‘Hallelujah Day’ as ABAC Celebrates 106th Birthday

TIFTON – Today marks another “Hallelujah Day” for Tifton and Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College.

When the small town of Tifton won the bidding process to serve as the host city for the Second District Agricultural and Mechanical School, the Tifton Gazette proclaimed “The Hallelujah Day Has Come, Tifton Lands the A&M School.” That area high school opened its doors on Feb. 20, 1908 when 27 students walked up the Tift Hall steps. That school eventually became ABAC. Today ABAC turns 106 years old.

“It has been a record-setting year for ABAC with our increase in enrollment and more bachelor’s degree graduates than ever before,” ABAC President David Bridges said. “Those accomplishments would not have been possible without the solid foundation established by the Agricultural and Mechanical School students, faculty, and administration.

“ABAC today is a lot different than it was in 1908. But we still maintain those core values and the promise of a quality education for every student who walks in a classroom building on our campus.”

Bridges, who took office on July 1, 2006, speaks from a unique historical perspective since he is the only ABAC president who is also an ABAC graduate (Class of ’78).

Opening day of the Second District A&M School was declared a holiday in Tifton. Stores and the public school were closed. A special train ran to the campus from downtown Tifton and some 1,200 people attended the opening day ceremony.
Professor W.W. Driskell was the first principal of the Second District A&M School. The first class to graduate on June 14, 1910 included Joel Davis and Maude Paulk from Tift County and Charles Hinson from Grady County.

Tift, Lewis, and Herring Halls were showplaces when they opened in 1908. Today, all three buildings have completed a rehabilitation process. Tift Hall houses the History Room of the college which is open for daily viewing as well as administrative offices. Lewis Hall is home to the Stafford School of Business. Herring Hall is the location for the admissions office and business office.

During the fall term, ABAC enrolled 3,394 students from 151 of Georgia’s 159 counties, 19 states, and 24 countries. That five per cent leap in enrollment bucked a statewide trend as 18 of the 31 University System of Georgia institutions had enrollment drops. Almost 1,300 students live on the ABAC campus in modern housing complexes at ABAC Place and ABAC Lakeside.

The Georgia Museum of Agriculture and Historic Village is now a part of the ABAC campus as well as the Forest Lakes Golf Club. ABAC also enrolls almost 200 students for classes at ABAC on the Square in downtown Moultrie. A recent study showed the impact of ABAC on the south Georgia economy to be over $261 million on an annual basis.

ABAC offers bachelor’s degrees in Diversified Agriculture, Turfgrass and Golf Course Management, Biology, Forestry, and Wildlife Management as well as Social and Community Development, Politics and Modern Cultures, Writing and Communication, and Business and Economic Development under the broad umbrella of Rural Studies.
The roots of ABAC extend all the way back to Aug. 18, 1906 when the Georgia General Assembly enacted Public Law 448. This bill established a state-run Agricultural and Mechanical School in each of Georgia’s 12 congressional districts.

The schools were designed by a single architect so the main campus buildings statewide were almost identical. They were actually college preparatory boarding schools and included students from 14-21 years old.

The course work contained agriculture classes for boys and home economics classes for girls. At the Second District A&M School, only boys were allowed to board during the first term. Students lived in Herring Hall and Lewis Hall and attended classes in Tift Hall.

Community leaders from Tifton actually had to bid against Albany, Camilla, Pelham, and Ashburn for the right to host the school. Thanks to Tifton founder Henry Harding Tift, Tifton won the bid on the eighth balloting at a meeting in Albany on Nov. 23, 1906. The final vote came down to Tifton and Pelham.

In 1924, a bill passed the Georgia legislature to change the high school to a college called the South Georgia A&M College. S.L. Lewis, who had been the principal at the high school on two different occasions, was selected as the first president of the college.

In 1929, the name of the college was changed again to the Georgia State College for Men. Dr. Frank G. Branch was the first and only president. GSCM had a broad range of athletics including a football team. The Rams’ biggest win was a 13-12 victory over the University of Miami on Oct. 16, 1931.
In 1933, the Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia was formed and changed the name of the college again, this time to Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College. It became a two-year college named after Baldwin, one of only two Georgia signers of the U.S. Constitution. Dr. J.G. Woodroof was the first president of ABAC.

ABAC returned to four-year college status on May 16, 2006 when the Board of Regents named it a State College of the University System of Georgia.

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