

SOME REMARKS ON THE EARLY HISTORY
OF THE DEPARTMENT OF RECREATION AND PARKS
TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY
"THE FIRST TWENTY-FIVE YEARS"

The Department of Recreation and Parks was created in February, 1965 as part of the newly-authorized School of Natural BioSciences to be located in the College of Agriculture. Agriculture Dean R.J. Patterson, immediately established a college-level committee under the chairmanship of Dr. Charles Leinweber, Head of the Range Science Department, to begin a nationwide search for a department head for the new department. Consultants were employed to speed the selection process.

In early August, 1965, the committee recommended that Dr. Leslie M. Reid, Assistant Professor of Park Administration in the Department of Resource Development at Michigan State University, be invited to visit the campus as the leading candidate for the position.

August was an unusual time to recruit personnel from northern states because of the extreme Texas heat. I flew directly from Michigan to the on-campus airport at Easterwood Field, and was met there by Dr. Richard Potts, a College Dean for Resident Instruction. Hustled into Dr. Potts air-conditioned Ford sedan, we bounced over a mile-long bumpy gravel road through the University farms, while Dr. Potts explained that the main road was closed due to construction of a viaduct under the railroad tracks bisecting the campus.

Dr. Charles Leinweber, Head of the Range Science Department, chaired the Ag College committee to select a head for the newly-approved department. Leinweber arranged interviews for me with Ag College heads, with Dean Patterson, and with University administrators representing research, academics, and extension. A key part of the interview process was a lengthy "Ph.D.-style" seminar at which I responded to a barrage of questions posed by representatives of the 12 Ag College departments. An initial focus was the tentative undergraduate curriculum which had been drawn up by the committee. Comprising about 185 semester hours of courses, it contained pet courses that each committee member felt should be included in the new degree program.

The final part of the visit was an informal meeting with President Earl Rudder. This was a very warm and sociable meeting and, apparently based on a report from the selection committee, concluded with President Rudder walking me to the door of his office. Throwing an arm around my shoulder, I remember him saying, "I really need you to come join me; we're about 20 years behind in this recreation business. I want to make Texas A&M into one of the leading universities in the country. Give us the premier program in the country and I promise you all the resources you need to help you get there."

The impetus for creating a recreation and parks degree program had been generated by President Rudder's belief that such a program would likely be similar to the park and wildlife programs administered by the State of Texas, and would be of benefit to Texas farmers and ranchers. Nevertheless, he put no restrictions on what the academic content of the program should be, simply telling me, "You're the scholar; you tell me what should be in it. My job is to try to finance it."

That single conversation changed me from a mildly-interested candidate into the person who left the campus committed to leaving a ranked teaching and research program at Michigan State to join President Rudder at Texas A&M.

In dreaming about the kind of program that should be created at Texas A&M, I recognized the importance of solid support from the President's office--support critical in broadening the view of recreation held by the Extension Service and the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station.

Several features at Texas A&M were attractive to me: a much smaller institution--about 9,000 undergraduate students; no competing academic degree programs (M.S.U. had recreation-related degrees in five separate departments); minimal statewide duplication (only Texas Tech had an established program in park administration and landscape horticulture); a rapidly-growing Texas population that boded well for professional careers for future graduates; the ability to recruit truly outstanding professors; and freedom to organize the department without the stifling constraints of past traditions.

The A&M Board of Directors confirmed my appointment as Professor and Head of the Department on Saturday, October 9, 1965. With the good help of Mrs. Mary Ruth Patranella, Secretary to the Dean of Agriculture, I immediately began planning to start-up activities for the new department, but the Department of Recreation and Parks actually began to function with my arrival in December, 1965. A single 10 by 12-foot office on the third floor of the new Plant Sciences Building was designated as the Department of Recreation and Parks, and I began unpacking the 2,200 pounds of personal materials, plus books and duplicate materials given me by Michigan State University as a care package to start the new program.

The initial authorizing request to the Texas Coordinating Board in 1964 had asked for Master's and Ph.D. degrees, in addition to departmental autonomy and the B.S. degree. The Coordinating Board had refused the graduate degrees, telling Texas A&M to demonstrate initially the success of the undergraduate degree and the need for advanced degree programs. Approval to award the M.S. and Ph.D. was received in August, 1968.

The Christmas holiday was spent preparing a recruitment leaflet, redoing the request for M.S. and Ph.D. degrees, and preparing official requests to teach undergraduate courses. The revamped curriculum was approved in March, 1966.

The Dean had recommended that I teach no courses in the Spring Semester of 1966, using the time instead to travel throughout Texas to become acquainted with the State, and to concentrate on administrative details, such as refining the tentative B.S. curriculum.

During the last weeks of 1965, while I was still unpacking materials, attending meetings, and becoming acquainted with new colleagues, students who had read announcements about the new program came by to discuss their interest in enrolling as majors. This added to my inpatients, resulting in my decision to offer two of the new curriculum's introductory courses in the Spring Semester. The first of these students was Walter Dabney, a tall, slim freshman in Company D-2 of the Corps of Cadets. Uniform hat in hand, Walt showed up at the office door of Reid's first working day, saying, "Sir, I've heard about this new department and I want into it." I remember saying, "Look at all these boxes to be unpacked; help me shelve this stuff and I'll be glad to talk as we go along." During the next several months, Dabney rarely appeared without another freshman by the wrist to be talked into transferring into Recreation and Parks.

By the start of classes in February, 1966, the new department boasted 17 transfer majors. The first course began with an enrollment of 23 students, and I quickly realized I had overreached myself in attempting to teach and guide approvals through the administration. Fortunately, I met a young professional at the Southwest Park and Recreation Training Institute at Texoma, Oklahoma in February, 1966 who had just enrolled in a Ph.D. program at another university. This person, Carroll Dowell, was persuaded to transfer his graduate program to Texas A&M and was hired as the department's first instructor to help teach until additional faculty could be appointed. C.D. Dowell proved to be the graduate student to whom the department's first Ph.D. degree was awarded, in May, 1970. That first

Ph.D. final defense was an important milestone. A large celebratory cake was on hand in hopes the candidate would pass. But I best remember C.D. distractedly trying to heap more and more ashes and cigarettes into a small ashtray, while answering questions!

From a humble beginning with two instructors and 17 undergraduate transfer students in the initial semester of operation, the Department is today widely recognized as one of the leading departments of its kind in the USA, and internationally--a full service department with Bachelor's, Master's, and Ph.D. degrees, a strong research emphasis, plus formal cooperation in Cooperative Extension and continuing education programs.

In just over 20 years, 108 Ph.D. degrees have been granted by the Department. An additional 197 Master's degrees and over 1100 baccalaureate diplomas have been awarded. During the same period, a total of over 80 persons have served the Department at the rank of Instructor or higher--as Assistant Professor or higher rank and a nearly equal number of salaried staff members ranging from Typist to Administrative Assistant. The Department has also employed full-time librarians, a graphic artist, a journalist, computer technician, word-processing specialist, interpretive specialist and conference coordinator.

Three fundamental decisions led initially to the success of the Department: 1) that the departmental programs would be outdoor recreation-based, public/private, municipal/federal as appropriate to a College of Agriculture and Institute of Renewable Natural Resources with complementary departments of Forest Science, Fisheries and Wildlife Sciences, and Range Science; 2) to be interdisciplinary in bringing to bear a wide diversity of disciplines in attacking resource-based outdoor recreation problems; 3) that senior faculty with national reputations and recognized scholarly stature would be appointed first to serve as a foundation of excellence, in contrast to beginning with junior professors and building from these through eventual promotion to the higher ranks. Thus, approval was gained after less than three years of operation for the first M.S. and Ph.D. degrees in Recreation and Resources Development in the State of Texas.

Among the first professors employed were: an instructor whose background was in Anthropology, another from Park Administration, a Forester, a DPA from Harvard University, a Ph.D. Landscape Architect from the University of Michigan, and a geographer. Over time, a balanced cadre of professors was added--some from leading R&P schools--others from related disciplines who demonstrated a commitment to outdoor recreation and resource development.

The cross-fertilization of disparate backgrounds has been one of the healthy and exciting products of the critical organizational concept. It is one of the reasons the Department attracted top graduate degree candidates from many fields and returned graduates to many different disciplines.

By December, 1971, the Department included 10 full time faculty, 4 Extension Specialists, plus two part-time lecturers; 28 formal courses, 140 B.S. majors and 60 graduate students (25 Ph.D.'s). Graduate students, impatient to enroll in the new program as an alternative to the only other Texas program then in existence (at Texas Tech University), in fact began their studies prior to the time the Coordinating Board gave approval to Texas A&M to award graduate degrees in the Department. Thus, the first handful of graduate students were carried as majors in the Department of Range Science--and two Master's actually graduated with the Master of Range Science diploma.

Though Texas A&M was just in the process of becoming a true co-educational institution, the Department faculty already included its first female professor--Dr. Billie Ingram.

Rapid growth in student enrollments and faculty positions resulted in a constant strain on physical facilities--classrooms, teaching labs, research areas, and faculty offices. The Plant Sciences Building space was increased from the single initial office to a four-room suite that comprised two faculty offices, a secretarial office, a shared classroom, and an equipment/supply room.

By September, 1966, the new Department was moved to more than twice as much floor area in space being vacated by the Dean of Agriculture in the Herman Heep Building. By the time this move was accomplished, negotiations were already underway to add still more space to the expanding Department. Additional classrooms, labs, and faculty offices were obtained in the nearby Entomology Building.

Within a year, additional space was desperately needed, and approval was gained to recombine the major pieces of the Department scattered in four campus locations into one facility. Among several alternatives, the Department was given exclusive occupancy in January 1969 of an attractive brick building which had previously housed A&M's Agricultural Extension Service. Built in 1929 as a horse barn for the mounted cavalry, the remodeled building proved to be ideally suited for all the activities and personnel associated with Departmental programs. A surprise bonus proved to be an empty, unused attic. Attacked by a battalion of hard-scrubbing grad wives, this cleaned-up area became "the loft" home of resident grad students.

THE LOFT

by E. H. Heath

It was old, full of hay and things.
We pitched all that out.
In its place went walls, desks, beer can
collections, pictures of home and dart boards.

We didn't know it then, but those were precious times -
Life was new and we were close -
They were the best of times - laughing when Dan and Ben
would argue -
And the worse times -
When Stephen cried, then burst into rage.

Where have those moments gone?
Will they ever come again?
"If you make an Eagle, I'll give you a degree."

No, youth comes but once -
It is fleeting, then gone and
Wisdom is early to despair,
But to renew beginnings,
Beginnings and memories of Camelot - The Loft
And life was new in Aggieland.

Although Recreation and Parks occupied the "horse-barn" for less than five years, the "horse-barn" is remembered by students and faculty alike with a great measure of nostalgic fondness. By this time, frequent major moves had spawned a standard Departmental joke, "We're moving again--this must be Wednesday!"

Continuing the pattern of frequent moves, by August, 1973, the Department so completely outgrew the horse-barn that another move became necessary--this time to 22,000 sq.ft. four-story Goodwin Hall which had begun its campus service as a male dormitory. This facility became available with the completion of a 12-story tower for its former occupants, the Departments of Oceanography, Geoscience and Meteorology. In Goodwin Hall, the ground floor was partially below ground level. Renovation provided space for teaching labs, seminar room, student lounge, kitchen, and office space

for some 38 students. Since an infrequent storm could result in flooding, students called this bottom level, "the sump--where dirt and filth doth collect."

Even with the added space of Goodwin Hall, adequate space continued to be a major problem, primarily because by this time the faculty and students in the Department were actively involved in major research projects requiring designated space. The problem was partially and temporarily solved by gaining approval to occupy a 2-story WWII-era barracks building which had been erected for a military training program. The Department enjoyed the use of this building for grad offices, research projects, and teaching labs until the site was preempted for construction of the University Cyclotron.

Losing this space provided the necessary justification to persuade the administration to move Recreation and Parks to a still larger building--Francis Hall, initially A&M's College of Veterinary Medicine, and most recently the location of the four departments comprising the College of Business Administration. Approval was also obtained to develop a major Park Operations and Maintenance Laboratory in a separate building, and also to occupy space in yet a third building to house the Department's Recreation and Parks Extension offices.

Occupancy of Francis Hall constituted the sixth major move made by the Department in less than 15 years. Recreation and Parks was laughingly referred to as the "Gypsies of A&M" because of the frequent moves to various locations around the campus. Nevertheless, each move provided the opportunity for further expansion of programs, faculty and students.

With the move to Francis Hall in 1981, the nomadic period in the Department's life came to an end. Francis Hall appears to be the likely permanent location of the Department for the foreseeable future.

At the present time, the Department stands at an important crossroads. It enjoys an established reputation, a core of experienced and able professors, able students, plus solid support from University administrators and professionals in the field.

These remarks certainly don't do justice to the remarkable outpouring of research publications, the awards and recognitions for excellence received, the training workshops and institutes developed, or the services provided to outside agencies and organizations. Nor does it more than hint at the humor and fun that's been part of the history of the Department. If there's any interest in it, maybe we can elaborate on this sometime in the future....

L.M. Reid