

HAWARDEN....NOT SO LONG AGO

SECO: THE FINAL CHAPTER

CHAPTER 43

BY: Mary Truesdell Johnson

The fall of the 1984-85 school year at Sioux Empire College started with the anticipation of another busy and productive year. As reported in last week's column, the classes were numerous and varied, including nights and weekends. The extra circular activities boasted success from the previous year's competition in sports; and the art department and theatre were looking forward to more productions and exhibits. All signs that things were going well.

B.N. Brown began his second year as President of SECO, after his appointment in 1983 to fill the position vacated by Al Hudek. President Hudek had assumed the President's position in 1969 and resigned in June of 1983. Also resigning at the same time was Dan Hudek, Dean of Students, and Leo Hallman, business manager.

May 15, 1985 was graduation day. The graduates were completely unaware that they would be the final graduating class of Sioux Empire College. After twenty years of planning, eighteen graduating classes, and over 1000 students receiving their Associate of Arts Degree, Sioux Empire College of Hawarden, Iowa entered the pages of history. The day following graduation, May 16, 1985 the Board of Trustees held a meeting and voted to close the college immediately; leaving 41 employees without jobs.

The closing was a shock to the entire community. Sadly, the clouds rolled in faster than anyone could imagine. Rumors of financial problems and mishandling of funds spread like wild fire; the naysayers were quick to say "I told you so!" and the supporters and contributors to SECO were shocked and disappointed.

It was reported in the June 27, 1985 issue of *The Independent* that the college had been subject to a Federal Audit over eighteen months before its closing. Officials and Board members had made several attempts to receive the results of this audit, but as usual, government red tape seemed to block their many efforts. For some unknown reason, the *Des Moines Register* obtained the audit report and published it before anyone in Hawarden had knowledge of its contents.

The officials of Sioux Empire College were stunned with the accusations in the newspaper, but could not affirm or deny any of the charges as they had not seen the report. It soon became apparent that the three men who had resigned in 1983 may be the only ones that could verify or disclaim the audit. The charges included questionable education and recruitment practices. It was immediately apparent that President Brown and the current board members were presented the huge task to struggle to explain the facts of the audit report even though the incidents in question took place from 1978 – 1983; before many of them were even a part of the college staff.

President Brown, in an article in the July 18, 1985 *The Independent* blamed the Department of Education Auditing Branch for delays in preparing their audit as one of the reasons Sioux Empire College was forced to close in May of 1985. During this period Federal Funds for the next school year were delayed which resulted in loss of enrollment. The final blow came when the North Central Association denied further continuation of candidacy status due to the lack of financial backing. At its peak, SECO had 470 full and part time students in one year and its maximum graduation was 120 graduates. As much as 12% of West Sioux Graduating students attended the college yearly and of the 1000 graduates of the school during its existence, around 75% went on to finish their four year degree.

THE INDEPENDENT: July 17, 1986 - COLLEGE OFFICIALS INDICTED FOR FRAUD

A Federal Grand Jury in Sioux Falls has indicted the former president and two other administrators of Sioux Empire College in Hawarden, Iowa on mail fraud and other charges.

Albert D. Hudek 49 of Council Bluffs president of the two year college until 1983; Daniel L Hudek 40 of Sioux City, former Dean of Student Services; and Leo Hallman 35 of Pocahontas, former business manager of the college.

Albert Hudek said the charges are unfair in that Sioux Empire was trying to serve a disadvantaged group of students that other colleges didn't want to help.

Philip Hogan, U.S. attorney for South Dakota said the charges stem from the college's recruitment of Native American Indians from South Dakota Reservations and arranging for them to receive federal grants and federally backed loans.

THE INDEPENDENT: July 24, 1986 –EX-SIOUX EMPIRE COLLEGE OFFICIALS PLEAD NOT GUILTY *At this time a trial has not been set.*

THE INDEPENDENT: January 1, 1987 – EX-SIOUX EMPIRE COLLEGE OFFICIALS RECEIVE PENALTIES

On November 12, 1986 the Hudeks each entered pleas of guilty to misdemeanor charges of three counts of misapplication of Federal Student Financial Assistance and Hallman entered a plea of guilty to one count of misapplication of Federal Student Financial Assistance funds.

The changed felony charges to misdemeanor charges carried maximum penalties of a \$1000.00 fine and/or one year imprisonment on each count.

In statements made to Judge Jones, the three defendants and their lawyers emphasized the fact that while they agreed there had been some errors made on their part, that the college in fact had saved the government many thousands of dollars by educating students at a less expensive cost than in state institutions and by helping many disadvantaged persons become wage earners, thus eliminating them from possible inclusion on government social programs.

The issues of THE INDEPENDENT that I have referenced contain many more paragraphs with descriptions of the charges, and the comments of the individuals. Copies of these can be found on the internet in siouxcounty.newspaperarchive.com or at the Hawarden Public Library. If I have aroused your curiosity, I would direct you to those two sources to read the entire accounts.

In conclusion; I have spent many hours weighing the pros and cons of Hawarden's endeavor into higher education. Was it a monumental challenge that in spite of its short existence was a success; or was it doomed to failure from the very beginning? A few quotes come to mind; "What doesn't kill us only makes us stronger." And "If you risk nothing, then you risk everything."

In 1965 a few forward thinking men had a vision; a vision to make Hawarden a vibrant and active community and offer affordable higher education to those who would pursue it. The vision became a reality when the community and its people decided to support the idea of the college with their time and money. This effort gave one thousand graduates of SECO a chance for a better life; an education that was close to home and affordable.

As we know, everything did not go as planned, mistakes were made and consequences were imposed; the college closed much too soon, but was it a mistake? I vote NO. Nothing worthwhile is ever a mistake; what price tag can be put on education? My children benefited from the SECO experience by taking summer classes to lighten their load during the school year; my husband was able to get his two year degree while managing a business and supporting his family. SECO was a stepping stone for veterans, high school graduates, Native Americans and more, that leaves a legacy to be proud of.

If you are one of the people who helped the college in its infancy and mourned when it closed, I applaud you. Sometimes it takes many to help a few, but all are rewarded for the effort.