Evidence Cover Sheet

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Brief Description: Included in the November 2006 edition of New Mexico magazine, local resident and businessman David L. Stone’s article provides the political and historical context, and describes the local efforts that resulted in the university’s founding.
FIELDS OF HOPE:
HOW PORTALES WON THE BATTLE
FOR EASTERN NEW MEXICO UNIVERSITY

Essay by David L. Stone
In 1912 the New Mexico Constitution called for “a normal school, which shall be established by the Legislature and located in one of the counties of Union, Quay, Curry, Roosevelt, Chaves or Eddy.” A normal school was a term used for a teachers' training institution.

During the 1927 session, the State Legislature was in the process of deciding where to locate this institution of higher learning. All the towns in eastern New Mexico were maneuvering to have the school in their county. This story shares an insight into the local folklore on how the decision was finally made.

Clovis was the largest town in the area and the odds-on favorite to win. Tucumcari was trying especially hard. Roswell was home to the New Mexico Military Institute, so they made no serious effort, but Carlsbad was also a contender.

The senator from Roosevelt County was Graham Bryant, a tenacious bulldog who would not take no for an answer. State Sen. Bryant, in a compromise, agreed to support Tucumcari's request for road money in exchange for Tucumcari’s support for locating the new school in Portales. This deal was to be good only on the first vote. This was one obstacle down and still a few to go.

Bryant then negotiated with the Clovis city fathers. Clovis leaders Cash Ramey, A.W. Scarita, John Barry and State Sen. Sterling A. Jones agreed to support Portales for the college on the first ballot, but only if Clovis would receive Bryant’s support for a new National Guard Armory. Wrestling was big in those days, and Clovis needed a big facility for wrestling matches. It was good for business in Clovis. State money was already approved for an armory; college money was still questionable. Clovis leaders were certain that Portales could not get the votes to obtain the new normal college on the first ballot. Clovis, they thought, would end up with the armory and the college. Little did they realize that “Bulldog Bryant” was wresting the college away from them.

Bryant, Coe Howard, Sam Seay, Ezra Watts and Earl McCollum drove to Encino, the home of R.C. Dillon, to obtain his support for the location of the college in Portales. Dillon’s support was critical. A big snowstorm impounded Bryant’s car and the Portales crusaders had to make the return trip by train, but their trip was worth all the trouble and inconvenience. The governor supported Portales on the first ballot.

On the day before the big ballot, Bryant lacked the support of only one senator. He was close in his quest to locate the college in Portales on the first vote. It was now or never. All his support would disappear if he lost on the first ballot. He was desperate. He had run all his traps and he was still one vote short. He knew this was Portales’ only chance to get the college.

Louise Coe, the senator from Hondo, was unescorted while in Santa Fe. Her husband, a paraplegic, stayed in Hondo and managed their ranch while she was at the Legislature. She was the only senator undecided on the college location issue.

In 1927, the New Mexico Legislature passed a bill to build a college—then Eastern New Mexico Junior College—in Portales. This building was constructed in 1935 and is shown in this photo from the 1970s. The institution ultimately became Eastern New Mexico University.
Bryant was a gruff, serious-minded lawyer. It was hard to imagine passionate thoughts ever crossing his mind. When the future of Portales was at stake, however, he started having romantic ideas. Who could persuade Coe to vote for Portales? She would be needing an escort to a Santa Fe celebration on the eve of the big vote. Who could escort her and sell Portales in the process? Bryant's prospects for success brightened as he selected the man.

Napoleon Bonaparte Fields, known as "Boney," was a handsome, debonair, smooth-talking men's clothing-store owner in Portales. He was an impeccable dresser and drove a new Buick Roadster convertible. More important, he was the most eligible bachelor in Portales.

Bryant appeared to be a rock of power who never asked for help. On that day, however, he knew he needed help from a man with different talents than he possessed. He needed a lady's man.

Soon after Bryant explained the situation, "Boney" Fields washed his car, packed his best suit and was on his way to Santa Fe. He carried the hopes of Portales with him.

History does not record how "Boney" Fields entreated Coe, or even if he entertained her. It does record that on the first ballot, Coe voted to locate the new Eastern New Mexico Junior College in Portales.

After the college was officially located, the grateful citizens of Portales presented Dillon with a white horse and silver-mounted saddle as a token of their appreciation. Portales saddlemaker, J. Harv Baker, made the trophy saddle.

Graham Bryant was, and still is, recognized as the man who delivered ENMJC to Portales. This institution grew to become Eastern New Mexico University, the third-largest university in New Mexico. He served as chairman of the board of regents and directed its future with wisdom and tenacity. He is rightfully called "the father of ENMU."

Boney Fields remains an unsung hero who worked undercover to deliver the deciding vote on the first ballot. This is dedicated to Napoleon Bonaparte Fields, who was ENMU's Fields of Hope.

David L. Stone, a third-generation New Mexican, is president of Portales National Bank, the state's oldest family-owned bank. He's also rancher, movie actor, poet, songwriter and Civil War reenactor. He wrote this story as part of a collection he hopes to publish as book.