

# OWEN HALL

OAK GROVE – COBURN  
VASSALBORO  
MAINE



Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace  
Where there is hatred, let me sow love  
Where there is injury, pardon  
Where there is doubt, faith  
Where there is despair, hope  
Where there is darkness, light, and  
Where there is sadness, joy.

Divine Master,

Grant that I may not so much seek  
To be consoled as to console  
To be understood as to understand  
To be loved as to love  
For it is in giving that we receive  
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned  
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

St. Francis.

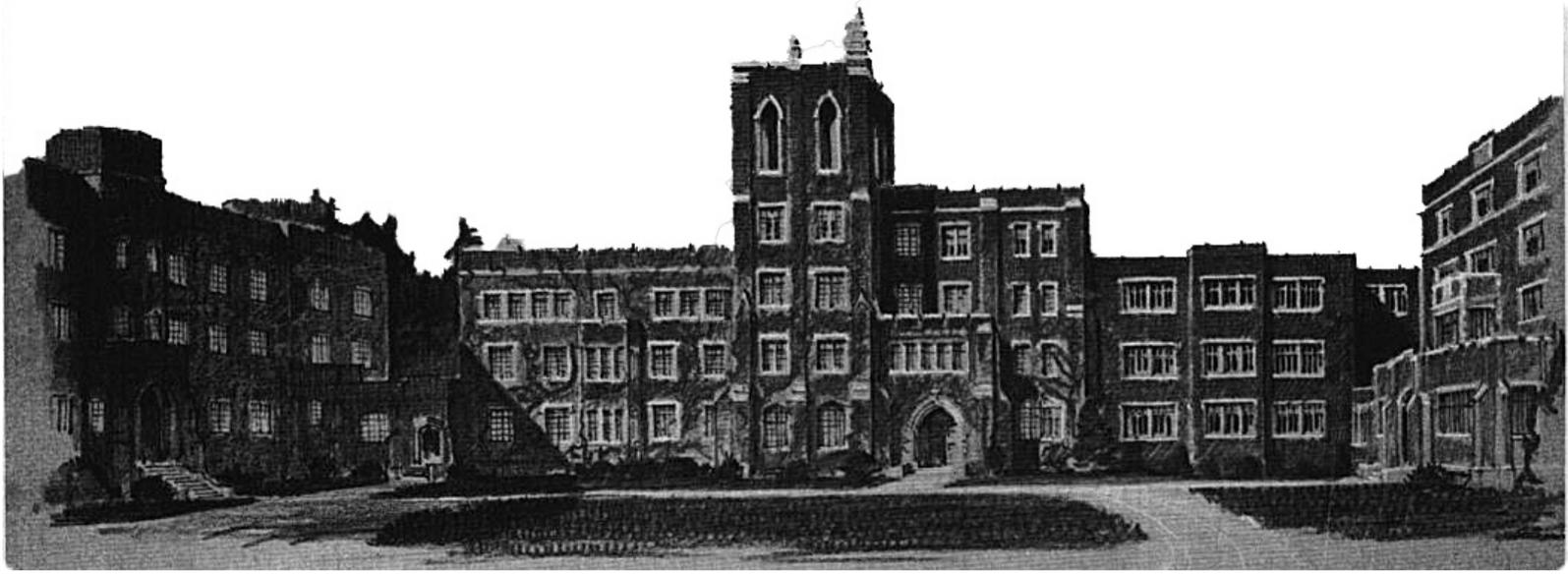
# OWEN HALL

Dedicated to the Memory of

EVA PRATT OWEN  
ROBERT EVERETT OWEN

Principals of Oak Grove School 1918-1968

OAK GROVE - COBURN  
VASSALBORO, MAINE  
June 7, 1975



BRIGGS HALL

OWEN HALL

SENIOR HOUSE

THE ARCADE AND RECITATION BUILDING

THE SCIENCE BUILDING

FOREWORD	5
THE OWENS' FIFTY YEARS	6
ROBERT OWEN AND EVA PRATT	10
THE FORMATIVE YEARS	13
THE FIRST BUILDING	17
THE QUADRANGLE	19
THE FINANCING THROUGH FRIENDS OF THE SCHOOL	23
A SELECTION OF TRIBUTES	27
THE YEARS AFTERWARD	31
Colophon	33

## FOREWORD

Soon after the central tower building of the Oak Grove Quadrangle was completed in 1941, the Board of Trustees appropriately decided to name it Owen Hall in honor of Eva and Robert Owen, whose vision it had been and whose hard efforts as Principals had enabled its realization. However at that time, although the Owens were greatly pleased by the tribute, they requested that the decision not be made public as long as they were associated with the School.

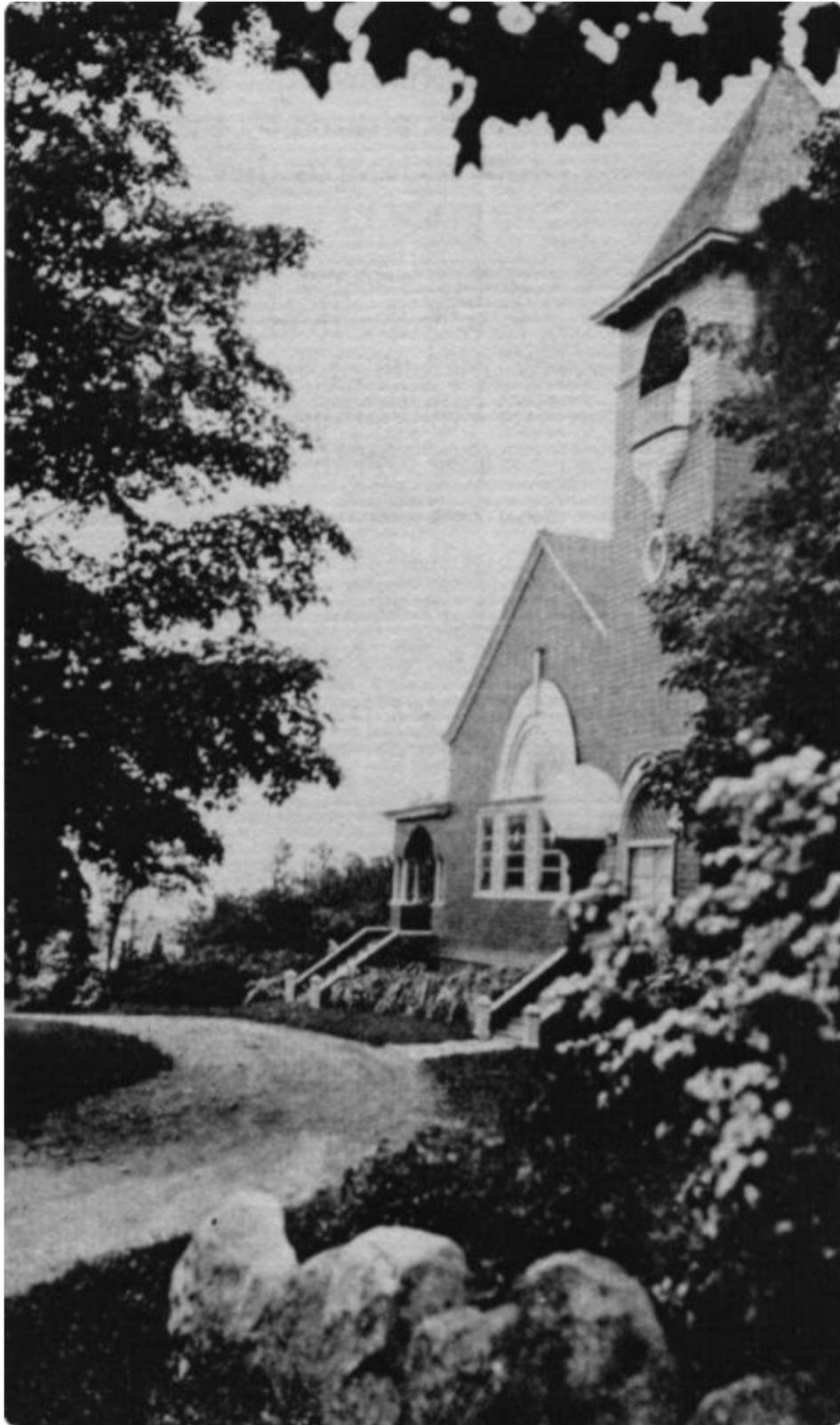
With their recent deaths, the present Board appreciates that the time has come for this decision, merited now more than ever in light of their subsequent years of devoted service to the School, to be enacted and for what has been known all these years simply as the Administration Building to be known from now on as Owen Hall. The name will be inscribed in the stone over the archway of the Tower, and a bronze plaque hung beneath it on the wall by the front door.

For the occasion of the formal Dedication of Owen Hall, which will take place in Bailey Chapel on June 7, 1975, this booklet, an historical and biographical sketch of the Owens and Oak Grove under their direction, has been prepared by Betsy Palmer Eldridge, O.G. '55.

Both the naming of the Hall and this booklet, however, can serve only as tokens of the tremendous admiration and respect that we, the Trustees, feel for the Owens. Their contribution to the School was immeasurable, as is our indebtedness and gratitude.

Charles R. Cushing, D.M.D.  
President, Board of Trustees  
Oak Grove - Coburn

Vassalboro  
June 1975



## THE OWENS' FIFTY YEARS

For most of us who know the School today, it is hardly possible to erase the image of the present Tudor campus and imagine Oak Grove as the Owens saw it when they first arrived as Principals in 1918. There were only three buildings: the Chapel, the Gymnasium, and Bailey Hall, and the School stood on a scant twenty-eight acres. Similarly, it is difficult for us

to realize that the School already had accumulated nearly seventy years of history.<sup>1</sup> No fewer than twenty-six principals had preceded them. The School had had two disastrous fires and on several occasions, had been on the verge of closing for a variety of reasons. Each time however, it rallied with men who saw its possibilities and had the determination and dedication to bring them into being. Traces of this varied history in the buildings and grounds of the school were still in evidence in 1918, as indeed they are today.

The Chapel, the first of the three buildings the Owens found, was basically the same building we know today in its symbolic position at the entrance to the school grounds. It was certainly the oldest of the buildings, having been built as a Friends Meeting House in 1785, when Maine was still a part of the state of Massachusetts. In fact as well as spirit, it was the genesis of the School. Five men from this "River Meeting" assembled at a home nearby in 1849 and founded Oak Grove School as a school to educate their children in the Quaker tradition. The five Friends contributed a thousand dollars each, purchased an acre of land above the Friend's burial ground on the North Vassalboro road, and built the original school building. Predictably, the meeting house at this time was a very plain building of white clapboard with few and simple windows. Inside, it had the traditional rows of facing benches. In 1895, the building was given by the Friends to the School, and extensively remodeled to serve as the Sophia Bailey Memorial Chapel. The original roof lines were kept but the square tower on the southeast corner, and the porch on the southwest corner were added. Inside, the speaker's platform was built and the present windows installed. Later, in honor of the School's Centennial in 1949, the Chapel was remodeled further by changing the entrance and eliminating the driveway. It was also redecorated inside to its present blue and white color scheme. But in 1918, it would have appeared much as it does in this early photograph.

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<sup>1</sup> This early period is fascinatingly depicted in the pamphlet *First Seventy Years of Oak Grove Seminary* written by Raymond R. Manson and Elsie Holway Burleigh and published by the Vassalboro Historical Society in 1965.

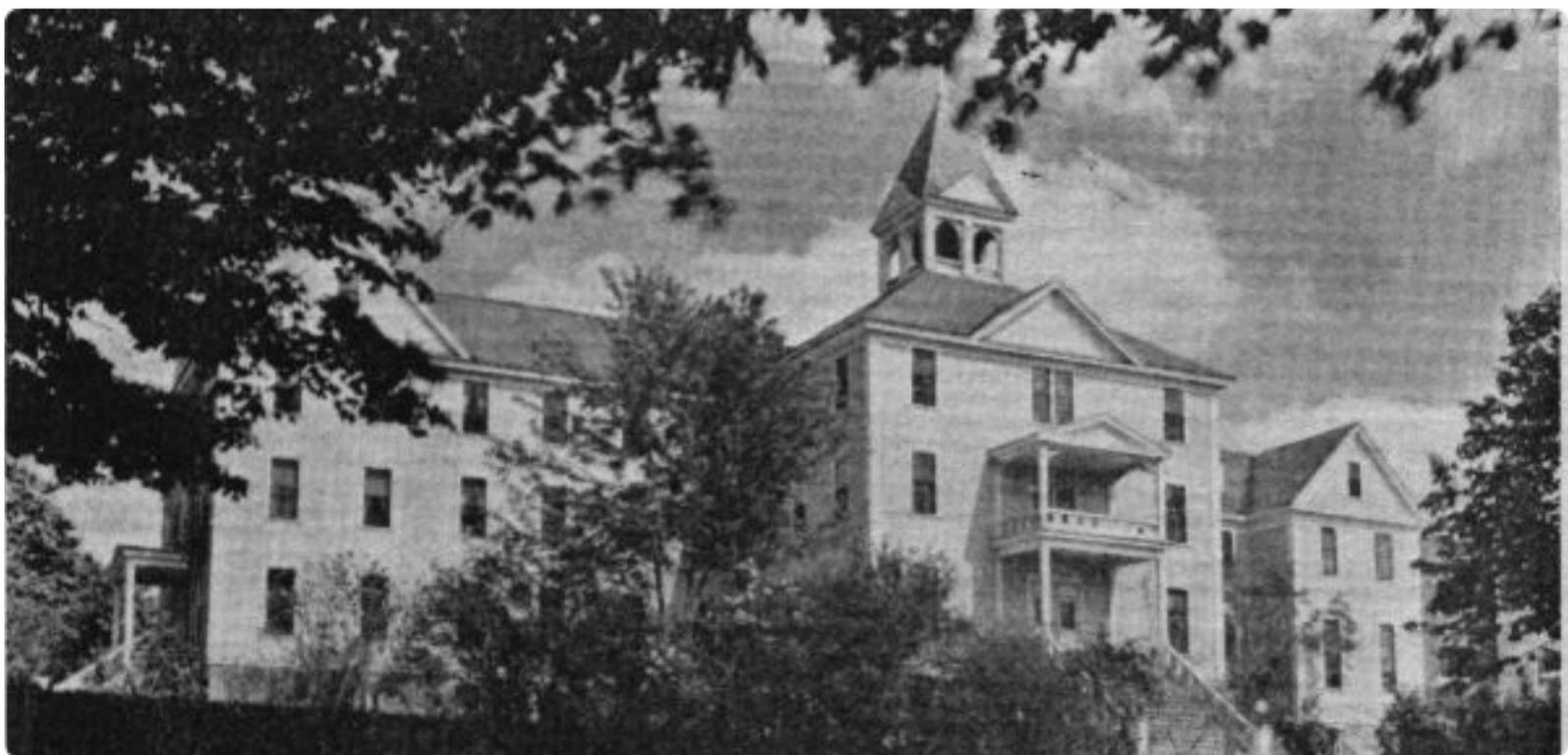


The Gymnasium they found as shown above was the familiar brown shingled structure that we can see still on the campus. It stood further up the hill, however, and faced north. In 1929 to make room for the new Quadrangle, it was moved down the hill on rollers by teams of horses, turned to face Gannett Field, and placed on a new foundation. At the time that it was built in 1908, it was considered the most modern of its kind in the state. Considering that the School's first gymnasium burned in the fire of 1887, and the second collapsed in a snow storm in 1907, the longevity of this building, although seldom used now, is quite remarkable.

The third building, Bailey Hall, no longer exists. As the main building of the School, it held both classroom and dormitory facilities. It was a large, three-story clapboard building that stood directly at the end of the School road with its entrance looking back down the rows of young maples to the Chapel. It was by no means the first school building. The original 1849 school building stood on the north side of the North Vassalboro road, where in recent years there has been an ice skating rink. This building had only classrooms, however, and when not enough housing for students could be found in the village, the need for a "boarding house" became critical. As a result, land was purchased on the south side of the road and a dormitory built there, just north of the present Briggs Hall. In 1883, fire destroyed that original school building across the road and closed the School for almost a year. Then a new school building was built conveniently next to the dormitory by Charles M. Bailey, a Quaker from Winslow who loyally supported the School. Scarcely two years later in the Fall of 1887, this first Bailey Hall, the dormitory, and the gymnasium behind it were burned to the ground in a series of fires. This was a period of great trial for the School, but Charles Bailey again rose to the occasion and built the second Bailey Hall pictured below. This was the building the Owens came to know so well. It stood until 1942

when with the completion of the major part of the Quadrangle, it could be taken down. With fire having played such a role in the history of the School, the Owens seldom passed up an opportunity in later years to mention the "Class A, fire-proof construction" of their new buildings.

After thirty years of active use, however, Bailey Hall was not in very good condition when the Owens arrived at the School in June of 1918. For that matter, neither was the School. As a result of World War I and competition from the public high schools established after the High School Act of 1874, the enrollment had dropped drastically. This and other factors led the Board of Managers to consider the "laying down" of the School in 1916-17. Fortunately they decided against it, but a number of local skeptics still predicted that neither the School nor the Owens, in their mid-twenties and the youngest principals it had ever had, would survive the year. Clearly, they underestimated the enthusiasm, ability and determination of the Owens. As is now obvious in retrospect, the School had been placed in the hands of a most unusual and gifted pair.



*The original Oak Grove Seminary building circa 1920*

## ROBERT OWEN AND EVA PRATT



*Robert Owen and Eva Pratt shown in their Coburn Classical Institute yearbook photographs of 1910.*

Robert Owen was born on April 18, 1892 in Gardiner, Maine, the son of a Baptist minister, Charles Everett Owen. When the family moved to Water-ville, his father gave up preaching and became the head of the Civic League. His mother, Nellie Nason Owen, was very active socially and in the church. She was also very musical, a talent inherited by Robert who studied voice and sang in quartets. He had one sister, Edna, who was considerably older. With his family in town, he was able to live at home while attending Coburn Classical Institute, one of four Baptist preparatory schools in the area sending students to Colby College, also a Baptist school. He was always known as a shy, rather quiet boy.

Eva Pratt was born on November 17, 1889, in Clinton, Maine, on the lovely New England farm known later to many as "Rosemere". The farm was kept in the family until 1969, and although not actually a part of Oak Grove, served students over the years as weekend headquarters for school outings and class rides. Eva's father was Leonidas Hamilyn Pratt, known as one of the best farmers in Kennebec County. Her mother, Della Dewey, was an enthusiastic painter, both of pictures and china. Eva had two brothers, Arthur and Leon, and a younger sister, Edith, who later joined her at Oak Grove to teach Latin. Eva's health

was not good during those early years and a recurrent case of rheumatic fever caused her to stay out of school for extended periods.

Eva and Robert met at Coburn. Reportedly he was among the boys that went down to the train to see "the new girl" coming down from Clinton. Eva boarded at Coburn Cottage, but went home for the weekends. They were close friends from the start, and evidently the subject of much teasing. The school literary magazine, the Coburn Clarion, was said to have quipped about Eva Pratt, "If she pays her bills 'til doomsday, she will still be owen'."

Both of them were active and popular; she always receiving prizes and on the Honor Roll, he studying voice and playing football. In those days, the Coburn boys were sent down to play football at the then co-educational Oak Grove in a horse-drawn buckboard. The Coburn Clarion of April, 1909, says, "Our team was somewhat crippled by the absence of Collins, but Owen, who took his place, played a good game."

They both worked on the editorial staff of the Coburn Clarion; she as Alumni Editor, and he as Business Editor. The Spring 1910 issue had a piece in the Literary Section written by Eva

Pratt that delightfully foreshadowed her later style: "It was late afternoon on the last day of an old year. The leaden sky hung low and close, damp mist shrouded the little valley and rested wearily on the hilltops..."

They graduated in 1910 and went on to Colby College together where Robert became a Zeta Psi, and Eva joined Chi Omega. Unfortunately Eva was having trouble with her eyes and was told she must stop studying or lose her eyesight entirely. Very disappointed, she dropped out of college and the next year started teaching at South Thomaston High School, on the Coast. Later in 1947, she would be awarded an honorary degree from both Colby College and the University of Maine.

The Coburn Clarion of March, 1913, listed Eva Pratt as having "completed a most successful term of school as principal of the South Thomaston High School. She expects to establish a dormitory for girls next term." But the following Fall in the October 1913 issue, she was reported instead to be the principal of Erskine Academy, South China, Maine.

Robert graduated from Colby in 1914 and they were married that summer by his father in the Baptist Church in Clinton. By Fall, they were both back at Erskine where they spent the next four years with Robert serving as Principal and Eva as Dean of Girls. Then in 1918,

turning down two other offers, they came to Oak Grove. Already there was a special quality about the School that appealed to them.

## THE FORMATIVE YEARS



Almost immediately the School showed an Owen flavor. The 1918-1919 Catalogue for the School started out:

"Situated among the oaks and pines on a lofty hilltop overlooking the beautiful valley of the Kennebec, Oak Grove enjoys a pure atmosphere and a grand view, which are a benefaction to the physical life and an inspiration to the spiritual. In character. Oak Grove is an ideal boarding school for boys and girls. It combines home, school, and religious influence in a way designed to develop the well bred and carefully trained citizen of strong Christian character. During that critical period when both mind and body are adjusting themselves to a new world of experience, the greatest care should be used to keep the moral and spiritual atmosphere strong and clean. This is Oak Grove's set policy. It is a clean, Christian boarding school, that maintains a real home atmosphere."

They worked hard that summer, cleaning, painting and papering Bailey Hall, and recruiting students. Mr. Owen's letter to the students started:

"My dear young friend:...Mrs. Owen and I will have the great pleasure of welcoming you back this fall. We had rather be at Oak Grove than in any other preparatory school in this state, and we imagine that you must feel the same way. We hope you do, and that you are planning to be in our big family when school opens. We hope to have every room in the dormitory taken...For this reason we urge you to engage your room at once, so that you will not be disappointed. It has been customary to make a deposit of \$1.00..."

In that period, the dormitory, tuition and miscellaneous charges totalled \$105.00 per term, or \$315.00 for the year. The School publication Oak Leaves the following January 1919, had this account of the Owen's first months:

"The Fall term at Oak Grove Seminary opened Tuesday, September 10th under the new principal, Robert Everett Owen. Since his election in June, Principal and Mrs. Owen have given their entire time to the work, and the many repairs and extensive remodelling show the effect of personal attention to every detail...We are exceedingly pleased with these many changes made possible thru staunch friends; but we are by no means satisfied yet, for our ambitions for the future are many, and if realized, will mean the complete transformation of Oak Grove."

That first year, as reported in the Daily Kennebec Journal, June 13, 1919, was apparently an unqualified success:

"COMMENCEMENT WEEK OPENS AT OAK GROVE - 1918-1919 A BIG YEAR. Vassalboro, Me. July 12. Commencement week at Oak Grove Seminary began Thursday at 10:30 AM with the meeting of the Board of Managers. There was a large attendance at this last meeting of the school year. The new principal, Robert E. Owen, made his first annual report, and it was the unanimous decision of the Board that this past year has been one of the most successful in the history of the school. The enrollment has been nearly double, the endowment has been increased and generous friends have given so freely that the present financial standing is most gratifying. Principal Owen was unanimously re-elected for a term of two years. Further steps were taken toward the extensive repairs which will be started the first of July and plans were made for the future growth of Oak Grove..."

The next few years proceeded relatively smoothly. The School grew and with it, the vision and dedication of the Owens. The year 1924 marked the 75th Anniversary of the School. The editorial section of Oak Leaves that year had a summary of the School's history that ended:

"Like all institutions. Oak Grove has had her shadows mingled with the sunshine and there have been times of financial disaster. If the school has suffered in her administration, it has been because none of her great principals have made Oak Grove a life work as men have done at Exeter, Andover and Penn Charter."

A major turning point in the history of the School occurred the following year in 1925, with the decision to drop co-education and become a girls' school. The decision was made following the recommendation of the Special Committee on Education to the Board of the New England Yearly Meeting. The School had been turned over to the aegis of the New England Yearly Meeting forty years before in 1884. Now, in the winter of '24-'25, the Special Committee recommended that the two schools in the New England Yearly Meeting drop their co-educational programs and that Moses Brown become a Boys' School and Oak Grove a Girls' School. The main reason given in the report at the time was:

"The increasing number of public high schools ... now makes secondary education available at public expense in many towns which formerly supplied students to private schools. Gradually, therefore, the clientele of private schools has changed its character until now those who seek the boarding school for their children are ... those who are seeking a different type of education and social life from that obtainable in the public high school."

The Owens were enthusiastically in favor of the decision and felt it important that the School go along with the growing trend among private schools toward specialization. At this time their specific plans for the School were crystallizing as well. The change was heralded in the local newspaper, April 14, 1925, in an article "Oak Grove Becomes School for Girls". The original draft for this read in part as follows:

"Oak Grove Seminary will become a private school for girls, it was announced Sunday. While the announcement will be a surprise to many interested friends, nevertheless the change is not sudden and has been under consideration for nearly a year ... Principal and Mrs. Owen have given extensive study to the problems of secondary education and it is their theory that young people should develop naturally and without constant restrictions and irritating regulations. The complex problems of co-education create a condition in which rules and restrictions must necessarily hold a place of too much importance, and young people are restrained to the detriment of their own individuality and development. The separate private school has none of these disadvantages and its students can safely enjoy greater freedom...The new Oak Grove will in no sense be a "fashionable finishing school" but it will be in large measure an exclusive school. It is the distinct purpose to build up a great school where wholesome and brilliant girls of high ideals may have the finest and broadest preparation for college and for life, and where they may have these advantages in an attractive and pleasant environment....Over seventy-five thousand dollars is already in hand toward a new dormitory.... It will form the first unit of a definite

quadrangle scheme which will eventually completely replace the present dormitory and administration building ..."

The new policy was an immediate success, evidently, as a year later the Owens reported to the Board of Trustees:

"A year ago Oak Grove stepped into unexpected prominence when her Board announced that this would immediately become a school for girls. Some folks condemned the policy and some were skeptical, but many were loud in their approbation of the change. The first year of any new venture is always a trying one and this has been no exception. Managers and executives have had to justify their policy and we believe it has been splendidly done. Today Oak Grove is already established as a school for girls and the future looks most auspicious. Persons in authority said that an enrollment of 25 for the first year (especially since the rates were raised 50%) would be proof of the success of the new school ... The total enrollment for the year is 52, which is approximately the same as when we entered the school in 1918... The girls are high-minded and wholesome, and it has been a joy to work with them. They are more contented and doing finer school work than the girls did during the seven years of co-education..."



## THE FIRST BUILDING



At last, in 1928, as the Owens completed their tenth year at Oak Grove, ground was broken for the first building of the quadrangle they envisioned. It would be a dormitory of "Class A, completely fire-proof construction" and would be called Briggs Hall. The location on the south side of Bailey Hall and at a strange angle, must have been perplexing until the next buildings appeared. But the beginning was enthusiastic and impressively undertaken. The following excerpts are from the 1928 Oak Leaves:

"The opening day of our Spring term began very early, and with exercises which were significant to us, we laid the first brick in the beautiful tower ... 'We lay the first brick in love, we cement it in loyalty, and we consecrate it in prayer.' ... Principal Owen (prayed) for the blessings of the past, for the generosity and loyalty of friends and for the hopes of the future ... Mrs. Owen reminded all that only a few years ago, 'the erection of such a building as is now under construction was considered a dream and an impossibility'."

And then the next year from the Oak Leaves editorial entitled, "Visions Made Visible":

"We shall dedicate our new dormitory this commencement and all who come to our exercises may now see what Mr. and Mrs. Owen have seen for ten years. It is a majestic building in its simplicity, its dignity, its quality and its beauty. Those who admire its stately lines, its harmonious proportions of brick and stone can see but a fraction of the real structure unless they look beyond, to the generous friends who have given the funds for its erection, to the loving thought worked out in every detail, and to the great vision and hope of the future for which it stands as a glorious monument. It is but the beginning of the visible, but the plans have been wisely, devotedly laid, and we know the whole shall be realized."

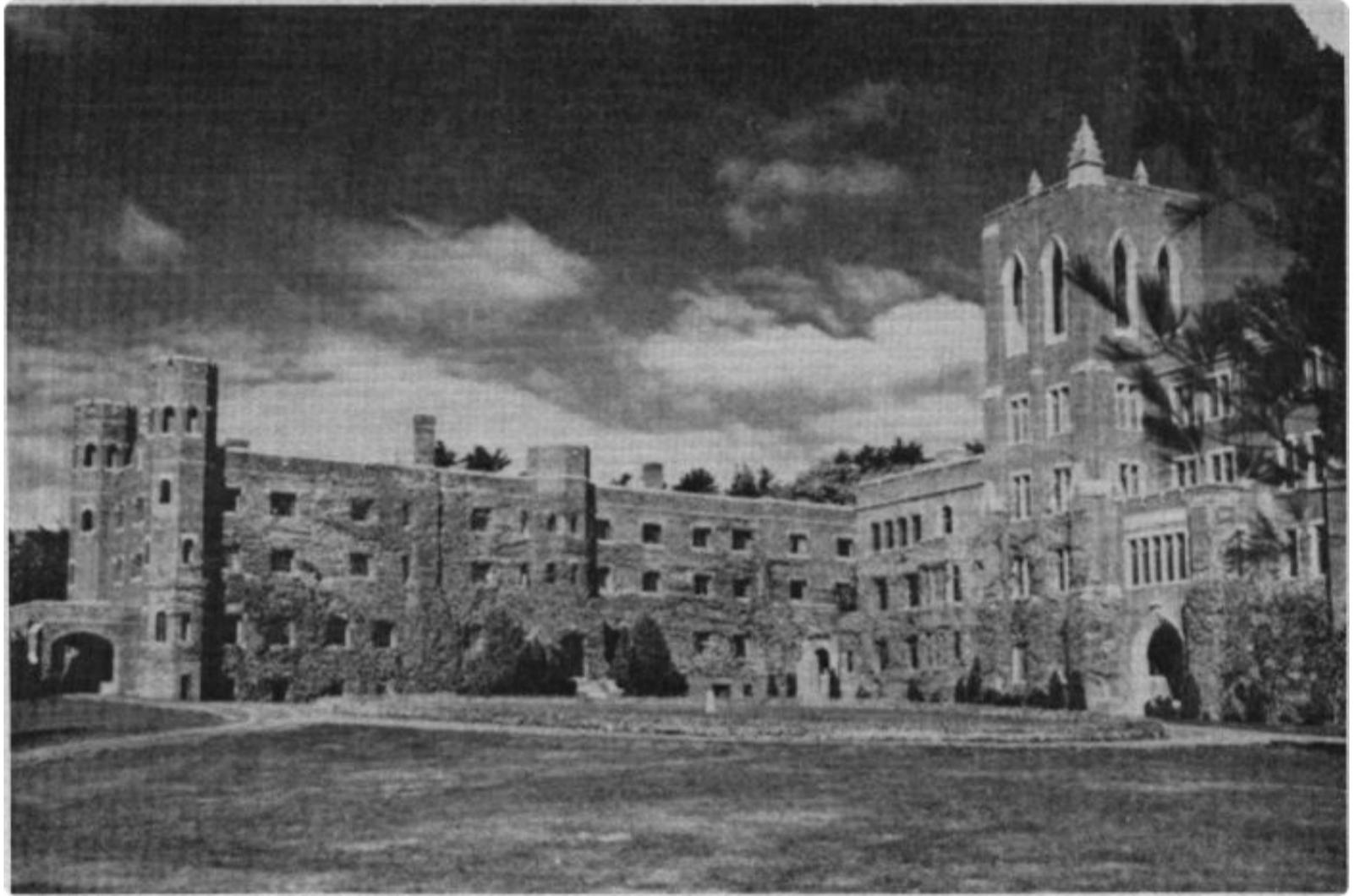
Ten years elapsed before the next building, the Recitation Building, could be added. In the meantime, Briggs was proudly enjoyed and photographs of its arches and doorways filled the yearbooks of that period.

At this point in the Owens' history at the School, Mr. Owen was elected to the State Senate in nearby Augusta, where he served for ten years on the Committees of Education, Appropriation and Health. The article, "Hats Off to Senator Owen" appeared in the 1937 Oak Leaves:

"Besides feeling the honor of having our Principal elected as State Senator, it has been great fun to feel a special interest in Government and politics this Winter. We have been thrilled when we have seen his picture in the papers, when we have read of the measures he was advocating, and when we knew the fine stand he was taking (but we weren't at all surprised) in constructive legislation; and incidently we have enjoyed the distinguished guests who have been entertained at the School as well as the times we've been entertained in Augusta. Any school even in a city can be an isolated community to itself unless it has dynamic outside interest in our own Government as well as the world affairs. The new zest we have felt for current events has been good for all of us. All honor to Senator Owen."

From then on, Mrs. Owen became the more visible of the pair within the School. Even after his return from the Senate, Mr. Owen preferred to stay behind the scenes managing the business and financial aspects of the School. He also maintained his outside interests. Over the years, he was an active Rotarian and member of the local Masonic Lodge as well as serving as a director of the Cancer Society, both locally and nationally. He remained, however, a keen observer of the School, vitally interested, and a strong force in its development.

## THE QUADRANGLE



Starting in 1938, the building program was resumed and within the space of four years, the major part of the Quadrangle was completed. The first addition was the Recitation Building connected to the east end of Briggs Hall by a small arcade. The 1938 Oak Leaves refers to these buildings, completed in 1939:

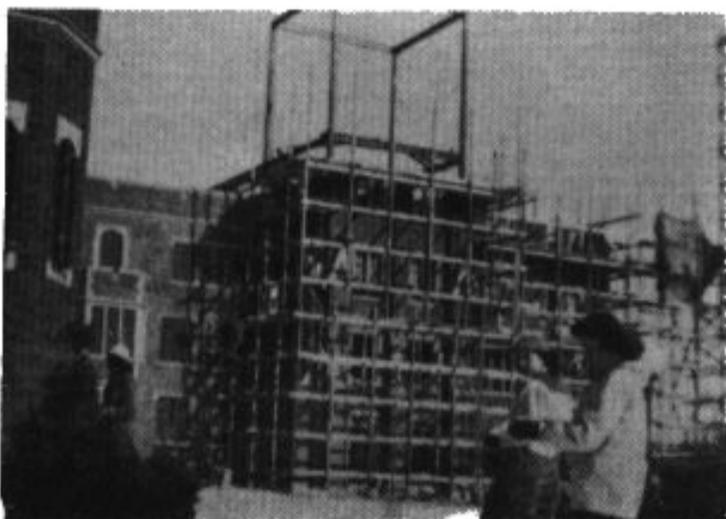
"While we are all in ecstasy as we watch the walls of our beautiful new recitation wing rise almost like magic and we can hardly wait to christen those spacious new recitation rooms, yet our principals modestly and smilingly tell us that the worth of a School is not in the elegance or extent of the buildings but rather in the quality and power of its students not only while they are in school but as long as they shall live ...

"...the arcade which brings us to the New Wing ... has been so arranged that through its arched windows we not only see the East Gardens with their flowers and the great pines beyond, but through the west windows we also have the panorama of our own Kennebec Valley ... Every window holds so much beauty of gardens, meadows, groves, winding river, and mountains on the far horizon. We love it, we carry it in our hearts when we graduate from Oak Grove, and yet we can leave it all for those who follow..."

Adjoining the Recitation Building to the south, the Administration Building was added the following year. It formed the central tower of the complex and housed the Library and an apartment for the Principals as well as the administrative offices. As soon as this was completed and occupied in 1941, the gradual dismantling of Bailey began. At the same time, an additional dormitory, later called Senior House, was built to the south, facing Briggs and forming the third side of the Quadrangle. The 1941 Oak Leaves refers to the Administration Building and the New Dormitory:

"At commencement last year our South Campus had many interesting little stakes. The great steam shovel began to excavate soon after School closed and when we returned we watched walls rising until that joyous day in Spring when the elevator was still reaching to the clouds and all who wished had the privilege (before it was placed on the corner) of standing on the very top pinnacle of our new Gothic tower that seems to be the center of the world ...

"The newest fireproof dormitory with its rooms to the East to greet the morning sun and the moon as it rises over the tall pines or to the West to overlook the winding Kennebec Valley and the mountains beyond, will have the same completely fireproof construction of Briggs Hall ... Now we have turned the second corner of our quadrangle and have as much as we need for an indefinite period. Although the future plans do call for...another recitation wing just south of the central administration unit, and luxury of all luxuries – an auditorium to be reached through an attractive arcade directly back of the administration unit. Until the recitation building is built we have been promised a temporary arcade from the east corner of the newest dormitory to the south side of the Administration Building so that we may never need to bother with a raincoat in passing back and forth from one end of the quadrangle to the other in any weather..."



*Photographs showing the construction and finished tower.*

The "temporary arcade" lasted for twenty years, and thundering through the cold "tunnel", as it was called, became a familiar part of school life for a whole generation of girls. Although no major construction was undertaken in this period, Mrs. Owen had several smaller building projects.

A new barn was built in 1954 below the Gannett playing fields to eliminate the cold hazardous rides down to the ring from the old wooden barn in back of the School. Riding always had been an important part of the School. Mrs. Owen had liked it herself and had taught it in the early days. The 1925 announcement specifically mentioned: "Additional saddle horses will be secured and riding will form an even more important place in the life of the girls than it does now." The new barn was half-jokingly called "Sheorta", a contraction of "she ought to", as reportedly everyone offered a different opinion on its construction. Built of concrete cinder blocks, it was the one Owen building in which the practical considerations outweighed the aesthetic and it was seldom photographed!

Then in 1956, a west wing with a large living room on the first floor and an infirmary on the second was added to Senior House. Concurrently, the Smiley or Colomy house across the highway came back into the School's hands and was extensively remodelled. Although it has been used primarily as a Headmaster's house, it had several other uses proposed at the time: a home-like dormitory for a middle school, a Seniors' "privilege" house, or a French house. A small brick wing was added on the north end to serve as a guest suite for parents. The house was often called "Little Rosemere" after the family home in Clinton.



*The Smiley or Colomy house.*

Finally in the Summer of 1962, the twenty years hiatus in construction ended. Before their retirement, the Owens added in quick succession three more major new buildings, two of which had been prophesied in the 1941 Oak Leaves cited. First, the Science Building, the new recitation building mentioned earlier, completed the Quadrangle by filling in the gap between the Administration Building and Senior House. Then, although not originally planned, the new Gymnasium with its large glass brick windows and ample locker rooms came directly behind that. Finally, "luxury of all luxuries", the Auditorium and the Arcade extended into the East Gardens behind the Administration Building. Unfortunately for continuity's sake, no Oak Leaves accounts are available for these buildings. The 1963 Oak Leaves made but brief mention of these buildings still in progress and the 1964 Oak Leaves, the last issue prepared by the Owens, tragically burned in the fire that year that destroyed the Galahad Press in Fairfield.

The Auditorium was the last building that the Owens added to complete the present campus. Into its north wall, they hung the old bell that had been in the tower of Bailey Hall and had watched students come and go for so many years. Impressively enough, the Owens had seen their dreams for the School come true. In the fifty years since their arrival, they had seen it grow from three buildings on twenty-eight acres to eleven buildings on more than five hundred acres of woods, ponds, lawns and gardens. A favorite quote of Mrs.

Owen's was from Lewis Carroll's *Through The Looking Glass*:

"Alice laughed, 'There's no use trying,' she said: 'one can't believe impossible things.' 'I daresay you haven't had much practice,' said the Queen. 'When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast...'



## THE FINANCING THROUGH FRIENDS OF THE SCHOOL

How the Owens managed to finance such a handsome complex of buildings remains a mystery. The building program was continued with only minor interruptions for war, depression and recession, and as the many arches and doorways attest, there was no cutting of corners, or skimping on details. Furthermore, during this period, the tuition continued to be one of the lowest in New England, in keeping with the Quaker tradition of the School. In 1910, Richard M. Jones, principal of Oak Grove forty years before, wrote, "To the eternal honor of Oak Grove Seminary be it said that through all its history ... it has held strictly to the purpose of its foundation ... and has offered education at a reasonable figure."

The financing of these buildings is all the more impressive in view of the Owen's attitude toward fund drives. Despite a regular Christmas letter and a few examples of personal letters that appealed for funds in the early years, the Owens found these methods generally distasteful and abandoned them. They often said that they never liked "to beg" for the School. In all their years at the School, there was no Alumnae Association with an annual giving campaign such as many schools already had, and when Mrs. Owen planned on her retirement to become the Alumnae Secretary, she specifically stated that it would not be "to fund drive". This is not to say that the Owens hesitated the least bit to speak up if an occasion presented itself to mention the needs of the School or their plans and hopes for it. But for them there was a real difference between that and a more direct appeal.

Typical of their approach is this excerpt from a 1965 general letter to parents: "For more than twenty-five years Oak Grove has never solicited a single person for contributions, but that does not mean gifts are not gloriously welcome when they come, or that we are not thrilled with the number of voluntary gifts to Oak Grove..." And a 1925 report to the Trustees, which mentioned the cost of a new well read, "We do not know who will be led to make this a beautiful and lasting gift to the school. Nothing is finer than to be the means of providing living water for generations of students." Later the same report mentioned that several of their more generous donors had died and "we must find new friends."

Clearly the answer to the question of financing the buildings lies primarily with these "new friends", on whom the Owens came to rely. Over the years, there were many loyal supporters; people, many of whom had had daughters at the School, who had come to respect the Owens and to admire their endeavors.

Mrs. Owen especially had an extraordinary ability to establish a rapport with people. It has been pointed out that she always preferred to speak with only one or two persons at a time. She liked to concentrate, to focus her attention on the person or situation at hand so that she could listen and understand and relate directly. She once wrote to a mother, "...we shall be delighted if you come for Winter Carnival, but personally I would be even more pleased if you came on a week when you were the only mother here. To me it is devastating to have hordes of parents in, see them briefly, and then out without one satisfying conference..."

These friendships were fostered to a great extent through her letters. She was a copious writer. Hardly a night went by but what she spent several hours dictating in their apartment in the Tower. These were the famous, single-spaced letters that often ran into three and four pages. Files of correspondence for students who were at the School for two or three years were often inches thick. She herself readily acknowledged the habit of "ediphone visits" and once wrote, "Robert says I would never be so hopelessly behind on my letters if I could write anything less than a book! When I write about a girl, however, I like to cover the ground rather thoroughly. I would rather write one real report each semester than dash off little notes that said nothing." Indeed, to all who came in contact with her, that inimitable prose was familiar. A typical general letter would start, "Greetings of a lovely dawn from our Oak Grove hilltop..." or "From the last of May until August we have enjoyed the fragrance and color of roses in our garden and even last week we had a great copper bowl in the hall with more than a hundred blossoms..." The examples are endless. Not surprisingly, this poem by Nancy Lynch appeared among the many poems and quotations Mrs. Owen had saved:

A word is such a lovely thing,  
It builds a song, for words can sing,  
And words go swiftly through the sky  
On shining wings, for words can fly...

Oh words can talk across the years,  
Beyond the miles, above the fears,  
Down countless ages march and sing,  
A word is such a lovely thing.

Parents particularly appreciated these warm, breezy letters that often rambled on at length and in depth about every aspect of the School, or a girl's character. In addition to the

wisdom of years of experience, Mrs. Owen had phenomenal insight into the girls. Her comments and appraisals could be recognized even years later as being extremely accurate. She could see and believe in their potential, and yet, tactfully, be completely frank about their shortcomings. The need occasionally to admonish, she found most distressing:

"As everyone else, you have a few little habits to correct, but I am not going to mention them because I think that anything a girl of your intelligence ought not to be told is something she herself already knows anyway and something she is going to attend to when she gets ready. When all is said and done, the most of our problems are those that only we can solve when we have faced the facts around us, faced our own good and poor qualities, and decided we will be the happiest and most useful when we have made a few corrections in ourselves."

This was a positive, constructive approach that parents could appreciate. Basically, she believed in these girls. Only with the greatest reluctance would she ever accept word of anything but the best from them. True to her adopted Quaker faith, she saw "a speck of God" in each of them. In large measure, they responded. As she wrote, "It is the ardent hope of Robert and me that when we place the diploma of Oak Grove in the hand of a girl, it is a visible symbol of the growth and flowering that is the best within her nature and that she goes forth with a clearly defined philosophy of life and way of life as well as the power of knowing that, up to the present, she has discovered and developed her best."

Mrs. Owen, empathizing with the parents, went to great lengths to share the School life with them, and at the same time, to reassure them that they could "sleep peacefully while their daughters were at Oak Grove." As she once wrote, "It is fortunate for us that the Creator had more respect for order and minute detail when he created the Universe than some have had in the infinitely delicate task of providing a stimulating but orderly program for the development of the adolescent. If I had seen a single radiant and zestful student in the midst of the confusion, my reaction would be different, but they seemed to me too much like "bees in a bottle" buzzing around frantically, bumping their heads, exhausting their energy, and getting nowhere."

In many ways, she elicited their cooperation as well as their trust and confidence: "Please, when you or your husband feel there is something we ought to know in order to be more helpful to your daughter or something you would like to have us subtract from or add to her program, write us promptly and frankly. Her interest is our interest and we are hopeful

to fill in each day with meaningful and glad progress...Thank you for sharing her with us." In later years, Mrs. Owen often resorted to the telephone, sometimes past midnight, for these lengthy conversations.

Frequently, these letters to the parents were accompanied by a picture or two of their daughter, taken by the ever patient Robert. For many girls, their clearest memory of Mr. Owen is with camera in hand, waiting for the right moment. As tiresome as posing for these picture-taking sessions was for them, the result was most gratefully received by their parents. Mrs. Owen conscientiously tried to send home at least one picture of each girl every term.

These letters throughout were infused with the Owens' philosophy of Oak Grove. In general tenor, this did not differ markedly from that of other fine schools, but the colorings were certainly distinctive. The given examples came from letters to parents, but similar pieces appeared again and again in her extensive correspondence with anyone connected with the School; faculty, 'staff, prospective students or their parents. She spoke from an apparently inexhaustible well of inspiration.

There was something unquestionably unique about the Owens. While perhaps some considered them eccentric, no one could doubt their sincerity or the depth of their convictions. Furthermore, they thoroughly enjoyed their endeavors, and such genuine enthusiasm was contagious. They were able to inspire others, to persuade them to dream their dreams. These were the friends of the School who through their loyalty and interest as well as their gifts made vital contributions to Oak Grove. As is often the case with dedicated people like the Owens, their work became their life and the line between the two became hazy and blurred. The people who became friends of Oak Grove and enthusiastically supported it became friends of the Owens as well. Some showed this simply in the warm personal interest they took in the Owens, with frequent cards and flowers, until the end; others wrote letters over the years that spoke of it eloquently. Tributes to the Owens and the School of that time are inextricably mixed, and they are as varied as the friendships that prompted them.

## A SELECTION OF TRIBUTES



Many of the letters are from parents who expressed their affection for the Owens, and their deep appreciation for all that the School had done for their daughters. This is shown in four quotes from mothers writing to Mrs. Owen.

"I could not even begin to think how to say thank you for the part you have had in the pride we feel in all four of our girls. We have always felt that the years at Oak Grove were the wisest investment we ever made and it is so gratifying to have each one, as they go on in school and life, say that very same thing to us. There seem to be so few places now where the verities of life are held in high esteem and where loveliness is a constant goal. We shall always remember with grateful hearts that our daughters' lives will be enriched forever because they found these qualities at Oak Grove."

"How are there words to tell you how often, with deepest gratitude, I've remembered all you have meant in (our) lives. To no one but Mother, who died nearly ten years ago, do I owe such a debt for wise and loving help with my daughters. We speak of you often and rejoice that we have known you ... Both daughters are infinitely better women for what you did for them ..."

"I feel that we are indeed co-parents, because you have been able to help (her) appreciate and adopt some of the ideals and attitudes that I have wanted for her, but of which I did not seem to be able to convince her. You have been a wonderful influence in her life, and she is deeply attached to you..."

"You have certainly gained a true understanding of her personality and character. I am especially grateful for the personal interest you have taken in her, and I am touched by your affection for her. I marvel at your ability to give so much of yourself to your girls." Among this group of appreciative parents were a number of fathers who became interested in the School and served long and faithful terms on the Board of Trustees. Two such fathers recently wrote particularly fine tributes to the Owens:

"One of the very special heartwarming, inspiring and real satisfactions of my life was the privilege of knowing, working with and enjoying the friendship of Eva and Robert. They were two most able, devoted people, – so different in many ways. Eva vibrant, dynamic, courageous and positive, Robert reserved, quiet almost self-effacing, but I think equally courageous and determined...Their achievements were tremendous. They have been missed, but they will continue to be missed."

"Mrs. Owen was one of the finest individuals I have ever met, and I know she will be greatly missed by her countless friends and associates. The record that she and Robert achieved at Oak Grove School is indeed a monument to their extraordinary talent. Thousands of young women have benefited immeasurably as a result of her dedication to their interests. The thoughtful and meticulous manner in which she shaped and refined those who were fortunate enough to be under her tutelage was truly unique. Her reputation as an Educator was unsurpassed and no one will ever forget the major contribution she made in the academic field. In addition to her vast intellectual capacity, she was always a perfect lady. The quality of her life has helped all of us who were privileged to know her..."





Understandably, some of Mrs. Owen's closest relationships were with the students themselves, who numbered well over a thousand in the course of the fifty years. Students are not always left with the fondest memories of their mentors, but most Oak Grovians subsequently, if not at the time, appreciated the Owens' efforts on their behalf. In retrospect, their thanks were profuse and gratifying. In honor of the Owens' Fortieth Anniversary, several dozen letters from "their devoted graduates" were collected and presented at Commencement 1958. Among the many letters that came after Mrs. Owen's death was the following:

"I always thought Mrs. Owen to be a "one of a kind" person...In all the time that I knew her, the great dignity that she has was the greatest thing I ever saw. In the most trying situations (and I was one of her frequent problems) she never lost control and was always fair and kind. She tried very hard to look severe, but the core of her make up was loving, and she earned our total respect...I never forgot her fairness, it was unique...I was a tomboy and she managed to bring me graciously into the pattern of Oak Grove without much strain. I have carried memories over the years that I consider priceless, because she, in her own fashion made the graces seem very desirable. At any rate, what she taught remained "forever gentle on my mind" so to speak..."

Another tribute was written by a graduate of the early co-educational days:

"A life more dedicated to the welfare of Oak Grove as an institution, and to the students who passed through its portals during the years Eva Pratt Owen served it, there could not have been. The influence of her example lives on in my heart as it must in countless others.

Mentor, counsellor and friend, while having no children of her own, Mrs. Owen had as her family forever all those who were privileged to be students during her tenure. As her life blessed and was blessed, equally so is her memory honored..."

To fail to mention the faculty and staff would be to leave the picture incomplete. No other group was more responsible down through the years for the continued success of the School. The Owens depended upon them to provide a constructive and harmonious atmosphere as well as to maintain the high academic level of which they were justifiably proud. Fortunately, the Owens attracted exemplary teachers who understood their idealism, matched their dedication and with great patience, incorporated their spirit into the countless aspects of every day school life. Without the co-operation and unstinting efforts of these kind and talented people, the School never could have prospered as it did.

Many of them, being of the Owen's vintage, are gone now, but as one once wrote:

"This is my twentieth year at Oak Grove School and I have had ample opportunity to appreciate the kindness and dedication of our beloved Principals, Mr. and Mrs. Owen...Their endeavors have always been toward the happiness and welfare of the Oak Grove family...I cannot find words to thank Mrs. Owen for all the encouragement that I have always received in relation to my work. She has always had the quick and right answer about programs, text books, orientations of any kind needed in the course of our work...Few persons have such a persuasive way to inspire others to co-operate with her in bringing dreams to reality...Mr. Owen is a quiet but brilliant man who says a great deal in a few words, and is always kind to everyone...This school has been like a home and I am deeply thankful..."



## THE YEARS AFTERWARD

In 1968, the Owens completed their fifteenth year with Oak Grove and retired. At that time, a tribute was written by the Trustees and hung in Mrs. Owen's office which has been maintained as a permanent memorial room to them. It read in part as follows:

"Here the careers of Eva Pratt Owen and Robert Everett Owen demonstrated the accomplishments of faith as devout quakers, with the quiet manner, the constant kindness, the ever-seeking of guidance through prayer, and the inspiration of love, by which they led Oak Grove through the educational, social and religious phases of a half-century of notable growth and development...

"Rare it has been in the history of Education for two leaders to so share in a combined record of a hundred years of service to one educational enterprise. Rare, indeed, has been the privilege and opportunity to record for those who come after them the admiration, high regard, and respect in which these two moving spirits were held by their students, their alumnae and their associates..."

In the years that followed their retirement to their apartment on the third floor of the Administration Building, they watched with interest the activities of the School below. Surely many times, had they been able, would they have loved to come down to advise, encourage, console, for every aspect of the School's life was known to them, – and dear to them. But it was not to be. It was time for the School to move on and to find its place in the future.

During those final years, Mrs. Owen, for whom poetry had always been an important inspiration, often referred to one of her favorite poems:

The road winds up the hill to meet the heights  
Beyond the locust hedge it curves from sight.  
And yet no man would foolishly contend  
That where he sees it not it makes an end.

Anonymous

This seems to speak to us today as an expression not only of personal faith but of faith in future generations to guide the School firmly and safely on the road. In this sincere belief, we formally dedicate the Administration Building as Owen Hall in honor of Eva and Robert Owen that the memory of their example may serve to inspire those who follow.

O World, thou choolest not the better part!  
It is not wisdom to be only wise  
And on the inward vision close the eyes,  
But it is wisdom to believe the heart.  
Columbus found a world and had no chart  
Save one that faith deciphered in the skies;  
To trust the soul's invincible surmise  
Was all his science, and his only art.  
Our knowledge is a torch of smoky pine  
That lights the pathway but one step ahead  
Across a void of mystery and dread.  
Bid then the tender light of faith to shine  
By which alone the mortal heart is led  
Unto the thinking of thought divine.

Anonymous

## Colophon

The resetting of this book was taken from the original typeset copy produced for the dedication of Owen Hall in 1975. Special thanks should go to Dr. Charles R. and Mrs. Alice Cushing of Fairfield, Maine for loaning me the original copy to scan.

I have modernized typographic usage for publication names. This title was typeset in Avenir Next font. The images were taken from the half tone images in the book, some of these have been slightly edited to improve reproduction.

It is my hope that by reproducing this work the alumni of Oak Grove School and Oak Grove-Coburn School will come to better understand the history of the school that educated them.

Greg Kearney OGC 1976