The Pine Log: The First Year, 1924-1925

Dennis Bradford
Many elements contribute to the history and traditions of a university, among them school colors, consistent athletic or academic prowess, and yearly events. One area, student publications, does more than contribute: it documents. The yearbook, for example, contains the visual history of the school, while the student newspaper documents the life of its institution. At Stephen F. Austin State University that newspaper is The Pine Log.

The Pine Log debuted on May 31, 1924. There was only one issue that year, and it came at the end of the spring term. But it set the standard for looks, content, and quality and became the benchmark for student reporting at SFA. In her first editorial, Mary Edwards, a freshman from Troup, Texas, was realistic when she wrote, “The purpose of The Pine Log is to be an organ of expression for the college community - to give the news pertaining to this community; to foster and sustain true college community spirit.” She continued. “Its editorial and news columns shall represent the use of our Mother Tongue in its highest purity.” The staff of two—Edwards and fellow freshman Greer Orton, Jr.,2 of Nacogdoches—wasted little time doing exactly what they set out to do. The first issue contained a glimpse of the hectic, exciting, early days in the life at Stephen F. Austin State Teachers College.

The written history of SFA began with an account of its birth. “The College was authorized by law as early as 1917. It was that year that the Thirty-Fifth Legislature of Texas passed an act providing for the establishment of the institution. The World War delayed implementation until the summer of 1922 when the Board of Regents chose A.W. Birdwell as president. During 1922-23, Birdwell prepared the budgets and secured the faculty. The College was due to open in the Fall 1923, but a hitch in the building plans meant that the first building would not be finished in time. Nacogdoches public school superintendent, Bob Davis came to the rescue offering facilities at the high school.” With that obstacle overcome, the faculty and 402 students turned to teaching and learning.

That first edition of The Pine Log contained articles that pondered the value of higher education and the relationship between academics and sports, issues discussed and debated over seventy-five years later. The paper reported in 1924, “Faculty at Stephen F. Austin State Teachers College recently passed a regulation, whereby students who engage in intercollegiate athletics must meet a reasonable scholarship requirement. At least four courses, passing in three, and making at least six grade points; if not, they are disqualified.”

The question of whether higher education was worth the time and expense was answered. “For professional men and women of today, and even more surely of tomorrow, education means more than capacity for living. It means opportunity to get on in the world. Educated men and women stand at the top in all the professions; in law, medicine, teaching, and so on. And they are rapidly taking the lead in industry. These are facts which [need] no figures for proof.

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Everyone can see it for himself. For the profession of teaching specifically, a college education is the first, and therefore the most immediate need. There is no future to speak of for the teacher who does not have a college degree, the higher the better. If these be facts — let him who can deny them — the youth of the land should be urged to go to school. The slogan of those who wish to get on in the professions and become leaders of men must be: Go to college."

Socially, the College was quite active. The Anne Birdwell Club, named for Birdwell's daughter, was a literary society that promoted "good fellowship and a spirit of comradeship, and of studying standard literature." Also the Stone Fort Literary Society, the Laffalots, and the Blue Bonnet Literary Society were formed. The Lone Star Troop of the Girl Scouts, formed that inaugural school year, became the first troop in Nacogdoches and perhaps in East Texas.

With the first academic year completed, the program for the College's first commencement appeared on the front page. There were a number of events which spanned three days, June 1-3, 1924.

The Stephen F. Austin (Main) Building was completed during that school year, but by then SFASTC was already expanding. When he heard that the College needed a gymnasium, Frank S. Aikman, president of the Mahdeen Company, donated $12,000 in cash to be used to construct the facility. It was a wood frame building measuring 110 feet by 140 feet and built on a concrete foundation with wood floors; it had steam heat, lockers, offices for the Department of Education, and a 25 foot by 50 foot stage.

Also in the first issue, the student paper announced that world famous poet Karle Wilson Baker of Nacogdoches would teach at the summer school. Baker would teach English 215 and 216, or courses in contemporary poetry, "designed to give students knowledge of the best literature of living poets and an appreciation and judgment of the poetry of our own times."

Even in its first year, sports teams in football, basketball, baseball, and track represented the College. They achieved modest success and laid the groundwork for the future.

Local merchants were quick to realize that the College offered a new market for their goods and services. Among the ads appearing in the paper were those offering cameras and film developing, furniture, clothing, barber shops, automobile filling stations, jewelry, drugs, groceries, local theatres, foods, and car rental. Many of the names of the merchants are familiar today, although perhaps in strange combinations or businesses. There were Stripling, Hazelwood & Co., Jessels Jewelry, Ye Campus Shoppe, Palace Theatre, Tucker - Hayter 7 Co., Co - Operative Furniture Co., J.F. Summers & Sons, Orton Furniture, Guaranty Bank and Trust, Commercial Guaranty State Bank, Burrows Bros., Branch - Patton Grocery Co., Swift Bros. & Smith, Inc., and others.

When the students returned for the Fall term in 1924, the staff of The Pine Log continued the routine business of reporting and documenting the life of the College. The first issue of volume two was published on October 18. It proudly proclaimed from its banner and masthead that it would appear every two weeks
during the school year. Campus society resumed its frantic pace with the addition of the Young Women's Christian Association, the Thomas J. Rusk Literary Society, and the Karle Wilson Baker Dramatic Club. The faculty and staff welcomed new faces. George Millard, a graduate of Sewanee University and captain of its football team, became SFA's line coach. Professor C.C. Johnson, who was graduated from the University of Colorado and the Simmons College, assumed his duties in the Mathematics and Science Department.

On November 7, 1924, Aikman Gymnasium was dedicated. The new building quickly became the center of cultural and social life for the College. An open house for students was held there every Saturday night from 7:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. The stage became the site for productions presented by the Karle Wilson Baker Dramatic Club, concerts, and speakers.

The humorous talents of *The Pine Log* staff resulted in "The Log of Alexander Salamander Johenery Jones, Freshman." The series first appeared on November 15, 1924, and continued through the Spring term in 1925. In diary form, it "chronicled" the trials and tribulations of a "typical" college freshman and his attempts to negotiate the hurdles and pitfalls of college life in the 1920s. It also served as a gossip column.

Primarily a college paper, the staff of *The Pine Log* could not ignore events in Nacogdoches. The rivalry between Nacogdoches High School and Lufkin High School was captured on November 11, 1924, when the Nacogdoches football team (no mascot named) defeated the Lufkin Panthers in a hard-fought game. The score was 9 to 0, and the game was played in Lufkin before a crowd of 3,000 spectators. It seems not much has changed in seventy-five years.

In December, the College Football Banquet was held at the Redland Hotel, later the site of the Godtell Ministry. Head coach Robert Shelton presented fourteen letter sweaters to members of the Lumberjack team. The letter was a "T" in those early days. Sam Davis was elected team captain for the coming season.

When the Spring term got under way, the editor of *The Stone Fort* yearbook called for all students to have their pictures (Kodaks) taken. He also pressed the need for everyone to support *The Stone Fort* by buying a copy of the annual. He published figures that showed the cost to produce the book was estimated at $2,834.

That spring, the SFASTC campus was growing again. Work on the A.W. Birdwell athletic field with a new quarter-mile track and college field was nearly complete.

The formation of an athletic association for women was announced in the issue on February 7, 1925. The new Lumberjack members of the Women's Athletic Association moved immediately to seek admission to the Athletic Conference of American College women.

Crossword puzzles were popular, so inevitably they appeared in *The Pine Log*. The puzzle on February 7 was created by the staff, and knowledge of campus life was required to fill the blanks successfully. The instructions
informed the reader that the puzzle should be solved in not less than thirty-two minutes, but a person of superior intellect could complete it in thirty. 31

British soldier, writer, lecturer, and poet Tom Skeyhill presented his famous lecture, “The Trojan Way,” in Aikman Gymnasium on February 11, 1925. Skeyhill said, “The youth of today must find a way to keep peace; the three great gifts of the late war are skepticism, a desire for peace, and a new sense of religious values – all three gifts together will result in a new civilization opposed to war.” 32

In addition to the location of SFASTC home basketball games, Aikman Gymnasium continued to serve as a cultural Mecca for Nacogdoches. Mozart’s Marriage of Figaro, a comic opera, was presented to an immense audience by a traveling group, the William Wade Hinshaw Company. 33 Pianist Reuben Davies, along with violinist and vocalist Caroline Powers Thomas, also entertained a huge audience. The world-renowned baritone Oscar Seagle offered an excellent performance, 35 while the Sewanee Glee Club also was a crowd pleaser. 36

The College hosted the first regional track meet for high school teams in the East Texas area. The first Piney Woods Track Meet was held April 10 - 11, 1925. Sixteen East Texas high schools sent 175 athletes to compete. Houston’s Central High School took top team honors, while [no first name listed] Marsalis, from Humble, was individual champion. 37

Throughout the year, The Pine Log kept the campus community informed on the struggles of the football and track teams, as well as the triumphs of the basketball and baseball teams. Sam Davis became SFA’s first true sports hero when he lettered in four different sports. Davis played fullback for the football team, guard for the basketball team, first base during the baseball season, and hurled the javelin during track season. 38

By the end of the school year in May 1925, the staff of The Pine Log had swelled to twelve students as budding journalists flocked to the paper’s banner. 39 In the beginning there had only been Mary Edwards and Greer Orton. Together with professor of English Thomas E. Ferguson, the faculty advisor, they began a tradition that has become one of the important threads that binds all who have attended SFA throughout the years.

Mary Edwards  
Professor T.E. Ferguson  
Greer Orton


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