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BOOM TOWN: 1924 - 2024

Key Amarillo institutions celebrate milestone anniversaries

CELEBRATING CLARENDON COLLEGE: 125 YEARS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

By RYAN MCSWAIN

On the western edge of Clarendon, Texas, you'll find the Athens of the Panhandle. "I think the locals named us that," says Clarendon College President Tex Buckhaults. "Early studies at the College featured a classical education. And if you've been by, you've seen the white columns. They bring to mind ancient Greek architecture. We've tried to continue that as we've grown."

The original Athens dates back thousands of years, but the "Athens of the Panhandle" is celebrating its 125th anniversary. Founded in 1898, it's older than all but a few local businesses or organizations, and has been in continual operation longer than any other institution of higher learning in the region.

"We're the best-kept secret in the Texas Panhandle," Buckhaults says.

FROM CLASSROOMS TO COWBOYS

According to Buckhaults, the school's smaller size is an asset. "Depending on the program, we have between a 15-to-1 and 19-to-1 student-teacher ratio," he says. Each student receives more individual attention, which translates into higher graduation rates and successful transfers.

The college offers two-year Associate in Science and Associate in Arts degrees and is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. By enrollment, cosmetology is its largest program, followed by nursing. But its agricultural impact is much older. "Our legacy program is ranch and feedlot operations," says Buckhaults. "We're seeing third- and fourth-generation students, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Going through that program, they get a lot of training on operating farms, ranches and feedlots. There are plenty of field trips!"

The Ranch and Feedlot Operations Program only accepts 28 students a year. "I can't brag on those cowboys enough. They know how to make it in today's world," he says. In the program, students learn creative methods for keeping a farm or ranch profitable, from hunting leases to wind and solar energy.

Clarendon College works with local school districts as well. "We're one of those schools with a high rate of dual credit," Buckhaults says.

"It gives students a head start with college and then university."

Many students, including a large number of education majors, start at Clarendon College before finishing elsewhere. Of its 250 graduates each year, 100 end up at West Texas A&M University. "We push all of our academic students into university. We have programs to help students transfer directly into online and in-person programs with WTAMU and Texas Tech. We also work with schools like Midwestern State in Wichita Falls, Oklahoma Panhandle State University, and Eastern New Mexico University."

Along with the 107-acre campus in Clarendon, the College maintains branches in Amarillo, Childress and Pampa. "Amarillo is cosmetology," says Buckhaults. "Our other sites have technical training. Pampa has welding, RN and BSN nursing, cosmetology, industrial maintenance and academics. Childress has cosmetology, nursing and academics. Clarendon focuses on face-to-face classes and ranch and feedlot operations."

Regardless of their educational focus, attending Clarendon College launches students into a bright future. "For a long time, 100 percent of the kids in ranch and feedlot operations go into well-paying

jobs. Same with our nursing program," Buckhaults says. "As it stands right now, all of our graduates this year are already working part-time or have offers for jobs as soon as they graduate."

SPORTS, SPURS, AND SPOTLIGHTS

Clarendon College didn't just break educational ground in the Panhandle. The school has played a major role in West Texas sports history. In fact, the first interscholastic football game in the Panhandle took place between Clarendon College and Goodnight Academy back in 1903. (Clarendon came out on top, 16 to 10.) But there's more to the

ALL CLARENDON COLLEGE HISTORIC PHOTOS FROM UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS LIBRARIES, THE PORTAL TO TEXAS HISTORY, TEXASHISTORY.UNT.EDU; COURTESY OF PANHANDLE-PLAINS HISTORICAL MUSEUM



CLARENDON COLLEGE STUDENTS, 1920S



PANHANDLE LITERARY SOCIETY, CLARENDON COLLEGE, 1900

school's athletic prowess than football. "In our first 30 years," Buckhaults says, "this was one of the first schools with women's sports like tennis and basketball."

The Clarendon Bulldogs now compete with active baseball, softball, basketball, volleyball, track and cross country programs. Student-athletes have gone on to play for university programs across the country. One of many notable alumni is Ryan Rohlinger, who played third base for the San Francisco Giants from 2008 to 2011.

Other teams compete in different arenas. "We field a livestock judging team from the students in our [ranch and feedlot operations] program," Buckhaults explains. "They judge all kinds: sheep, goats, hogs, cattle. We have a meat judging program winning competitions at the national level. *Sports Illustrated* did a story on us a few years ago." In that May 2019 piece, the magazine identified Clarendon College as a "pipeline program" for Texas Tech's perennially competitive meat judging team. The school's rodeo and ranch horse teams have also brought home championship titles.

HISTORY IN THE MAKING

Like many universities, the school's establishment began with a religious focus. Rev. W. A. Allen and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, founded the Clarendon College and University Training School in 1898 with 21 students and four teachers. By 1916, growing enrollment made it one of the largest junior colleges in the southern U.S. But in 1927, the Methodist Church elected to move the institution to Abilene, where it became what is now McMurry University.

The Clarendon College property—its facilities and its name—remained at the original location. Several interested parties attempted to purchase the facilities, but the Clarendon Independent School Board came out on top and used the property to establish a municipal junior college. After separating from the school district, the college moved to a new location in 1968, where it still sits today.

President Buckhaults has been part of the school's history for a long time himself. "I started as an adjunct in '96, went full time in '99. Been here ever since! I became the full-time

president in June 2020," he says.

Buckhaults isn't just the president. He also owns the school's mascot, a gift from his family: Barcus is a full-blooded English bulldog named after the Reverend J. Samuel Barcus, the fourth president of Clarendon College (1901-1903).

LOOKING FORWARD

Clarendon College has lasted despite operating in one of the least-populated college service areas in Texas. "We have eight counties to focus on," Buckhaults says. "If you add them all together, you've got 50,000 people. We joke with the Amarillo people, 'You've got 200,000 just in Amarillo proper!'"

To encourage enrollment, the college offers financial aid and scholarship opportunities, and maintains a presence across local high schools. State legislation has further boosted funding for community colleges. "House Bill 8 has been very helpful for us to focus on rural students. That particular model is performance-based, and our local kids do very well. We have an outstanding graduation rate," he says.

Despite those challenges, Buckhaults remains optimistic about the next 125 years. "We're currently exploring and modernizing ranch and feedlot operations. There's new drone technology for checking fences, counting animals. With [artificial intelligence], you can plot the drone to count the animals for you," he says. In addition to AI, agriculture students are learning to use a portable ultrasound machine for early pregnancy detection in livestock, fetal development monitoring and disease diagnosis. Potential new vocational programs include farriery (hoof care, including the shoeing of horses), silversmithing and metalwork.

From its early faith focus to today's drone operators, Clarendon College has transformed its educational approach multiple times over 125 years and will continue to do so as it meets the needs of students in rural Texas. ☺



FROM LEFT: SENIOR CLASS, CLARENDON COLLEGE, JUNE 1908; CLARENDON COLLEGE CAMPUS, DATE UNKNOWN