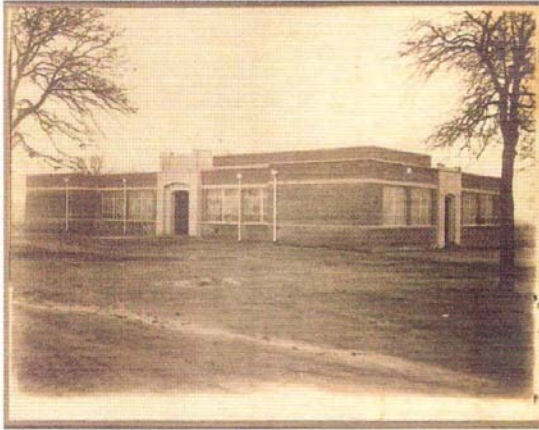


## Keeping the Fire Burning



**Memories are often the fuel of conservation fires.** John Hopper has memories of pie suppers in the gymnasium. He remembers how everyone pulled together to support the war effort. And he remembers the values he and his fellow students learned growing up in a rural Oklahoma community and attending a school called Excelsior.

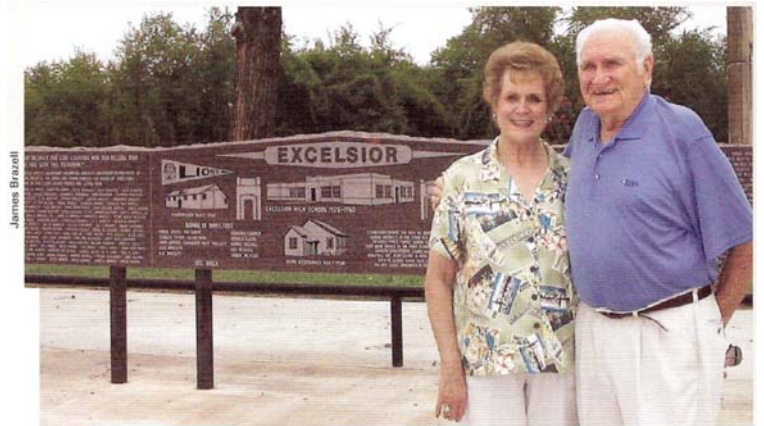
Four decades ago, John and nearly 300 others formed the Friends and Alumni of Excelsior Association because of the lasting ties created by their shared experience of attending the school, which operated from 1926-1962. This group so valued their connection to the school that they have taken extraordinary steps to save what is left of this legacy.

When the Excelsior property was sold, the building and all its contents were scattered. All that remained were the two arches that once graced the south and east entrances. "Where study hall used to be, a huge elm had grown up," remembers John.

In 1999 the Friends and Alumni group resolved to take action to protect the property and the remains of the school. Each year, since the 1960s, members of this community had been traveling from Hawaii, Alaska, California, and all along the eastern seaboard to have dinner together in Oklahoma. The conservation and commemoration goals brought even greater strength to their commitment to each other and the place they had in common.

First the group scraped together the funds to buy the site, including a grant from the Oklahoma Historical Society. Then they set about cleaning up the grounds. Today, the original arches stand strong and free, a testimony, according to John, to the strong will of those who passed through the doorways and went on to serve their state and country.

But they wanted to do more than conserve the property; they wanted to commemorate and share their memories and relationships with future generations. So a granite monument was paid for by engraving the names of 289 people on the face of the polished stone, for \$25 per name. And with those names appears the memory, put into words. *"Excelsior-where we were taught to respect God, country and our fellow man- we salute you with this monument."*



**Doris and John Hopper**

This could have been a happy ending to the story, except that each year the number of people coming to the annual dinner declines. "Our group is dwindling," observes John. "It became evident that, despite our work, the site would deteriorate again. We needed help to preserve it."

Luckily, Oklahoma's statewide land trust, **Land Legacy**, was willing to help. Robert Gregory, executive director, says that although the organization's mission does not include historic preservation, "The Excelsior School's community wouldn't take no for an answer." Robert was concerned about the responsibility of caring for the site after the local stewards are gone. So **Land Legacy** proposed that the Friends and Alumni establish a \$20,000 endowment to support the stewardship in the future. After several years of determined fundraising, the endowment is in place.

Oklahoma is currently celebrating its centennial, honoring projects across the state for their contributions to the state's first 100 years. The Excelsior project was recently designated as a "Centennial Project."

Now that the Excelsior School site has been deeded to **Land Legacy**, John, now 81, is satisfied that it will be "kept in great shape in the future." He plans to keep going to the annual dinners and caring for the school site for as long as he can. When he dies he hopes donations in his name will be made to **Land Legacy** to keep the arches standing and the preservation fire stoked.