

## HISTORY OF SOUTHWEST TECHNICAL INSTITUTE

World War II was at its peak in the fall of 1944. To bring the war to a successful conclusion, there existed among all the military services a great need for solid fuel rockets that had proven to be extremely effective on land, sea, and in the air. A shortage of production plants for rockets made it necessary to proceed with great haste to develop facilities for the manufacture and storage of this new weapon.

The Navy Department selected a site in south central Arkansas comprised of 69,000 acres for the construction of the only facility in the United States devoted wholly to the assembly, loading, and storage of rockets. The area was strictly rural in character and sparsely populated. Farming had been declining for the past thirty years and return of the land to forest was well underway. The area was located four miles northeast of Camden, Arkansas, including land in both Calhoun and Ouachita counties.

The proposed Naval Ammunition Depot was named after one of the foremost advocates of the new solid fuel rocket, Captain Samuel Robert Shumaker. Captain Shumaker was born in Huntington, Pennsylvania, on October 17, 1894, and died at sea aboard the USS New Orleans, on May 26, 1944. The Navy Department felt it fitting that the new installation be named in honor of this officer and the Shumaker Naval Ammunition Depot, Camden, Arkansas, became official.

Construction of the new facility began on November 21, 1944, with the base of operations located at the existing airport which was closed to all air traffic. The airport facilities were converted to offices, barracks, cafeteria, and motor pool usage. Hangars were used as offices and design buildings; runways were used as parking areas, utilities were enlarged and, in addition to existing buildings, hundreds of buildings and hutments were accommodations for 14,000 people in the airport area. At the peak of the construction period, approximately 20,000 persons were employed.

Normally, the development of an industrial area is done in three stages; adequate draining is provided, adequate roads are built, and the actual construction of industrial facilities begins. In this project it was necessary to begin all three stages at the same time due to the urgent need for rockets. Consequently, problems of construction existed in great multitude requiring ingenuity combined with long hours of hard work to overcome these problems.

The sense of urgency and the bulldog tenacity of the workers caught up in a war strewn with atrocities enabled the first rocket produced at the Shumaker Naval Ammunition Depot to come off the line on April 24, 1945, four months and four days after work on the project was initiated. Construction continued and production increased in proportion with rockets from the facility playing a significant part in the successful conclusion of the war.

With the surrender of Japan, production was reduced in the fall of 1945, in keeping with peacetime requirements. By 1949, the Depot dropped from a reduced operational status to a purely maintenance status. With the beginning of the Korean conflict, there was again a heavy demand for rockets, and a considerable production program was initiated by the Navy in the facilities. With the armistice of July, 1953 in Korea, production was reduced as the need for rockets diminished.

For a number of years, limited production of rockets continued and were stored in the more than 700 earth covered magazines comprising over two and one-half million square feet. With adequate supplies to meet a national emergency in storage, production was halted and the Shumaker Naval Ammunition Depot was “moth balled.”

Early in 1960, the property was declared surplus by the General Services Administration and preparation for its sale to the highest bidder was made. The properties included in the sale were 69,000 acres of land on which was located 1,077 permanent structures, 140 miles of hard surfaced roads, 48 miles of gravel roads, 160 miles of railroad, adequate water, sewer, electrical, gas, and telephone facilities along with all machinery, furniture and other physical properties.

On April, 1962, sealed bids were received by the General Services Administration for the land and improvements. On the basis of the highest bid submitted, the Brown Engineering Corporation of Houston, Texas, acquired certain properties of the 69,000 acre tract. The portions designated as tracts 1,2,4 and 5, total 25,600 acres, contained the bulk of the buildings and service facilities. The remainder of the area, containing portions of the magazine area and the rocket test range, was heavily wooded and was acquired by International Paper Company.

It was the intention of the Brown Engineering Corporation to salvage all physical properties for sale on the surplus and salvage markets. As the permanent loss of the huge facility created a crisis of unemployment in the area, Senator John L. McClellan approached the Brown Engineering Corporation officials with a proposition of turning the Depot into an industrial park. The Brown officials agreed to halt salvage operation for two years and work toward the development of an industrial park.

After a slow start the industrial park began to develop with industries that had government contracts to produce ammunitions and related war materials for the Vietnam War. The first industry to locate was Masterson of Arkansas; a garment factory followed by International Telephone and Telegraph which manufactured radio communication equipment, Aerojet General, which manufactured chemical and explosive devices, Baldwin Electronics, which manufactured 2.75mm rockets, and Pace Corporation which manufactured smoke bombs, trip flares, and a host of other chemical and explosive devices. Employment in these plants exceeded 3,000 workers. The industrial park has continued to grow over the years and today has in excess of twenty industries located in the area.

One of the greatest handicaps experienced by the Brown Engineering Corporation in locating industry in the park was the lack of a pool of trained technicians, or at least a facility for training workers. In an effort to solve this problem, the Brown Corporation conceived the idea of donating to the State of Arkansas the administrative area composed of six buildings and seventy acres of land for the purpose of developing an institution to train technicians.

On December 13, 1965, Mr. George Brown of the Brown Engineering Corporation contacted Governor Orval Faubus offering to donate the property to the State of Arkansas for the development of such an institution. A few days later Governor Faubus presented this proposal to the State Board of Education for their consideration. A committee was appointed by the Board to visit the properties and determine if the proposal was feasible. On January 20, 1966, Perin Jones and Alan Lynch of the State Board of Education, Dr. Lawrence Davis, Lewis “Red” Johnson, and Robert Webb of the State Advisory Council for

Vocational Education, and Marion Adams, J. C. Ruppert and Charles O. Ross of the Education Department were the guests of George Brown and toured the proposed properties.

It was agreed by most members of the group that the facilities were adequate to provide an additional, badly needed, segment of the educational system to Arkansas people and industry. However, it was also agreed that financing such a venture would pose a tremendous problem. The buildings and improvements were in good condition to have been receiving only token maintenance for a number of years, but would require considerable renovation to serve the need.

The following report was made ready for presentation to the State Board of Education on February 28, 1966:

“The buildings are of good, solid, permanent construction. Wood trim and finish is in need of paint. Some areas are large enough for laboratories, shops, and classrooms. Other areas are arranged in small offices or areas and partitions will need to be removed to make classrooms.”

“The site includes about 75 acres at the entrance to the Depot which was the administrative area. The area is very attractive with good streets.”

We were informed by the Brown Foundation representatives that it might be possible to secure federal funds through the Economic Development Administration of the Department of Commerce to remodel the buildings and purchase equipment and use the value of the property (possible two million dollars) to match federal funds. In order to qualify for these funds the county (Calhoun County) must be designated a high unemployment or low income area. Both Calhoun and Ouachita counties have been so classified in the past but the classification was withdrawn the previous fall. The Arkansas Employment Security Division made a house to house survey to determine if Calhoun County could be re-designated as an area of above average unemployment.

The Department of Education Staff had secured copies of the curriculum of a similar institute planned at a military base near Waco, Texas. From this, and existing knowledge of technical needs in Arkansas, a list of courses were developed for consideration.

An application for a grant of \$750,000 was submitted to the Economic Development Administration and Senator John L. McClelland announced the approval of the grant on November 3, 1966. The approval was made contingent on the State spending an additional \$617,000 on the institution. On Saturday, November 5, 1966, the State Board of Education approved the school under provisions of Act 328 of 1957. The name of the institution selected by the board was “Southwest Technical Institute.”

Advisory Committees selected statewide, were formed for each proposed course. Meetings of the Advisory Committees were conducted on the proposed campus during the winter months of 1966-67 by J. C. Ruppert and Charles O. Ross.

The following courses were selected and approved by the Advisory Committees: Aviation Maintenance Technology, Commercial and Advertising Art, Architectural Drafting and Design Technology, Mechanical Drafting and Design Technology, Civil Engineering Technology, Industrial Chemistry, Mechanical Technology, Electronics Technology, Instrumentation and Automation Technology, Food Preparation and Management. Each

course would be two years in length and an Associate Degree would be awarded upon successful completion of the course.

On July 26, 1967, bids were opened by the State Board of Education for the purpose of awarding a contract for the renovation of the buildings. Simmons and Sons of Warren, Arkansas, was awarded the contract as the lowest bidder. Work began on the buildings in August, 1967.

Effective March 1, 1967, the Board appointed as Director of Southwest Technical Institute Charles O. Ross, Director of the Cotton Boll Vo-Tech School at Burdette, Arkansas. Mary Katherine Ross was employed as a secretary and Howard Landreth was employed to recruit students for the institution. As the appropriations for the operation of Southwest Technical Institute did not go into effect until July 1, 1967, funds were made available by the Camden School District and they were reimbursed for all expenditures from March 1, 1967 to June 30, 1967 by the State Department of Education.

The Fire Training Program conducted by the State Department of Education was transferred to Southwest Technical Institute on July 1, 1967. Prior to this date, all fire training classes had been conducted in the field by R. Whit Murphy, Sr., Elmo Anderson, Ralph Scantlin, and Gene Hendricks. The main fire station located on the campus had been acquired in the grant from the Brown Foundation would be the site of the Fire Training Academy. The fire station renovation was not included in the contract and was done by maintenance employees of the school. Three new fire trucks and much training equipment was acquired for use by the Academy. R. White Murphy, Sr. was designated as the chief instructor and an office was set up in the administration building for the Fire Training Academy.

Purchase of all the thousand of items needed to establish the various programs was made during a period of three months. Specifications for all items from a colony counter to a computer system were written by the Director and submitted to the State Purchasing Department. Officials of the department said this was the largest job they had been confronted with up to that date.

Key personnel were employed along with some instructors to go on the payroll July 1, 1967. Hoyle Mann was selected as an Assistant Director for Instructional Programs, Bobby E. Dempsey as Assistant Director for Finance, and Larry Young as Assistant Director for Student Affairs.

The contractor was on schedule with his work when the school was dedicated on October 19, 1967. The occasion was appreciation day for Senator John L. McClellan in Camden. Senator McClellan dedicated the Arkansas Co-op Electrical Generating Plant, named for him, and located on the Ouachita river, East of Camden, at 3:00 p.m. and Southwest Technical Institute at 5:00 p.m.

As the facilities were not ready for occupancy, a large tent was erected in front of the Administration Building for the occasion. The Golden Knight Parachute Team was on hand as well as a large group of national and state political and industrial dignitaries. The crowd was estimated to be more than 5,000. Some 1,500 remained for the ceremonies under the tent.

Among those present were: Senator and Mrs. John L. McClelland (D. AR.); Senator and Mrs. William Fulbright (D.AR.); Senator Jim Eastland (D. Miss); Mr. and Mrs. George

Brown, Houston, Texas; Federal Judge Oren Harris; W. W. Grief, Adm. EDA, Austin, Texas; Courtney A. Evans, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, D. C. ; Congressman David Pryor (D. AR); Former Governor of Arkansas, Ben Laney; "Footsie" Britt, Lt. Governor of Arkansas; Roger Lewis, President General Dynamics; John F. Jordan, President Baldwin Electronics; Lucien Wulsin, President D. H. Baldwin Company; Marshal McGrath, Vice President International Paper Company, New York; and many other political and industrial leaders.

It was a great day for Senator McClelland and gave many people an opportunity to express their gratitude for his leadership in representing Arkansas in the Senate so many years.

The contractor was nearly finished with his work when a tornado and hail storm came through the area in April, 1968. The clay tile roofs on all the buildings were a complete loss. Over 1,000 window panes were broken and leaks damaged the ceilings in many of the rooms.

The check for damage from the Hartford Insurance Company exceeded \$93,000. Work began immediately to repair the damage so the school could open in September, 1968.

During the summer of 1968 the State Board of Education approved the purchase of two large dormitories from the Brown Foundation. The purchase price was \$900,000 to be paid over a period of some 25 years. The Board authorized two bond issues. A Series A Bond in the amount of \$330,000 for renovation and equipping the dormitories. These bonds were sold to banks in the area and were to be paid in eight years. Only part of this bond issue was needed to do the necessary work. The Series A Bonds were paid on schedule. The Series B Bonds in the amount of \$900,000 were held by the Brown Foundation. The principal on these bonds was not due until after the Series A Bonds matured.

On September 9, 1968, Southwest Technical Institute officially opened for classes. Governor Winthrop Rockefeller and Ralph O'Connor, President of Highland Resources (Formerly Brown Engineering Corporation), were the principal speakers at the opening ceremonies. Governor Rockefeller announced that the dormitories occupied by students would be named Brown Hall in honor of George Brown.

The full-time enrollment for the first class was 144. In September of 1969, the full-time enrollment increased to 218.

On August 14, 1970, associate degrees were awarded to 67 graduates of the first class. Jack E. Meadow, Vice President of Georgia-Pacific Corporation and a member of the State Board of Education, were the principal speakers.

The enrollment of full-time students for 1970-71 was 220 representing 52 of the 75 Arkansas counties, 6 states, and 1 foreign country (Hong Kong). During this year 937 students were enrolled in special part-time classes on campus, and 3,000 in classes conducted off-campus.

In the Spring of 1971, the final payment representing ten percent of the E.D.A. grant was received. This money (\$75,000) was used to build a 13,000 square foot hangar building on an additional plot of land donated by the Brown Foundation. The hangar was located near the shop building and the aircraft engine test cells.

On August 6, 1971, 50 students were awarded associate degrees. The principal

speaker at the commencement program was John F. Jordan, President of Baldwin Electronics.

During the 1971-72 school year, 244 full-time students enrolled in the various technical programs. During this school year an application for a grant from the Environmental Protection Agency was made. The grant was approved to build a mobile training facility. The unit was designed by the drafting department and contained a complete wet chemistry laboratory, office, and classroom for 20 students. The unit went into operation at Stuttgart, Arkansas, during the later part of April, 1972.

On August 10, 1972, 59 graduates received associate degrees. Dr. Arch W. Ford, Director of the State Department of Education, was the principal speaker.

In September of 1972, 250 full-time students enrolled in associate degree programs.

Title to a 23 acre plot three miles off the campus was donated by J. W. Weiner, of Shreveport, Louisiana, for the purpose of building a training ground for firemen. Tommy Gaughan of Camden was instrumental in getting the land donated to the school. Representative Julian Street of Camden, and Ray Smith of Hot Springs introduced a bill in the 1973 General Assembly to appropriate \$250,000 for the construction of the training ground. Senator J. A. "Dooley" Womack of Camden provided leadership in the Senate for passage of the bill.

This appropriation was a good start in building one of the best fire training grounds in the Southwest. During the 1975 meeting of the General Assembly Governor David Pryor recommended that an additional \$844,000 be given to the Fire Training Academy for Phase II construction. This appropriation was made and the academy training ground was completed and dedicated in 1977 as the "R. Whit Murphy Fire Training Ground." Mr. Murphy, having been involved in fire training for the state for over 25 years prior to his retirement, was very deserving of this honor.

Written by Charles O. Ross July, 1977.