ABAC Celebrates 107th Birthday on February 20

TIFTON – It was 107 years ago on Feb. 20, 1908 when a special train rolled up the railroad tracks from downtown Tifton for opening day ceremonies at the Second District Agricultural and Mechanical School. Today that school is known as Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College.
“It’s always great to celebrate another birthday,” ABAC President David Bridges said. “ABAC today is much different than it was in 1908 but let’s give the faculty, staff, administration and students of the Agricultural and Mechanical School credit. They set the foundation for the success story that ABAC is today.”

Downtown stores and the public school were closed on that special day in 1908. City officials even declared a holiday. Some 1,200 people attended the opening day ceremony. A total of 27 students walked up the Tift Hall steps to attend classes. Lewis Hall and Herring Hall were the dormitories for boarding students.

Residents of Tifton started getting excited about the new area high school all the way back on Nov. 23, 1906 when Tifton won the bidding process for the site of the school over Albany, Pelham, Camilla, and Ashburn. Captain Henry Harding Tift, founder of Tifton, led the delegation and personally financed a portion of the bid, which was successful on the eighth balloting. The Tifton Gazette proclaimed “The Hallelujah Day Has Come, Tifton Lands the A&M School.”

“It has been a record-setting year for ABAC with our increase in enrollment over the past four semesters and more bachelor’s degree graduates than ever before,” Bridges said. “We still maintain those core values from 1908 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).
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.

Today, 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.

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 now offers bachelor’s degrees in Diversified Agriculture, Turfgrass and Golf Course Management, Biology, Business and Economic Development and Natural Resource Management which features Forestry and Wildlife options. The Rural Studies bachelor’s degree is the only one of its kind in the United States and offers options in Social and Community Development, Politics and Modern Cultures and Writing and Communication.

The roots of ABAC extend 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.

In 1924, a bill passed the Georgia legislature to change the Second District A&M 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 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 which recorded back to back wins over the University of Miami, 13-12 in 1931 and 19-6 in 1932.

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 Abraham 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. Junior and senior level bachelor’s degree classes returned to the campus curriculum in January, 2008 with 41 students. Today, over 1,100 students major in bachelor’s degree programs.

During the fall term, ABAC enrolled 3,458 students, marking it as the only college or university south of Macon in the University System of Georgia to increase its enrollment in both the 2013 and 2014 fall semesters. Over 1,300 students live on the ABAC campus in modern housing complexes at ABAC Place and ABAC Lakeside.