>10</sup> Bessie Huff, "Journalism, A Socializing Agency," *The English Journal*, February, 1923.

<sup>11</sup> *Muskogee Junior College Bulletin*, June, 1961, 1.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Dorothy Moore, Youth Service Coordinator, Muskogee Public Library, Muskogee, Oklahoma, November 25, 1987.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Charles Bowman, President, Muskogee Chamber of Commerce, Muskogee, Oklahoma, November 27, 1987.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Dr. James Christian, Superintendent, Muskogee Public Schools, Muskogee, Oklahoma, November 25, 1987.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Interview with David Miller, President, Cross Telephone Company, Muskogee, Oklahoma, November 28, 1987.

<sup>19</sup> Telephone interview with Ed Edmondson, Attorney, Muskogee, Oklahoma, November 25, 1987.

<sup>20</sup> Bowman interview.

<sup>21</sup> Miller interview.

<sup>22</sup> Christian interview.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Opal Harrison, retired Muskogee school teacher, Muskogee, Oklahoma, November 25, 1987.

<sup>24</sup> *Muskogee Daily Phoenix*, November 13, 1958.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, June 23, 1961.

<sup>26</sup> Bessie Huff to Raymond Holcomb, President, Muskogee Board of Education, June 27, 1962, Muskogee Board of Education Archives, Muskogee, Oklahoma [hereafter cited as MBE Archives].

<sup>27</sup> Bessie Huff to Raymond Holcomb, President, Muskogee Board of Education, October 8, 1962, MBK Archives.

<sup>28</sup> *Muskogee Daily Phoenix*, March 28, 1983.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*