
THE BEGINNINGS OF LEE COLLEGE AND ITS SEVENTY-FIVE YEAR LEGACY OF LEARNING

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Located thirty miles from Houston is the growing community of Baytown, Texas, a thriving city of some 60,000 known for jobs in the petrochemical industry and becoming increasingly known for Lee College, the local community college. Established in 1934 in the midst of the Great Depression, today Lee College is the sixth- fastest growing community college in the nation and the second in Texas. This year the College is celebrating its 75th anniversary. With an original enrollment of 177 students, today the College serves over 13,000, offers over 130 degrees and certificates, has over twenty-two student organizations, is known for its nationally recognized Honors Program, and is continuing its commitment to provide high quality education at an affordable cost.¹ In 1934, in the midst of the Great Depression, the people of Baytown chose to impose a tax on themselves and establish a junior college. Since then, the College has flourished and captured the hearts of many.

The idea of establishing a two-year college in Baytown started in 1929. According to former Lee College Dean Walter Rundell, "certain candidates seeking the superintendency of the local school district gave the junior college idea a prominent place in their platforms."² Even though the project was considered, it took at least two years before any action took place. On September 3, 1931, the Board of Trustees of the Goose Creek School District made the decision to create a local community college. After the decision was made, ministers from the surrounding churches and heads of other community organizations were invited to

meet at Robert E. Lee High School to express their opinions concerning the College at the school district's meeting.³ In September of 1931, R.B. Sparks, the principal of Robert E. Lee High School, spoke before the local Chamber of Commerce promoting the idea of a junior college. Sparks felt that "in a time of economic depression, such as then gripped the nation, a local college was necessary to provide educational opportunity to students who could not afford it otherwise."⁴ Even though times were hard, the College would give students the opportunity to pursue a college education without the expense of leaving home.

A week later a committee of citizens was formed to begin the process to create a local two-year college. Members of the group included W.R. Smith, the Superintendent of Schools and chairman of the committee and R.B. Sparks, principal of Robert E. Lee High School. The committee's goals were to look over the probable enrollment, examine the curriculum, and investigate the cost of establishing Lee College.⁵ The committee sent questionnaires to twelve junior colleges regarding finances. Additional questionnaires were distributed to those who graduated from Robert E. Lee High School since 1922, to find out their interest in attending a community college. Sixty-five affirmative responses were returned. Of the seven junior colleges that replied, the most optimistic was from Houston Junior College, "which, without any supporting tax, had paid all of its expenses and accumulated \$50,000."⁶ W.R. Smith, who according to Garrett Herring, a member of the

Board of Trustees of the Goose Creek School District and “the prime mover in the college effort,”⁷ argued that classes could be held in the high school building. He suggested that if a reasonable tuition was established, it would help pay for some of the costs of the College’s operation and that a summer school program would keep a number of the College’s teachers employed all year round.⁸

In 1932, a meeting was scheduled to hear the report of the survey committee. Joe Reid, a local attorney, made the argument that Baytown needed to take advantage of this opportunity and establish a junior college “since the required tax of 10 cents per \$100 valuation would cost less than to send our children off to college.”⁹ E.W. Bruce, another local attorney and former principal of two local elementary schools, countered that he did not like the idea of a junior college. He stated, “I prefer big universities and colleges — schools that will live. I do not believe a junior college can be run successfully.”¹⁰ Because of this, the controversial plans for the junior college were inactive for two years. In January of 1934, a petition signed by F.C. Saxon and 350 other qualified voters of the Goose Creek School District was taken before the School Board once again. The petition proposed the establishment of a junior college district conforming to the boundaries of the Goose Creek Independent School District. W.C. Swain, Goose Creek Superintendent, moved to submit this petition before the State Board of Education. He wanted approval and endorsement of the State Board of Education so that he could form a junior college district. B.T. McKinley seconded the motion and it passed unanimously.¹¹

Smith, along with A.L. Taylor, the President of Board of Trustees of Goose Creek, traveled to Austin to present the petition to L.A. Woods, the State Superintendent of Public Instruction. In January of 1934, Taylor and Smith reported to the Goose Creek Board that Mr. Woods had made a promise to use his influence in favor of the proposed junior college district. W. A. Nelson, the College Examiner, made the promise to have

full collaboration when obtaining “classification for the College within the first year it was instated.”¹² At this point, things were progressing for the establishment of Lee College. Walter Rundell, who was destined to become dean of the College for twenty-two years, said, “Just as a dairyman never has enough rain and a library never has sufficient staff, it seems that there is almost never a propitious time to establish a new college.”¹³ However, momentum was building in favor of the local community college. The School Board decided on February 24, 1934, to put the idea to a vote of the community to decide the matter; voting would be restricted to those who paid local property taxes. The motion for the election to establish a junior college passed unanimously.

One note of importance is that in February of 1934, W.R. Smith wrote a letter to the *Baytown Sun* stating that parents would be able to save from \$400 to \$700 a year if they would send their student to a local public junior college instead of a university. Smith estimated that this action would amount to \$40,000 worth of savings annually for the community’s citizens.¹⁴ Just two days before the election, the *Baytown Sun* reported there was little opposition and expected the proposal to pass.¹⁵ On February 24, 1934, the ballots were counted and showed 538 people were in favor of the College’s establishment and 198 were not.¹⁶ The results were overwhelmingly in favor of the College.¹⁷ The next official step for the School Board was to pass a motion to begin organizing the junior college. The motion called for the employment of a faculty for the College and the purchase of the necessary equipment and supplies, and was passed in March of 1934.¹⁸ A meeting was called by the Board of Trustees of Goose Creek to discuss policies that would govern the inauguration and behavior of the College. During this meeting, the Board employed Erma Wood with a salary of \$75 a month to catalog the library books. Out-of-district fees for freshmen were set at \$100 per semester and \$25 per semester for sophomores. The Board voted to establish courses that would



Photo montage of Lee College through the years. All images courtesy Lee College

best serve the whole community and agreed to pay full-time junior college teachers \$200 month. They also set charges: a matriculation fee of five dollars, a science lab fee of five dollars, and a library deposit of four dollars.¹⁹ Students in-district were not required to pay tuition; therefore, these charges represented the entire amount that local students paid to attend the College.

As the opening session was quickly approaching, the board had another meeting in

June of 1934 and made several very important decisions. The decision was finalized to hold classes at Robert E. Lee High School in Baytown. During this period, classrooms, laboratories, and all other facilities would be shared between the high school and college students. When personnel were selected for the high school in 1933, the administrators did it with the idea that new teachers would be qualified to teach at both the high school and college level. Lee Junior College became

the official name of the institution in June of 1934. The Board decided to operate the College regardless of whether or not the minimum requirement of twenty-two students made the choice to enroll.²⁰ Assembling a capable faculty was a major concern. Applicants were selected and appeared before the Goose Creek Board. Interestingly, the Goose Creek Board of Trustees would also serve as the governing board of the College. When the Board met in July of 1934, they decided to transfer \$10,000 dollars from the local, public school maintenance fund to the junior college fund for the College's expenses.²¹

Another important development was the establishment of the first College catalog. A contract was written with the Standard Lithographing and Printing Company to print five hundred copies for a price of \$86.²² This catalog was mainly the work of Robert E. Lee High School's principal, R.B. Sparks. On August 1, 1934, the Board determined to require all students claiming to be in-district to satisfy the school board that their legal residence was indeed in the district before they were permitted to register.²³ This rule was amplified a month later. It required persons over twenty-one to prove that they had established in-district residence prior to registration.²⁴ The first budget, totaling \$24,000, was approved in August of 1934.²⁵ Nine thousand dollars was allocated for science equipment and library books. The remaining \$15,400 would pay the salaries of two administrators, three full-time, and eight part-time faculty members.²⁶

Lee College's original faculty offered impressive credentials. Two held Ph.D.s, nine held M.A.s, and one, a B.S.²⁷ On September 3, 1934, Lee Junior College opened its doors for registering its first students. By the time registration had ended, 177 students had enrolled. This was more than the estimate of 150.²⁸ The most unanticipated problem confronting the faculty and students during this first semester was surprisingly the Texas mosquitoes. This is no surprise since they were sharing facilities with Robert E. Lee High School and had to meet at

night. It was said that the mosquitoes came in droves and bit like a fury. The Board took note of this problem in March of 1935 and began screening the windows. The Board also voted on September 21, 1934, that they were not going to refund students who decided to withdraw.²⁹ During this meeting, they "approved a summer session for 1935."³⁰ On May 24, 1935, after the first session ended, the College graduated its first class, four women. Lee College was off to a very good start. In December of 1937, E.J. Matthews wrote a letter stating that "the graduates of Lee Junior College, the second youngest junior college in the state, were doing better at University of Texas than the graduates of any other junior colleges."³¹ During its first year of existence, "Lee College was given first class rating by both the Association of Texas Colleges and the State Department of Education."³²

Another worrisome issue was the problem of financial aid for students. Students could receive aid from the National Youth Administration or be employed by the College under the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. Both organizations were New Deal federal agencies. As far as the College was concerned, the summer of 1935 was a very quiet summer. The budget for 1935 and 1936 was approved at \$20,000. This was \$4,200 less than the first budget. In August, President Smith, who served as both the Superintendent of Schools and President of the College, was commissioned to travel to Austin to learn what conditions were necessary to aid college students in receiving aid from the National Youth Administration. Lee Knights, the College's student newspaper, reported that at the beginning of the second semester, January 20, 1935, eight junior college students were to be employed under the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. Each student would work fifty hours a month making thirty cents an hour. Five students would be library assistants and three would clerk in the President's and Dean's office.³³

During the fall semester of 1935, a noncredit course in child psychology for the adults of the community was approved. Assistant Dean S.B.

Red was also re-elected for the years 1936-1937. He received another \$200 annual increase to his salary.³⁵ This was Red's third year as Assistant Dean. Since his main responsibility was the operation of the College, his monthly salary was the same as a full-time faculty member. One duty of the Assistant Dean was to place on probation any student that had failed fifty percent of his work by the end of the first nine weeks of a semester. If the student showed no improvement whatsoever, they would be dropped from the rolls by the end of the semester.³⁶

In May of 1935, the legality of the operation of the College from public school funds became an issue. *The Daily Sun* released a one-page story entitled "Effort Made to Wreck the College." The article stated that President Smith supposedly had released news to the Houston papers that the junior college had to vote for a tax or the students would have to pay sufficient tuition in order to pay for the cost of operation.³⁷ Some interpreted this as Mr. Smith attempting to wreck the College. A response to these accusations was published in the May 1935 issue of *Lee Knights*. It was titled "Who Killed Cock Robin?" President Smith, while speaking at a college banquet, "incidentally remarked that eventually the junior college district might have to levy a tax for support of the college."³⁸ W.R. Smith was subsequently asked to resign his superintendence of the public schools and the presidency of the College. When the Board voted four to two in favor of Smith's resignation, John Hill McKinney, President of the School Board at the time stated, "He too was in favor of the resignation."³⁹ An anonymous member thought that while Smith was an able school administrator, he was guilty of "involvement in local politics."⁴⁰ Smith refused to resign, and instead chose to serve the year left on his contract. At the end of the 1935-36 sessions, "the man who had been primarily responsible for the establishment of the college and who had seen it off to a good start,"⁴¹ willingly walked out of the spotlight.

Located a few miles from Baytown is the

unincorporated town of Highlands. The citizens of this small community expressed a desire to be incorporated into the Goose Creek School District. Highlands, at the time, was part of the Crosby school district. In June of 1936, the Goose Creek Board agreed for Highlands to be annexed to the district. A resolution was sent to the County Board of Trustees⁴² and the extended school district was approved. Thus, the community of Crosby was also incorporated into the Lee College district. When the third College session began in 1937, the enrollment total for this session was 245. This was a slight increase from the previous years.⁴³

In January of 1937, the Board decided to buy typewriters for the high school and the College. Another key event was an announcement by Dr. Lowman, who succeeded Smith as Superintendent of Goose Creek and president of the College.⁴⁴ Dr. Lowman informed the Goose Creek Board of Trustees in January of 1937, that Lee Junior College was in fact one of 186 junior colleges that was being considered by the Carnegie Foundation for a library grant.⁴⁵ Subsequently, the College received a grant of \$3,000 in June that was to be paid over a three year period.⁴⁶ One thing unknown to a lot of people was that Erma Wood, the librarian, played a major role in obtaining the Carnegie grant. When she first learned that the funds were available, she put in a recommendation that the College apply for the grant. Despite her efforts, the Board showed little interest. This did not stop Ms. Erma Wood. According to page 15 of Walter Rundell's book *By The People! For the People Lee College*, she then "offered to pay her own expenses to a conference in Richmond, Virginia, where the grant program was to be explained, and did so."⁴⁷ She later went to a meeting in Austin concerning the grants and paid her own expenses for the trip as well. Even though it was due to Ms. Wood's many efforts in qualifying the library and applying for a successful grant, her name never appears in any publicity that concerns the receiving of the award. Today, the Lee College library is named the Lee College

Erma Wood Carlson Library in her honor. When the College received the grant in the amount of \$3,000 they realized it was quite a large amount for such a small college. The money they received was given on the basis of the College's excellence. The funds allowed the College library to continue to expand its impressive book collection.⁴⁸

When the third session ended in June of 1937, there were twenty-five graduates. This was the largest class to date for the College.⁴⁹ Lee College enrollment continued to grow until World War II which witnessed a decline in students. During the registration in the fall of 1939, enrollment hit a peak of 336 students. The next year, attendance began to spiral downward. Registration for 1940, showed a decline to 324. The effect of World War II was manifesting itself and employment opportunities were growing. In 1941, enrollment was at 238 students. The enrollment declined further to 177 students in 1942. However, at the end of World War II, many veterans decided to return to college and resume their education. They were taking full advantage of the G.I. Bills which granted them financial assistance.⁵⁰ The G.I. Bill, or more formerly known as the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, was passed by Congress on March 24, 1943.⁵¹ Since the College wanted to grant more opportunities to veterans, they offered a seminar especially for them. The conference lasted from March 4 until May 23 of 1946, granting as much as ten semester hours credit. The classes offered were chemistry, English, and algebra.⁵² In the fall of 1947, 441 students had enrolled. One year later, the number increased to 609 students,⁵³ one hundred sixty-four of which were veterans.⁵⁴

By 1948, many faculty members believed it would be beneficial if the name was changed from Lee Junior College to Lee College. They felt the chances of establishing technical-vocational courses would be better if they dropped the junior part of the name. The idea to change the name was the brainchild of Walter Rundell, the College dean at the time. He believed, "the greatly expanded vocational and

cultural departments at Lee have graduated the school from the ranks of junior colleges primarily satisfied with the academic preparation of students for higher colleges and universities."⁵⁵ On November 8, 1948, the Board voted to change the name to Lee College.⁵⁶ The Board's approval of the name change was unanimous. Board President Theo Wilburn had this to say about the matter: "I don't care what you call the college as long as you leave the Goose Creek in Goose Creek Independent School District."⁵⁷ The Board endorsed the name change, according to James C. Maroney in *The Handbook of Texas*, "because they were concerned that the designation 'junior' would discourage adults from taking courses."⁵⁸

As the College matured, new challenges arose. In November of 1958, the Board announced that they did not want to participate in the National Defense Student Loan Program. However, in December, the Board changed its mind and the College has continued involvement in the program ever since. This loan program had an unusual feature that was unique compared to other loan funds. It states that "teaching in a public elementary or secondary school for five years after securing a bachelor's or higher degree, a student could earn cancellation of fifty percent of the principal amount of the loan and interest on the amount canceled."⁵⁹ With these loans, the Federal Government supplied nine-tenths of the cash, and the rest was furnished by colleges that participated. Today, Lee College is supported by an organization named the Lee College Foundation. It was established in 1968 to promote scholarships for the growing number of students. Today it has assets of more than \$3.5 million.⁶⁰ It is estimated that the organization has three hundred scholarships for the students that not only attend Lee College, but also for those transferring from Lee for higher learning.⁶¹

One key thing to note is the cost of tuition back in the fifties. As late as 1956, out-of-district tuition was \$3 for three or four semester hours.⁶² When the years 1968-1969 came about this fee was reduced all the way down to \$1 per semester hour for the first ten credit hours, which would in

fact be a maximum of \$10 per semester.⁶³ Times have changed. In 2009, a full-time student at Lee College taking twelve in-district hours pays \$531 versus \$831 for out-of-district students. At Texas A&M, the cost for in-state tuition was \$5,152 and out-of-state tuition was \$19,582.⁶⁴

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, the College curriculum gradually expanded. In June of 1945, a music program was added along with home economics and office practices. Tom F. Seale was appointed teacher of the music courses.⁶⁵ In 1946, physical education, which had been dropped due to low enrollment, was put back into the curriculum.⁶⁶ When the summer of 1956 approached, Dr. Ben F. Ammons, who represented the San Jacinto Baptist Association, came forward to the Dean concerning Bible courses possibly being taught at Lee College. In August, after much discussion and consideration, it was approved. They were to begin teaching these Bible courses the following fall semester.⁶⁷ The Baptist Association recommended teachers in this program hold a minimum degree of Bachelor of Divinity, and the College approved. The classes originally met in the Baptist Church since it was the most convenient meeting place that was available. In 1959, because of the success of the program, the Baptists decided to buy a residence that adjoined the campus. They converted it into the Baptist Student Union.⁶⁸

Lee College was able to move to its own campus in 1951. A committee composed of the Lee Junior College faculty decided to "[recommend] a complete separation of the junior college and Robert E. Lee high school and that a separate building and campus be provided as soon as possible"⁶⁹ An important reason why Lee Junior College needed its own campus was because a college student attending classes in the high school did not really feel the level of maturity that most college students wanted and were making constant contact with high school students who attended classes a few years before.⁷⁰ It wasn't until 1951, after Rundell Hall and the gymnasium were completed, that Lee College moved to its new campus.⁷¹

One long-tenured faculty member interviewed was John Britt. He is one of the most honored professors at Lee College and has been teaching at the College for over 46 years. He is favored by many for his determination to help boost student's self-confidence and for instilling in many the confidence to succeed. Mr. Britt is also the Honors Program Coordinator at Lee. When asked what changes he had seen at the College, Mr. Britt answered that he had witnessed a huge increase in students and that years ago no one—students or faculty—had computers, departments did not have secretaries, the campus was much smaller, everybody knew everyone; the campus had only one maintenance man who only mowed the yards, and there wasn't an honors program.⁷²

Established in 1969, the Lee College Honors Program's goal is to serve the gifted and highly motivated students. It strives to prepare the students for success in their future education and employment opportunities. The classes are taught in a seminar format. Also, the Honors Program currently has available twenty-nine \$1,000 scholarships awarded on the basis of academic excellence. A big part of the Honors Program is American Studies, which is an interdisciplinary team-taught American history and American literature course. The program is also composed of the Human Condition, another team-taught course offering credit in freshman composition and humanities. A third honors course focuses on the history and development of motion pictures, and a fourth is based on the principles of public speaking. Lee College offers honors by contract in classes corresponding to the curriculum.

Lee College is a pioneer in prison education. This program was established in 1966. It was implemented to reduce recidivism of inmates by giving them the opportunity to receive an education. The two men who founded this program are George Beto, the Director of the Texas Department of Corrections at the time, and Walter Rundell, the Dean of Lee College. It all started when Mr. Beto asked Mr. Rundell "to consider the possibility of offering college

of 1941. Student Council helps students grasp the concept of responsibility and helps equip them to be better citizens.⁸⁸

In 2009, Lee College has many more extracurricular activities. A preeminent organization is the Student Ambassadors of Lee College, formed in 2005 by Mrs. Crystal Bessix, Director of Marketing. As Ambassadors, the goals are to serve as encouraging role models for students, provide the community and students with information regarding programs at Lee College, conduct personalized campus tours, facilitate presentations to prospective students, and serve as an advocate for higher education.⁸⁹ Another important student organization is the Campus Activities Board, headed by the Student Activities Director Mike Spletter. The Board brings various entertaining and scholarly events to campus and sponsors the popular Fall Fiesta and Spring Fling.

It is evident why, after its establishment in 1934, Lee College has become a stable fixture in Baytown, Texas, serving many students in a variety of programs. Today, some 13,000 students are enrolled. The College provides over 130 degrees and certificates, is recognized nationally for their Honors Program, and sponsors more than twenty-two student organizations.⁹⁰ Lee College continues to maintain its legacy of leadership and learning and will continue to provide high quality education for many years to come.

*Based on Celeste Butler's research the Texas Historical Commission has approved a historical marker for Lee College.



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