



Administration building at Gem State Adventist Academy.

From Facebook, Gem State Adventist Academy.

# Gem State Adventist Academy

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Gem State Adventist Academy is a coeducational boarding high school operated by the Idaho Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

## Developments that Led to Establishment of the School

Like other years in the decade both before and after, 1907 was one of many in a sea-change in American culture. Theodore Roosevelt was president, large corporations continued to fight organized labor, the stock market crashed, and the electric New Year's Eve ball dropped in New York City for the first time. At the same time, the membership of the Seventh-day Adventist church continued to climb, creating an immediate need for schools to support the Adventist mission. Churches, schools, and new conferences burst into existence all across North America. Such was the context when, in July of 1907, Idaho Adventists organized themselves into the Southern Idaho Conference and immediately began to lay plans for an academy.<sup>1</sup>

By 1908 the Southern Idaho Industrial Academy was "under organization."<sup>2</sup> It opened in Eagle, Idaho, during the fall of 1909 under the name Ames Industrial Academy. New students interested in attending it could turn to the *North Pacific Union Gleaner* (NPUG) for railroad schedules and instructions on how to handle their baggage.<sup>3</sup> The next year it had five teachers and 41 students on 20 acres.<sup>4</sup> But on November 14, 1911, only a semester into its third school year, the school burned to the ground.<sup>5</sup> The still-new Southern Idaho Conference (SoIC) now lacked a 12-grade school, whether boarding or day.

Although local Adventists created a school in Caldwell for their immediate needs, Mountain View Academy was neither a senior academy or a boarding school, and for the next seven years Adventists in Idaho and eastern Oregon were without a replacement for Ames Academy.

While the doughboys slogged through mud and bomb craters and slept in the trenches in France, plans began in Idaho to replace Ames Academy with a new boarding school. In March 1918 a conference committee scouted possible school locations, including Caldwell and an additional site in Boise. Representatives and business committees from both Boise and Caldwell offered incentives to the SoIC in hopes of attracting the academy to their respective towns, but ultimately the committee chose Caldwell. Since the town was just a little more than 20 miles west of Eagle, no one knows why the conference did not just rebuild the original Ames Academy. Church publications give no indication that anyone ever seriously considered it.<sup>6</sup> Ames' enrollment during its first three years had been low, and Caldwell's population just prior to 1920, at around 5,000, was significantly larger than that of Eagle, which did not register enough residents to appear in the 1920 census.<sup>7</sup> With only 1,100 Seventh-day Adventists in the Southern Iowa Conference in 1918, conference officials may have reasoned that with so few constituents a larger population center, which was easier to reach by train, was a more logical choice.<sup>8</sup> Gem State Academy's website reports that the conference purchased a 17-acre site at the intersection of Linden Street and Indiana Avenue in Caldwell. It was close to the railroad and easily irrigated, which would make possible the planned farm. The farm and the work it would provide students was then an integral part of the Adventist educational philosophy and would also help pay their tuition.<sup>9</sup>

## Choosing the Name

By July of 1918, when it had officially chosen Caldwell as the site for the new academy, the SoIC leadership had contacted each of the 24 churches for suggestions regarding a name for the new school. Any name with the word Idaho was ruled out due to concern from Idaho State College. State officials believed that too many schools bearing the state name could be confusing.<sup>10</sup> Although no evidence exists to support such an assertion, this concern may have also been a factor regarding the switch in 1909 from Southern Idaho Industrial Academy to Ames Academy. But if not the state name itself, then why not the official state nickname of Gem State, SoIC officials may have reasoned. Conference leadership suggested calling the new school Gem State Academy and, although three churches responded with suggestions for alternate names, the conference adopted the name of Gem State Academy.<sup>11</sup>

It is clear from early church sources that constituents focused on training “workers” for the mission field. Adventists were in line with other mission movements throughout the United States during this period—the YMCA and the Student Volunteer Movement perhaps the groups best known for sending missionaries. And although Adventists were intent on dispatching overseas missionaries, they were equally focused on training workers for the local mission field as well. In one probably fictional conversation on the front page of a 1918 issue of a church publication, the *Gleaner*, a church member sadly spoke to a young male student whose sibling had not attended an Adventist school, had married a non-Adventist, then had left the church.<sup>12</sup> Such were the dangers of not having an Adventist academy. Southern Idaho Conference members were committed to providing an Adventist education for their young people. In September they laid the cornerstone for the new academy.<sup>13</sup> Heeding Ellen White’s admonition that “the Lord would have the children gathered out from those schools where worldly influences prevail, and placed in our own schools, where the word of God is made the foundation of education,” church officials placed a Bible was placed in the left pillar of the chapel steps and cemented it in place.<sup>14</sup>

## Choosing the Leadership

A site had been chosen, a name had been assigned, and the cornerstone laid. What Gem State Academy (GSA) did not yet have was a faculty or even a single administrator. In May 1918 John E. Weaver graduated from Walla Walla College with a Bachelor of Arts degree and was almost immediately elected as GSA’s first principal!<sup>15</sup> Although research has not located any announcements of Weaver’s appointment, the weekly union publication list him as the contact person for students interested in receiving more information about GSA as late as September 19, 1918, just three weeks before school was set to start.<sup>16</sup> Then, without a persuasive explanation, on September 29 a conference meeting voted a change in leadership. SoIC said that it needed a man for fieldwork, and it thought Weaver was the right man for that job. According to the *Gleaner*, Weaver would become the contact for Missionary Volunteer work.<sup>17</sup> Another individual, an Elder Airey, was qualified to teach, and the conference asked him to join the GSA faculty. He would teach Bible and history.<sup>18</sup> That left the head of

school position open, and church administration hired Alvin J. Meiklejohn to fill it. All of those changes occurred in less than three weeks. Meiklejohn was principal when GSA opened on October 10, 1918.

## Early Enrollment

During the first fall semester 30 students enrolled in the first eight grades and 25 in the senior academy grades. Seven teachers taught the classes.<sup>19</sup> By the fall of 1919, only the second year of operation, 200 enrolled at GSA-- 90 in the high school and 110 in the elementary grades. Given the total conference population of 1,100, it is an astounding figure and testament to the commitment of Adventist education among adherents in the early 1900s. In the fall of 1919 five more teachers joined the faculty, bringing the total to 12.<sup>20</sup> Enrollment continued to grow in the senior academy during the next two decades, but these years were not without their struggles.

During the early depression period GSA struggled to attract students, registering only 60 in 1932.<sup>21</sup> The administration, led by principal W. S. Boynton, responded by investing in school industries. Students soon found themselves working in a greenhouse, peddling vegetables from door to door, shipping celery and carrots by rail, tending the dairy herd, and working in a fruit and vegetable cannery and a bakery, both of which served the academy and local residents.<sup>22</sup> According to the Gem State website, campus wages during the early part of the depression were just 12 cents an hour for boys and 10 cents an hour for girls.<sup>23</sup> The academy recovered, and for the next two decades the number of students arriving at Gem State each fall at least remained stable. The academy also continued to acquire small pieces of land. By 1959 120 students were attending classes, but the physical plant at GSA was in poor condition.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, the small town of Caldwell had gradually crept around the campus until it was no longer in a rural setting. Thus, on June 25, 1959, conference delegates voted to move the academy at a cost of a half million dollars.<sup>25</sup>

## Moving the Campus

It took almost a year to decide and on May 2, 1960, a special meeting of Idaho Conference delegates voted to establish a new 15-acre campus on a hill overlooking the Boise Valley.<sup>26</sup> Five miles southeast of the Caldwell post office, about one and a half miles from the existing campus, the more than three-hundred-acre property was already in use as the academy farm at Karcher Road and Montana Avenue.<sup>27</sup> Although some discussion occurred of rebuilding on the existing location, leadership concluded that the sale of the present property would significantly offset the cost of building a new campus and at the same would provide the desired rural environment.<sup>28</sup> The conference hired M. E. Smith to oversee the building. He had helped Mount Ellis Academy recover after fire destroyed much of its facilities in the late 1950s. Construction jobs on the campus would provide male students with plenty of year-round work that would help cover the costs of tuition, as well as teach them skills.<sup>29</sup>

As the churches throughout the conference began to pledge funds, the campus began to take shape. By the fall of 1962 the administration building, dormitories, a power plant, and laundry were complete enough for the new school to open its doors to 176 students.<sup>30</sup> The first class on the new campus graduated in the spring of 1963.<sup>31</sup> More good news was soon to come when on December 4, 1964, Gem State received accreditation from the Northwest Association of Secondary and Higher Education Schools.<sup>32</sup> Whether due to the new campus or the recent accreditation, or both, student registration more than doubled in the six years since the conference had voted to relocate the campus. Enrollment in 1965 was 260.<sup>33</sup>

## Enrollment Changes

But the 1960s saw the end of such explosive growth, and although the next two decades proved stable for Gem State—peaking in the 1970s—by 1980 the academy began a slow but steady decline in student numbers. Idaho Adventists were no longer as committed to Adventist education and in no year since 1990 has GSA enrolled more than 200 students. The academy website also suggests that new restrictions on how many hours students were able to be employed each week limited their ability to work off their school bill. By 2000 enrollment was consistently in the mid-100s, and by 2010 barely broke 100. With a shrinking student body, Idaho Adventists who still supported education now find themselves in a similar struggle as Adventist academies across the North American Division. Support is dwindling and budgets are tightening as fewer students arrive each fall semester.

## Gem State's Mission

Throughout its history Gem State Adventist Academy has made it a mission to reach young people and turn them toward Christ. In its earliest days that goal took on a mission-oriented approach as the local conference recruited young people to become church employees. As the decades passed and ease of travel made a range of SDA schools more accessible, Gem State's mission in the church, community, and the world, has shifted from creating church employees in its own conference, to, in the words of its current mission statement, seeing "every student develop a vibrant relationship with Jesus Christ and learn how to put Christianity into action through serving others."<sup>34</sup> This certainly does not exclude producing evangelists and church staff, yet the emphasis has clearly, even if subtly, shifted.

And while expression of that role within the community, nation, and world will continue to evolve, the core of the mission has remained the same: serving a loving Christ. With each new freshman that arrives on campus the role of GSA is renewed. In full, GSA's mission statement reads: "we believe that the ultimate aim of true education is to restore in human beings the image of their Creator. Therefore, we worship daily, have special weeks of prayer, and provide many other opportunities for students to connect with God. Our goal is to see every student develop a vibrant relationship with Jesus Christ and learn how to put Christianity into action through serving others."<sup>35</sup> That mission will not be finished as long as mankind is here on Earth.

## Principals

John E. Weaver, 1918; Alvin J. Meiklejohn, 1918-1919; A. N. Attebury, 1919-1922; W. C. Baldwin, 1922-1923; W. A. Gosmer, 1923-1924; G. E. Johnson, 1924; H. E. Weaver, 1925; J. L. Christian, 1925-1927; R. L. Hubbs, 1927-1929; F. E. Stratton, 1929-1931; W. S. Boynton, 1931-1938; W. G. McCready, 1938-1940; T. W. Walters, 1940-1943; K. E. Groves, 1943-1946; H. D. Schwartz, 1946-1949; G. L. Beane, 1949-1953; B. M. Kurtz, 1953-1959; R. T. Carter, 1959-1964; J. V. Peters, 1964-1965; C. L. Perkins, 1965-1966; W. W. Meske, 1966-1969; Arthur Nelson, 1969-1974; Clayton B. Breakie, 1974-1979; Cyril G. Connelly, 1979-1982; Wayne R. Wentland, Jr., 1982-1985; W. W. Meske, 1985-1986; Kelly B. Bock, 1986-1991; John F. Gatchet, 1991-2001; Mike Schwartz, 2002-2008; Peter McPherson, 2009-2013; Wayne Wentland, 2014-2015; Marvin Thorman 2016-<sup>36</sup>

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