Texas A&M:
From Humble Beginning
To Global Impact

By Lane B. Stephenson '77

It’s getting increasingly difficult to comprehend Texas A&M’s modest beginning. After all, it now has the largest student body in Texas and one of the five largest in the nation. Students come from all over the country—and from about 120 other countries.

How did it stack up in the beginning? The “catalogue of students” for the institution’s first session in 1876-77 lists 106 names—all referring to men, since it would be another 87 years before women were allowed to enroll, other than in the occasional case of the daughter of a member of the faculty or staff taking an occasional class.

That 106-member student body at the end of the first school year is not even as large as some of the university’s lecture-type classes these days, but that total represents a major increase over the number of students enrolled during the first few days the institution was open. The precise number of Aggies who showed up those first days varies from tale to tale, but here’s what is stated in Prof. Henry Dethloff’s authoritative two-volume book, A Centennial History of Texas A&M University, 1876-1976: “Great expectations must have been thoroughly dampened when only six students appeared for registration during the first few days of enrollment, but by the end of the first term forty-eight students were in attendance . . .” and then noting the 106 count by year’s end.

Although the inaugural student body was small, the names in its ranks went from A to Z—from Abbott to Zulch—the latter conjuring up thoughts of a possible connection to the nearby area that shows up on highway signs as North Zulch. The roster included several students with the same last name and same hometown, raising the distinct possibility there were some sets of brothers.

Then there are the geographic origins of those early Aggies. For decades, Texas A&M—or the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas, as it was formally known until 1963—was thought to be the higher education destination for young men from rural Texas. That reputation was at least partially deserved, but that first catalogue also shows such hometowns as Austin, Dallas, Galveston (then the largest town in Texas), Houston and San Antonio.

Along with those “big cities,” but which were not so big back then, the list is dotted with the likes of Caldwell, Hearne and Navasota, as well as some towns a bit more distant from the fledgling college. There was even one seemingly adventurous out-of-stater: William Washington Whitaker from Cotton Gin Port, Miss. Perhaps not surprisingly, the most students, 13, were from Bryan. Perhaps surprisingly, the next highest number, 10, was attributed to “College Station”—surprising because there was no officially designated College Station then. By 1877, however, the area around the campus was unofficially taking on the “College Station” name of the train station serving the campus.

Two of those young men listed from College Station have last names of...
The First Aggies

The “Catalog of Students” from the first session of classes at the A&M College of Texas, 1876-77, courtesy of Cushing Memorial Library & Archives:

Abbott, Charles Gustavus
Abercrombie, Charles Anderson
Anderson, reuben Lysander
Anders, Aubrey Leonard
Bayor, George Wythe
Bee, Clement Stevens
Bee, Jack Tarver
Bomer, Walter
Boren, Richard Long
Boyd, David Woodson
Bridges, Reuben McDonald
Brown, Thomas Henry
Burchard, Charles August
Burleson, Ford McB. (Gonzales)
Burnitt, Pyke
Burnitt, Seth (Heme)
Calhoun, Francis Augustus
Calhoun, Patrick
Campbell, Duncan
Carter, Henry Clay
Carrol, Monroe Walter
Cerf, Lous Amedee
Chinski, Clarence
Cohen, Meyer
Crisp, John Claybourn
Davidson, Green Adkins
Dickinson, John
Elliott, Clarence Powhattan
Elliott, Ferdinand Hamtramck
Edwards, Harden Harrison
Franklin, Thomas Hadley
Gathright, Hugh Guston
Gathright, Thomas Sanford
Gay, James Bates
Goode, Robert E.
Goodwin, John William
Grant, Green Wiggins
Hard, Barton Bee
Hardeman, John Hamilton
Hardeman, Thomas John
Hardy, George Washington
Harrison, Robert Henry
Henderson, Calvin
House, Reuben James
Howard, Charles Barnett
Hovey, Thomas
Hoya, Joseph Theodore
Jacob, Morris Isaac
James, James Leonidas
Keifer, William
King, Henry Gil
Long, Daniel Thomas
Lowe, Alfred Lawson
Malone, William Robert
Malone, William
Martin, Carlisle B.
McCoy, Pinkey Cicer
McCurley, James Archibald
McIver, James Daniel
McLean, Erasmus Sidenham
Morris, William Archy
Muench, Martin Jospeh
Mullins, James Monroe
Murphy, James Alfred
McGhee, Willy Gilmore
Nichols, Robert Lee
Norwood, Walter Nathaniel
O’Grady, Francis John
Owen, William Fleming
Paine, Herbert Albert
Patillo, John Franklin
Patillo, William Lewis
Patrick, Samuel Alexander
Pyron, Mathew Lin
Randle, Rush R.
Rankin, Harry William
Reid, Benjamin Lafayette
Rogan, Charles (Giddings)
Roders, William Lemuel
Rice, David
Sample, Jussis Perry
Shands, Edward Wright
Sheridan, John Russell
Shindler, James Thomas
Shepherd, Frank Terry
Simms, Samuel Halloway
Sleep, William Markham
Smith, Alva P.
Smith, Harry Gordon
Stone, Dewitt Clinton
Story, William Herff
Terrell, Robert Henry
Thurmond, George Beauregard
Trenckmann, Wm. Andrew Frederick
Vernor, Henry Enloe
Weatherington, John William
Weethermark, Benjamin Shepherd
Whitaker, William Washington
Williams, Thomas Jefferson
Williams, Earnest Fisher
Wilson, John Edwin
Woodward, Jesse
Yates, Edward Mangrove
Zulch, William Lorenzo

Gathright, presumably both sons of the college’s first president, Thomas S. Gathright. There can be little doubt that one of them was the president’s offspring because his name is the same, with the addition of “Jr.” It’s equally easy to presume that most—if not all—of the others listed as from College Station were sons of faculty or staff members.

More was learned last fall about that first class when it came to light that the current student body includes the great-great-granddaughter and great-great-grandson of the first man believed to have actually registered for classes—John Archibald McIver, who came over from nearby Caldwell.

The current students of extraordinary legacy proportions are Lindsay Lawrence ’14 and Zachary Lawrence ’16. He is a sophomore psychology major and member of Texas A&M’s Corps of Cadets, just as his father, grandfather, great-grandfather and great-great-grandfather were. Lindsay is a senior majoring in allied health. Also, a brother, Ryan Lawrence ’12, a history major, graduated from Texas A&M last spring. They grew up in Shiner in South Texas. Their ancestry makes them fifth-generation Aggies, a distinction shared by few others.

Attention to this Aggie archival footnote was brought to light in a modern manner—a tweet from a former Classmate of the father of the Aggie trio to then Texas A&M President R. Bowen Loftin ’71. The student-oriented Aggie president asked a staffer to check into it.

Once identified and asked why he had not made known this connection of historic significance, even though he had been an Aggie for more than a year, Zachary replied: “I didn’t want to call attention to myself,” adding he didn’t want his family connection to be a factor in his admission. “I wanted to get into Texas A&M on my own merits.”

Zachary recounted often-repeated family history that helps substantiate the belief that McIver was indeed the first Aggie: “What I’ve often heard family members say is that he rode over on horseback from Caldwell to enroll but was told he was a day early. Rather than ride back to Caldwell as he had planned, he decided just to stay overnight. He slept under a tree that night and then registered the next morning.”

The family has copies of newspapers stories reporting McIver’s death in 1923, with each having headlines noting he was the first student to register at Texas A&M.

Modest though that Oct. 4, 1876, opening was, it was a beginning—the beginning of an institution with a now global reach and that for the fall semester of 2013 had a student body of 58,809, including 53,672 on the College Station campus.

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