

INTRODUCTION

The Legacy of branch Normal College is better understood as a struggle for survival. It is remarkable that the institution survived against such great odds from within, as well as those from outside its walls during the first fifty years of its existence. The institution survived in part because of great men of wisdom and determination like Joseph Carter Corbin, Isaac Fisher, Frederick T. Vinegar and Jefferson Ish, Jr. and because of people, recently freed from slavery who were determined to get an education against all odds. To understand the history of this institution is to understand what the State of Arkansas has not done as much as what has been done to educate the black population of the State.

The story began in 1872 with the opening of Arkansas Industrial University (now the University of Arkansas) in the northwest corner of the state which was the farther district from the State's negro population. The school was said to be open to all regardless of race. However, by the end of 1873, the race issue, had ushered in a bill in the State Senate to locate a Branch Normal College of the Normal Department of the Arkansas industrial University southeast, east, or south of Pulaski County, "especially for the convenience and well-being of the poorer classes."

For two years after the bill became law nothing was done to implement the provisions of the statute. In July 1875, Joseph Carter Corbin, a learned negro who had served as State Superintendent of instruction and Chairman of the Board of Trustees for Arkansas Industrial University (1873-74) was hired by the Boards Committee on Branch Normal College to find a suitable location for the school. Finding Pine Bluff to be a suitable location for the college, Corbin was asked to assume the duties of Principal of the School.

The first location for the Normal School was an old dilapidated one story frame house built to serve as a barrack and located on the corner of Lindsey and Sevier streets (now Second Avenue and Oak Street). Corbin's effort to open the school at the beginning of September was delayed because promised repairs to the building had not been made and the school's furniture which had been ordered from Chicago was lost when a boat bringing it up the Arkansas river sank. Nonetheless, the school opened on September 27, 1875, with seven students in attendance. [Corbin described these students as scholastically heterogeneous - one could read very well but not write legibly. Others knew enough mathematics to cipher through ratio and proportion, but were reading at less than first grade level. The previous academic requirements or the qualities of these students were not significantly different from those of students entering the University of Fayetteville. The students entering Branch Normal College were certainly disadvantaged since 1.) they and their parents were just ten years removed from slavery and 2.) "few" if any preparatory schools of proper character had existed prior to this time in the State.

In June 1882, after seven years, Corbin reported with great pride that "The first colored student that ever graduated and received a college degree in the State was graduated from Branch Normal College. Between 1882 and 1895 ten students would

receive the Bachelor of Arts degree before the reduction of the collegiate program at Branch Normal. Despite Joseph Corbin's meritorious services in the growth of the college and his efforts to improve the educational level of the negro students. The Board of Trustees did not renew his contract in 1902.

In 1891, the Board had accepted the provisions of the second Morrill Act of 1890 and agreed to build agricultural and mechanical departments at the Branch Normal College. It is apparent that by 1902, the Board had decided to introduce the Tuskegee system of education at Branch Normal, i.e., scientific farming, and associated trades such as woodworking, blacksmithing, etc which would make the farmer self sufficient and economically independent.

Isaac Fisher, a graduate of Tuskegee institute and a disciple of Booker T. Washington, succeeded Corbin and headed the institution until 1911. But Fisher was not able to work out his Tuskegee idea or to accomplish anything substantial at Branch Normal. Fisher had no control over the finances of the school, no voice in the appointment and dismissal of teachers; this was done by the Board of Trustees, most often without consulting Fisher. He himself had no college degree to handle college curriculum as Corbin could. While Fisher was fighting opposition throughout his tenure, a lack of qualified hands on the faculty led to a depletion of required standard courses in the Normal and Classical Departments; which in turn reduced the college to a substandard level. By the end of the 1910-1911 school years no students passed an examination conducted by the Superintendent of Public Instruction. No student graduated; Fisher felt compelled to resign.

Following the resignation of Fisher, W.S. Harris was named superintendent and head of the College. Frederick T. Venegar was named head or Principal of the Normal Department and not the entire college. Both Harris and Venegar remained in these positions until the 1914-1915 school year. However, Venegar was reappointed as principal during Jefferson Ish's administration.

Branch Normal reached its lowest ebb in stature during the Harris-Venegar administration. Reductions in academic programs left the institution as an elementary and secondary school by the 1914-1915 school year. Finances were mismanaged; therefore necessary expansions in curriculum were not realized. This resulted in an accumulated surplus and the Board of Trustees directed that the fiscal management of the College be transferred to the State Superintendent of Education during this period. A student strike in 1915 lasted for more than two weeks, compelling they close the College indefinitely. However, the school reopened in the fall of 1915, with the termination of the Harris-Venegar administration.

Succeeding, W.S. Harris as superintendent of Branch Normal, Jefferson Ish was the first natural Arkansan to head the institution. Under his administration a standard high school program and a Home economics Department were established. The faculty and curriculum were expanded which laid the foundation for a multi-purpose College. Fisher's most important achievement was reorganization in the direction of making the

institution a land-grant college as contemplated by the 1890 Morrill Act. To do this he established a strong Agriculture Department for the first time, along with training in allied trades. The foundation for the college had finally been laid.

BRIDGING THE LEGACY: FROM BRANCH NORMAL TO THE UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS AT PINE BLUFF

Founded in 1873 as Branch Normal College, a branch of the Normal Department of the Arkansas Industrial University (now UAF) the college has undergone many changes. During the span of its existence, the college has had three name changes, from Branch Normal College to the Arkansas Agricultural Mechanical and Normal School in 1921, to the Arkansas Agricultural Mechanical and Normal College in 1927 and now the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff, starting in 1972.

The institution has survived against great odds, both from within as well as those from outside its walls, to stand today shoulderto shoulder with other universities across this nation as a fully accredited institution of higher education. This institution has survived in part because of strong men of vision and determination such as Joseph C. Corbin, Jefferson Ish, Robert Malone, John Brown Watson, Lawrence A. Davis, Sr. and the various individuals who have followed in their footsteps. Each of them has made significant contributions to the development and well being of this institution.

Fifteen individuals have served at the helm of this institution during its 132 year history. The late Dr. Lawrence A. Davis, Sr., the eighth head, served the longest tenure (30 years) and is seen as a transitional force in developing the UAPB campus as we know it today.

THE LEGACY OF JOHN BROWN WATSON

Dr. John Brown Watson, a graduate of Brown University was appointed as the first President of Arkansas A.M.&N. College in June 1928, after having served for several years as president of Leland College at Baker, Louisiana. During the period prior to Watson assuming the presidency, the college was called the Arkansas Agricultural, Mechanical, and Normal School which served as a Junior College with a preparatory and elementary schools, and a six week summer session for teachers. The title for the head of the school was superintendent.

Within the first few years of his tenure, Watson succeeded in reinstating the four year Bachelor Degree program, moved the college to its present location, and reorganized the faculty into standard academic departments and divisions. During the year 1929, a new site for the college had been purchased; the building begun, completed and furnished the same year, with Watson, and his faculty and students moving in on December 15. By the end of the 1929-30 school year, Watson had awarded the first two Bachelor Degrees at the college since 1885.

Dr. Watson worked steadily to improve the curriculum and quality of teaching at A.M.&N. and became a dominant force in the progress of the college. It was a difficult

struggle to establish the college program, particularly in the depression years of the 1930's. But, if needed President Watson was prepared to offer his personal financial aid to permit a student or faculty member to go on to graduate study. He also worked to bring the best possible faculty to Pine Bluff, seeking out talented young educators who were just starting their careers, with the knowledge that after a few years many of them would go on to larger institutions that could offer them more.

President Watson had established his reputation as a strong leader and a man of firm convictions, earning the nickname "John Bull" among both faculty and students. A strict disciplinarian, he expected everyone on campus to keep active and usefully occupied. Watson felt that the college had too little money to keep teachers who were not at least of average value to the college.

By the time of his untimely death in 1942. the college had reached its greatest height under his administration.

KEEPING THE SPIRIT ALIVE

Maintaining the spirit (mission) of the college was foremost on the minds and in the hearts of the students, faculty, and alumni & supporters of A.M.& N. College during the merger with the University of Arkansas system. The merger had been vigorously opposed because they feared the traditional role of the college would be destroyed.

Having served as president of A.M.& N. College for 29 years, Dr. Lawrence A. Davis, Sr. became the first Chancellor of the newly merged University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff in 1972. He was to serve only one year, resigning in June of 1973. Dr. Davis emphasized the basic mission of the university which was to assist the under-privileged students while not excluding the brightest and most talented students. He insisted that integration, as the law of the land, should be recognized and practiced. During 1972, the enrollment of non-black students increased. It should be noted that A.M.& N. College had an integrated faculty long before 1972. Dr. Davis' one year tenure as chancellor was beneficial to making the transition from A.M.& N. College to the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff as smooth as possible.

Following the resignation of Lawrence A. Davis during the summer of 1973, Dr. Johnny B. Johnson, a professor of teacher education was tabbed by Dr. David Mullins, President of the University of Arkansas System, to serve as acting chancellor while a national search was conducted to find an able individual to head the university, both academically and socially, during a period of uncertainty as to the future role of the institution.

On July 1, 1974, Dr. Herman B. Smith, Jr. assumed the office of Chancellor. Dr. Smith immediately set out to improve the physical appearance of the campus. The upgrading of the campus included construction of new parking lots; the resurfacing of existing parking lots; the renovation of two dormitories, (Childress and Holderness Halls) as classrooms; the renovation of the old library building (now Childress Hall); and the demolition of several campus landmarks including: the old president's home, the old home economics building, the Arts and Sciences building, Joseph C. Corbin Laboratory School (all constructed in 1929). New buildings were completed with the construction of a new science building (Kountz-Kyle) in 1972; a home economics building (Adair-Greenhouse) and a new administration building in 1977.

Smith served the university for almost seven years. Under his leadership, new programs were introduced to the curriculum, a vigorous recruiting drive for students was launched, and the university received increased state funding as well as support from the private sector. In 1975, UAPB obtained \$307,000 from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the largest grant ever received from any private source at the time. In January 1981 Dr. Smith announced his resignation. Immediately following his resignation James Martin, President of the University of Arkansas System, appointed a committee to oversee the administration and operations of the campus until June 30, 1981 or until a new chancellor could be selected. The members of the committee appointed Dr. Aaron Van Wright, Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, Dr. Lee Torrence, Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs,

Benson Otovo, Vice Chancellor for Fiscal Affairs, Dr. Sellers J. Parker, Research Director and Administrator for the 1890 Extension Programs, Dr. Lawrence A. Davis, Jr., Dean of Arts and Sciences, and Dr. Walter Littlejohn, who served as chairman. It should be noted that this was the second time that the university had been administered by a committee.

In September of 1981, Dr. Lloyd V. Hackley was appointed chancellor. As chancellor, Dr. Hackley gained state and national recognition as an outspoken proponent of quality educational standards for all students.

Accomplishments during his tenure include the re-accreditation of the University by the North Central Association of Colleges and Universities, various academic departments received accreditation from their respective accrediting body including music, The National Association of Schools of Music; Home Economics, the American Home Economics Association; Nursing, the National League of Nursing. The University College was established in 1982. The \$7.5 million Health, Physical Education and Recreation Complex, started under Smith's administration, was completed in 1984 and \$1.5 million was released by the State Legislature for the renovation of Caldwell Hall, the oldest existing campus building which currently houses administrative and student support programs. Dr. Hackley inaugurated the first multi-purpose endowment campaign, and secured state funding for a dormitory complex. Dr. Hackley resigned his position in October 1985 to become Chancellor of Fayetteville State University in North Carolina. Following Hackley's resignation, Dr. Johnny B. Johnson was appointed provost. In August 1986, Dr. Charles A. Walker accepted the position of chancellor. During his tenure the University was successful in generating phenomenal research funds – ranking the school third among all Arkansas institutions of higher learning in terms of research funds received. Federal funds were secured for the expansion of the dormitory complex initiated by Hackley, and the renovation of the former ROTC building to house the Center for Multi-purpose Research and Sponsored Programs. Approval was granted for two master's degree programs in elementary and secondary education in 1991, marking a milestone in the educational offering of UAPB.

Following Dr. Walker's resignation during the summer of 1991, Carolyn Blakely served as interim chancellor, becoming the first female to hold the position.

Dr. Davis began his closeup and personal relationship with UAPB at the age of four when his father, Dr. Lawrence A. Davis, Sr., began his tenure at the AM&N College (now UAPB) as a teacher, later serving as president and chancellor. His early education – nursery school through college (except for the year spent at Merrill High School from

which he graduated) – was obtained on the campus of AM&N College. Graduating from AM&N with a bachelor’s degree in mathematics, he went on to earn a master’s degree in mathematics from the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville. He also attended Iowa State University of Science and Technology at Ames, where he earned a doctorate in engineering mechanics, an area of mathematics not to be confused with mechanical engineering. His additional studies include a year at Brown University at Providence, Rhode Island, studying physics; a summer at the University of Oklahoma at Norman, studying computer science; two summers at Oak Ridge (Tennessee) Associate Universities, studying nuclear reactors and acid rains, and post graduate studies at Harvard University.

Dr. Davis’ professional career began with a brief stint at Mississippi Vocational College, now Mississippi Valley State University at Itta Bena, before returning to AM&N as an instructor of mathematics. Davis swiftly moved through the ranks to assistant professor, associate professor, full professor, chairman of the Department of Mathematics and Physics, dean of Arts and Sciences, and dean of Liberal and Fine Arts before assuming his present position.

Dr. Davis is active within the community and state. He has worked with Leadership Pine Bluff; the United Way; the Industrial Foundation; Partners for a Better Pine Bluff; the Merrill High School Restoration Alliance; the Arts and Science Center for Southeast Arkansas and is an active member and deacon of Pilgrim Missionary Baptist Church. He is the recipient of many accolades and awards as the result of his professional and volunteer work. He has received a Distinguished Alumnus Award from each of his alma maters.

Dr. Davis is dedicated to his family. He is married to the former Ethel Grant. They are the proud parents of two children; Sonya Davis Cole, and Lawrence A. Davis III. They have five grandchildren. One daughter, Catherine Davis Harvey is deceased.

Throughout his tenure as dean of Arts and Science and as Chancellor of the University, Davis has been a staunch supporter of the arts in the community as well as the university. Although becoming chancellor of UAPB was not his primary goal early in life, he now says, “I am happy to be sitting in the leadership role because I understand the importance of this university and its great heritage.”

TODAY

The University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff stands as the Flagship of the Arkansas Delta, with Lawrence A. Davis, Jr., at the helm. When Dr. Davis took control of the wheel as captain of the ship he knew that there would be rough waters ahead and days of uncertainty due to the college’s \$2.9 million deficit that existed at the time. In record time Dr. Davis had managed to turn the ship around, stabilize the schools finances, and raise the morale of the faculty, staff, and students.

Through the unanimous choice of the Board of Trustees, Dr. Davis was appointed chancellor in November of 1991 and immediately embarked on moving the university aggressively to address the challenge of funding new ways to better serve the university's clientele and to serve a more heterogeneous student body. His first year was filling his cabinet and other key positions including three vice-chancellors, a chief of security, and athletic director. The football program was restored after a two year ban and a new coaching staff was immediately hired. Within two years the football program was at an all time high, playing for the national championship of the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA), Division I.

With his key personnel in place, Dr. Davis labored to address as many of the historical concerns as possible, while giving impetus to enhancing the teaching, research and service functions that the university had performed well for more than 100 years. He oversaw the completion of a multi-million dollar building to house the School of Business and Management. Soon with the support of Diane Gilleland, the director of the Arkansas Department of Higher Education, and Governor Jim Guy Tucker, the university received a \$30 million appropriation from the state to upgrade the campus facilities. As a result of the largest state appropriation in the history of the university, Dr. Davis has been successful in attaining his initial goals for enhancing the service functions of the university.

**UAPB History is provided courtesy of the University Museum and Cultural Center*

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