

EYEWITNESS TO SOCIAL CHANGE:  
THE RACIAL DESEGREGATION OF EAST TEXAS STATE COLLEGE,  
1964-1972

By:  
Debra Greenwell Wilkison

Submitted to:  
Dr. Donald E. Reynolds,  
Professor and Head  
Department of History  
East Texas State University  
Commerce, Texas

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As a small child, Velma Waters could walk across the campus of East Texas State Teachers' College to bring her father his lunch where he was employed as a laborer on a WPA project, but she could hardly hope to grow up and study at this whites-only state-supported institution of higher learning in her hometown of Commerce, Texas. Nevertheless, even as a young child Velma Waters did have such dreams as did many of her generation of African-Americans growing up in the Jim Crow South. Eventually, her generation would overcome many of the barriers the segregationists had built in their way. A part of that story is how racial integration came to East Texas State College in Commerce, Texas, in 1964. It is probably much like other such incidents at colleges and universities across the South, for the movement to racially integrate higher education was a struggle that spanned the length and breadth of the American nation. Much of that story is already known and rightfully celebrated. The annals of the Civil Rights movement resound with the names of people and places that changed America's social order. But, if the story of the triumph of that movement has real and lasting meaning, we must also find it in the as yet untold stories of struggle, perseverance, and victory in the lives of common people on the local level. For it was, after all, on the local level that the struggle for and against segregation had begun in the late nineteenth century South.

Legally-mandated racial separation had been upheld by the Supreme Court in the 1896 precedent-setting case of Plessy v. Ferguson. The Court had ruled that state-enforced racial segregation did not violate a citizen's Fourteenth Amendment

guarantee of "equal protection under the law" if separate facilities were equal.<sup>1</sup>

It took sixty years of perseverance and frequent litigation to reverse the "separate-but-equal" doctrine. After 1910 most of the court battles were fought by an important new nation-wide group whose goal it was to achieve equality for America's blacks by working within the existing system. This group was the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. To finally overturn Plessy, lawyers for the Legal Defense Fund of the NAACP had to show that even when equal, the act of separation alone constituted a betrayal of the "equal protection" clause in the Fourteenth Amendment.

On May 17, 1954, Chief Justice Earl Warren delivered the Court's now-famous verdict. The Court ruled that to separate children from others of similar age and qualification solely on the basis of race "generates a feeling of inferiority . . . that may affect their hearts and minds in a way very unlikely to be undone. . . . Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal."<sup>2</sup> Further, the Court ordered the nation's schools to desegregate with "deliberate speed," a phrase that would certainly accurately reflect the slow and uneven task of implementing the Supreme Court ruling. By 1957 only three major school districts in the South had begun desegregation. The rest of the South's schools appeared to be following segregation's leaders in their call for "massive resistance" to the Brown decision. That same year, 1957, also saw the first of many dramatic confrontations between segregationists, led by local and



state officials, and civil rights advocates, backed (with varying degrees of conviction and enthusiasm) by the federal courts and the President.

The first major confrontation came in Little Rock, Arkansas. There the Governor of the state used Arkansas National Guardsmen to deny the admission of nine black teenagers to a previously all-white high school even after that action had been approved by the School Board and ordered by a federal court. The black students were admitted to Central High School in Little Rock only after President Dwight D. Eisenhower, thoroughly disgusted and plainly unenthusiastic, executed the federal court mandate specifically desegregating Central High School. Despite the power of the federal Government, Faubus managed to thwart desegregation the following year by shutting down not only Central High, but the rest of the state's public schools as well. Similar patterns of resistance within state governments and institutions of higher learning continued to develop across the South.<sup>3</sup>

Three years after Faubus shut down public education in Arkansas to stop desegregation, like action was threatened in Mississippi in response to an attempt to desegregate higher education in that state. In 1961, James Meredith, a native Mississippian and U. S. Army veteran, became interested in transferring from all-black Jackson State to the all-white University of Mississippi at Oxford. On September 3, 1962, a federal district court ordered the University to admit Meredith. Immediately the Governor of Mississippi Ross Barnett rallied the segregationist forces. "[W]e must either submit to the unlawful dictates of the federal government or stand up like men and tell

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them. 'Never.'

Nevertheless, a cautiously determined Kennedy Administration knew that it must enforce the decisions of the federal courts. On the other hand, President John F. Kennedy was also determined not to alienate the Southern white vote in the 1964 presidential election by using the U. S. Army as Eisenhower had in Little Rock. Instead, a force of several hundred U. S. Deputy Marshals secretly escorted Meredith on to the Mississippi campus. That evening the Marshals were attacked in what came to be known as the "Battle of Oxford." One hundred-sixty marshals were injured, twenty-eight of them were shot, two men were killed, and, 200 were arrested. Finally, Kennedy had to send in the Army anyway, to regain control of the campus. The next morning, Meredith was registered as a student at the University of Mississippi; the following summer he graduated with a bachelor's degree in political science.<sup>5</sup>

In 1963 Alabama Governor George C. Wallace chose to defy a federal court order just as Barnett had done in Mississippi. Wallace literally stood in the doorway of the University of Alabama to deny entrance to James Hood and Vivian Malone and the Justice Department officials seeking their registration and admission. In this case, the speedy federalization of Alabama's National Guard defused the situation and led to the peaceful desegregation of the University of Alabama. Victory had not come quickly or easily in Alabama, however. Earlier, Autherine Lucy had been admitted as a student only to be suspended after a white mob terrorized the campus. When she complained that mob rule held



sway in at the University of Alabama. she was permanently  
expelled.<sup>6</sup>

The foundation for the court-ordered desegregation of "Ole Miss" and the University of Alabama, as well as the Brown victory, had been laid years earlier in a Texas case involving racially segregated higher education. In 1946 Herman Sweatt had applied for admission to the University of Texas School of Law. The Texas administration offered to accommodate Sweatt's request by offering him "separate-but-equal" facilities away from campus in the basement of a downtown building where he would be taught by part-time faculty members. Surprisingly enough, approximately 2,000 University of Texas students supported Sweatt's appeal for nonsegregated education with a mass demonstration during which student leaders accused the University of hypocrisy.<sup>7</sup>

Sweatt rejected the offer for segregated training and sought legal representation from the NAACP. NAACP lawyers argued in a lawsuit filed on Sweatt's behalf that he would not receive benefits comparable to those available to his white classmates from the segregated training offered him. The NAACP team argued forcefully that one's association with fellow students of the law was an essential part of the normal educational process offered by law schools. The lower court ruled against Sweatt, thus providing the NAACP an opportunity to appeal the case. The case eventually reached the Supreme Court, which ruled against the University of Texas School of Law in June, 1950. Yet, the Court was careful to make sure that the decision could not be interpreted as a sweeping mandate for desegregation of the nation's colleges or schools. The decision, the Court indicated,

Christine Young Robinson became the first black student to attend Sul Ross State in Alpine.<sup>12</sup> In the case of West Texas State, it took a federal district court order, the result of a 1959 lawsuit, to open the doors of WTSC to black students in the fall of 1960.<sup>13</sup>

The remaining four colleges did not admit black students until 1964. According to officials at Southwest Texas State, that school admitted three blacks in time to have Southwest's most famous alumnus, President Lyndon B. Johnson, sign his landmark Higher Education Act of 1964 on an "integrated" campus.<sup>14</sup> Stephen F. Austin State also admitted one black school teacher as a graduate student in 1964.<sup>15</sup> By the end of the Spring 1964 semester only two lone holdouts among the seven Texas State Colleges maintained segregationist policies: Sam Houston State in Huntsville and East Texas State in Commerce. But, the end was near for segregation even at these two East Texas institutions.

The catalyst for change at Sam Houston and East Texas was a lawsuit filed by two east Texas women who had been denied admission to Sam Houston State College because they were Negroes. They were Maxine A. Haywood, a public school teacher from Texarkana, and Carolyn Jean Kirkwood, a May, 1964, high school graduate from Huntsville. In an April 1 letter to Haywood, Sam Houston State's Acting Dean of Admissions Reed Lindsey had denied her request for admission to the college "solely on the basis of race," the lawsuit charged. Shortly thereafter, Kirkwood likewise had been denied admission to the school. The plaintiffs' Houston lawyer Weldon H. Berry charged that Sam Houston State was



was to apply only to graduate schools. Further, the desegregation order could only be applied in cases where similar separate state programs for blacks did not exist. In other words, Sweatt could go to law school at Texas, but the Plessy v. Ferguson decision<sup>8</sup> still stood until the Brown ruling four years later. This was not to be the last the state of Texas, or its leading university, would hear of this controversy on the issue of racial segregation, however.

In September, 1956, due to a series of lawsuits and court-orders, the University of Texas at Austin became the first major educational institution in the South to admit blacks as undergraduate students. Yet, the University officials chose to implement a policy of "step" or partial integration which banned black students from participation in key programs of the University community. For example, Texas officials barred blacks from participation in University-sanctioned public dramatic performances, the marching band, and varsity athletics. Further, they were forced to live in unequal, inadequate, and separate<sup>9</sup> (often off-campus) housing. It was not until 1968 that the City of Austin acted to ban racial discrimination in housing. This "step" method yielded only to constant pressure from students and the courts. Instead of assuring a smooth transition from whites-only to integration, it resulted in costly court battles, demonstrations, and bad publicity for the University.<sup>10</sup> If other public colleges in Texas were watching the performance of the University of Texas, that most prestigious of Texas institutions offered them few practical guides. And soon other public



educational institutions in Texas would need such a guide.

From the 1920s through 1968 a Board of Regents, appointed by the governor, governed the seven-member state teachers' colleges system to which East Texas State College belonged. The Regents' controlled all financial matters, including the all-important state funds appropriated for faculty salaries, building materials, and funding for the different departments of the schools. In addition, they delegated the power to interpret and enforce policies and regulations to each state college president. During the tumultuous 1950s and 1960s this Board of Regents controlled Sam Houston State (Huntsville), Stephen F. Austin (Nacogdoches), Southwest Texas State (San Marcos), Sul Ross State (Alpine), West Texas State (Canyon), Angelo State (San Angelo), and East Texas State (Commerce). It was during these two decades that each of these schools changed their segregationist policies and began to admit black applicants. Angelo State led the way and was the only one of these seven colleges to admit blacks during the 1950s.

Almost immediately after the Brown decision, the San Angelo Independent School District elected to voluntarily desegregate the schools of that West Texas city. Following the SAISD lead, Angelo State (then a junior college) did likewise. It is certain<sup>11</sup> that black students indeed were on campus at least by 1957. Officials at Sul Ross State admit to no policy of racially-based exclusion ever at what must have been their uniquely non-discriminatory institution. Indeed, Hispanics had been attending Sul Ross since the 1940s; nevertheless, it was ten years after Sweatt and six years after Brown, when, in the fall of 1960,

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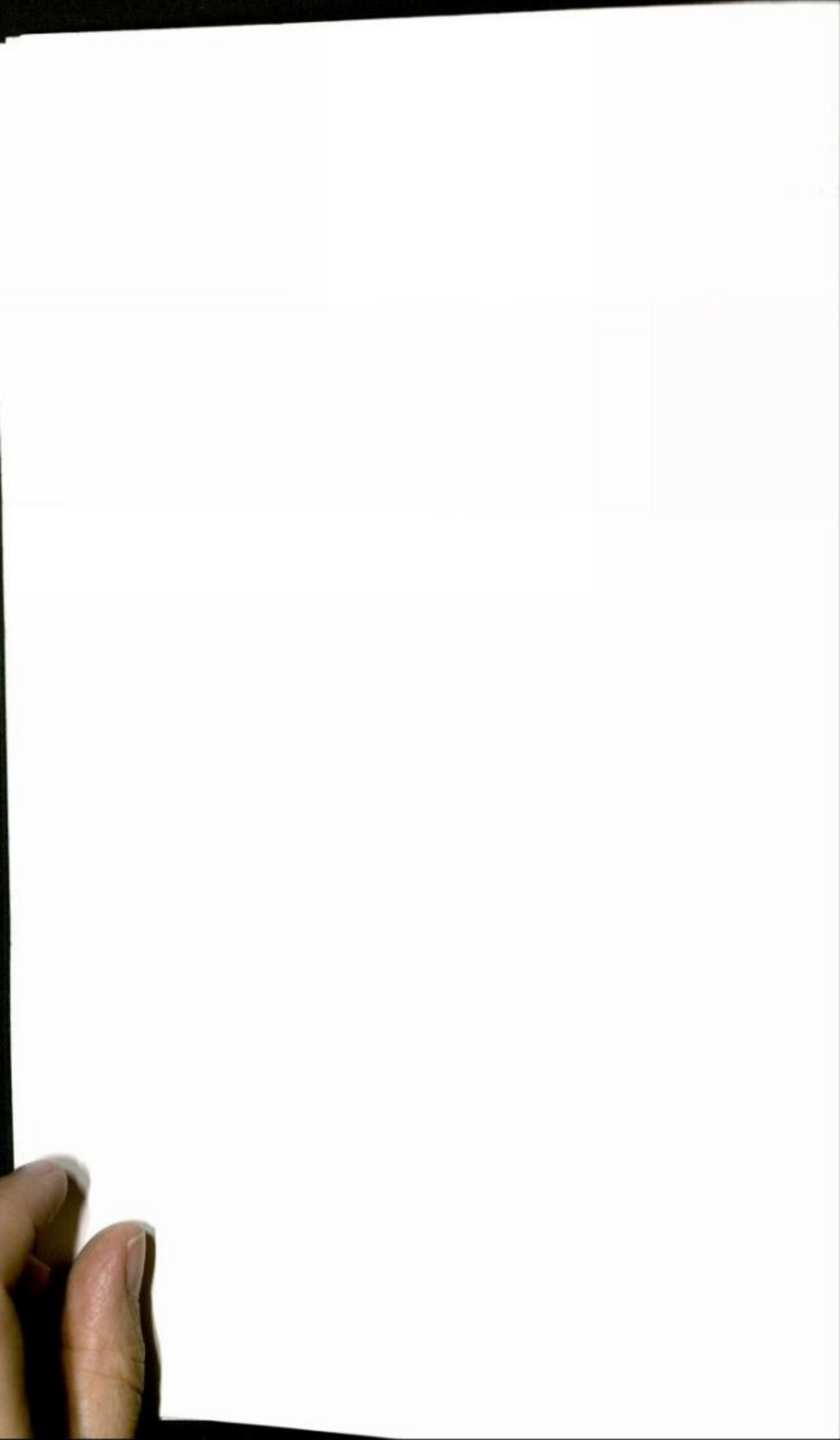
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violating his clients' Fourteenth Amendment guarantees to "equal protection." On Friday, June 5, 1964, Berry filed the lawsuit in Houston before the United States District Judge Ben Connally. By Friday evening the Board of Regents had ordered both East Texas State and Sam Houston State to begin admitting black  
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applicants.

Board of Regents President Newton Gresham had first claimed that Sam Houston State had no such whites-only policy. He followed this, however, by telling reporters that the Regents "had a long discussion of the desegregation situation" on Friday (June 5) and had decided that "qualified" black students ought to be admitted at any of the seven colleges under the Regents' supervision. According to both the Commerce Journal and the Houston Post, Gresham then reiterated to the press that the Regents had "never had a policy that would prohibit a qualified  
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Negro student from attending any state teachers [sic] college." By Tuesday, June 9, Governor John Connally inadvertently contradicted Gresham's assertion that no segregationist policy had existed when he praised the Regents' "voluntary approach" to removing racial obstacles as being a superior method over the  
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"enactment of laws." The Governor failed, of course, to note that the immediate impetus for the Regents' change of heart was the enforcement of Constitutional law in 1960 by a federal judge in the case of West Texas State, and the further overwhelming likelihood of such enforcement by the federal judge in the Haywood-Kirkwood suit against Sam Houston. Furthermore, the irony of the Regents' rescission of a segregationist policy which they claimed had never existed in the first place appears to have



occurred to none of the white educational or governmental leaders at the time. The announcement by the Regents did come at an advantageous moment for Governor Connally, however. At a Governor's Conference on civil rights held in Cleveland, he was able to announce that, with the desegregation of the last two holdouts, all Texas public colleges and universities were officially desegregated.<sup>19</sup> However tortuous the course, this was the route taken by East Texas State to its beginning of racial desegregation.

Long before the June 5, 1964, Board of Regents' decision, East Texas African-American applicants attempted to break the whites-only color line at East Texas State. Without exception, each had been stopped. On June 8, 1954, less than a month after the U. S. Supreme Court's historic Brown ruling, E. T. S. C. President James G. Gee's personal memos reveal that "Mrs. Brown," a black woman from McKinney, Collin County, Texas, had contacted Gee's office to determine if East Texas would possibly admit black students. Gee replied that "our Board of Regents and the Constitution of Texas states that [the] races must be segregated.<sup>20</sup> . . . [W]e [can] not, by law [sic] admit colored people."

Ten years later Gee was still refusing to accept the applications of black students. On May 15, 1964, Gee wrote to Wiley Bedford, Educational Officer at Perrin Air Force Base in Sherman, Texas, asserting that "this institution . . . continues without legal capability of admitting other than white students to enroll in this institution."<sup>21</sup> Gee's statement would seem to be ingenuous, at best. Clearly, if the University of Texas could





"legally" (by Texas own statutes) be desegregated, and if five of East Texas' six sister colleges governed by the same Board of Regents (Stephen F. Austin, West Texas State, Southwest Texas State, Angelo State, Sul Ross State) had "the legal capability" to become desegregated by the time Gee wrote to Bedford, it is unlikely that Gee could have thought that East Texas State College was somehow uniquely captive of white supremacy laws not binding other Texas schools. In the case of the U. S. Air Force, however, Gee added an interesting disclaimer: "Please bear in mind that there is no overt antagonism, but we are simply without the legal capabilities to admit students of the Negro race at this time."<sup>22</sup>

There were others who likewise applied to East Texas State College and were refused because they were African-American. Gee did not save all of his refusal letters<sup>23</sup> and, perhaps, some black applicants were handled at a more routine level without paperwork. The vast majority of East Texas' potential black students during its first seventy-five years of existence simply never applied because the negative reply was a foregone conclusion. Nevertheless, there were those whose desire outstripped their doubts. For example, Myrna Gilstrap of Greenville, Velma Waters of Commerce, and Billy Bradford of Commerce were each in turn denied entrance on Gee's assertion that it was out of his power to allow the admission of an African-American student. Waters and Gilstrap would persevere until the color line came down. Bradford, a cook in the East Texas State cafeteria, "had to leave town" before the<sup>24</sup> desegregation ruling was issued.





These cases sharply contradict Newton Gresham's denial that no policy of segregation had ever existed. They further serve to emphasize the role of President James G. Gee in maintaining segregation at East Texas State College after others in the same system had capitulated. Why was East Texas the last public college in Texas to racially desegregate? This question has already been answered in part above. The rest of the answer lies in the traditions of the region itself. Furthermore, the traditions of the white majority in East Texas State's region, the specific form and direction of President Gee's leadership, the role of the rest of the administration and faculty, the reaction of students white and black, and the part played by the community of Commerce all combined to help shape the nature of the desegregation process once it was begun.

East Texas State is located sixty miles northeast of Dallas in Commerce, Hunt County, Texas, an essentially rural area. Hunt County is a part of East and North Texas historically known for its rich blackland once conducive to the production of vast quantities of cotton. In fact, the Hunt County seat, Greenville, a city of approximately 15,000 people, located fifteen miles southwest of Commerce, once had been an important cotton pressing, baling, and shipping center during that crop's early twentieth century Texas heyday. Perhaps this helps to explain the mindset of many of the people growing up in East Texas. Even in the recent memory of many adults in the mid-twentieth century, blacks had been cotton-pickers and whites had been their employers, and older ways of life and thought prevailed amongst



many white East Texans.

Although blacks and whites had in many cases grown up side-by-side, the predominant view was that the races ought to continue to be officially separate. Pat Spurlock Vance, a native white member of the Commerce community and student at East Texas State in 1964 stated: "We were afraid of them [blacks]. That seems silly now. We heard about [the desegregation of East Texas State]. Not many liked it, but we knew it was coming." Vance admitted that only after desegregation did she and her classmates discover that the black students "seemed nice and decent." <sup>25</sup> Her early attitude and subsequent experiences represents the prevailing way of thinking across the entire South, as well as at East Texas State College. Perhaps the best single representative embodiment of the prevailing attitudes at East Texas State College during this period was its forceful president, James Gilliam Gee.

East Texas State College President Dr. James G. Gee was born, raised, and educated in South Carolina. A graduate of Clemson University, Gee was a veteran staff officer under General George S. Patton during World War II and had previously taught vocational education at Sam Houston State College in Huntsville, Texas, before accepting the position of President of East Texas State in 1947.

Gee's upbringing in South Carolina seems to have had an influence on his decisions as an adult. The evidence seems to indicate that he was a segregationist who was hesitant to bring blacks and whites together in the educational process. Gee had the habit of occasionally saving pieces of contemporary writing



of the status quo found himself taking the initiative and making decisions so that they would not be made for him.

The members of this "secret" committee included many of the leading faculty and administrative staff of the college. The committee included Dr. Kenneth Evans, Head of the Department of Social Sciences, Dr. Graham Johnson, Professor of Business Administration, Dr. C. B. Wright, Dean of the school of Arts and Sciences, Dr. J. Cullen Sowers, Dean of the Faculty and of the Graduate School, Dr. William Truax, Dean of Student Personnel Services, Dr. Wathena Temple, Head of the Department of Home Economics, and F. H. McDowell, Comptroller of the College. <sup>28</sup>

The committee made its report to Gee during the Spring semester of 1963 after studying the problems of other colleges and universities in regard to desegregation at those institutions. The schools studied by the committee were: the University of Texas, Arlington State College, Lamar State College <sup>29</sup> of Technology, and North Texas State University. As might be expected, the University of Texas came to serve as the negative model of what not to do in the committee's report, because of the grief authorities at Texas had brought upon themselves when they tried to obstruct full integration, once partial desegregation had begun. Instead, the committee recommended that if desegregation became an issue, then East Texas State should be <sup>30</sup> fully integrated "from the bottom up." The committee also recommended two other steps by the administration. First, the president ought to "make a statement of policy" to a meeting of all East Texas employees. Secondly, the school's news director should "contact news media to ask their cooperation in helping

ensure a dignified integration." This method, it was hoped, would save money, prevent problems, and avoid unwelcome publicity. Piece by piece, the house of segregation was crumbling, and it was only a matter of time before it reached Commerce.

Thus, when the Board of Regents declared on June 5, 1964, that "all qualified applicants, regardless of race, be admitted to the state's teachers' colleges," Gee began to prepare for full integration at East Texas State.<sup>32</sup> The president sent out a memorandum calling together all college employees. The meeting was scheduled for July 2, just two weeks before the second 1964 summer term was to begin. Dr. Ralph Goodwin, Professor of History, vividly recalled this meeting: "Everyone was included in this meeting . . . the teachers, the secretaries, the administration, and the yardmen."<sup>33</sup>

That address became something of a milestone in the history of the institution. In this rather authoritative speech Gee emphasized the importance of having every East Texas employee present. He went on to make clear two major points. Integration, he told the assemblage, was inevitable and would be happening shortly. Second, there would be no problems associated with racial integration at East Texas State College. He stated:

Our attitudes, our personal conduct, and the manner in which we exercise the utmost of practical and active good citizenship and self-control will be forever recorded in the annals of this institution, this county and the State of Texas as being irreparably bad or infinitely good. . . . [L]et us each here pledge to ourselves and to each other that our individual and joint efforts will always be motivated by the considered best interest of this . . . It is my devout wish and fervent



prayer that the integration of this college  
will come about in an orderly manner . . . 34

From the recommendation from his investigative committee, Gee proclaimed that every facility and function of the college would be made accessible to all students immediately, regardless of race. Interestingly, Gee took the time to squash any notions that the Regents' decree would bring about his own resignation. And, finally, Gee closed his remarks with a revealing personal statement. He said, "[W]e need not take counsel with our fears. Let us go forward together."<sup>35</sup>

Thus, Gee made it very clear to all college employees that racial integration was an established fact. According to one faculty member who heard him speak that July day, the president's address was a message to all: accept integration at East Texas, act in a positive manner in regards to it, or, leave the school.<sup>36</sup> Comptroller of the College F.H. McDowell, future president of East Texas State University, agreed that while Gee personally was a segregationist, "he was also a military man who, when given orders, carried them out."<sup>37</sup> Likewise, Gee expected his own orders to be similarly obeyed. McDowell remembers the second summer term of 1964 to have been "uneventful" in regards to the desegregation of the college. Doubtlessly, this reflected the wishes and the authoritarian leadership of President Gee.

As the ad hoc committee had recommended, Gee also sought to ensure that any press coverage of the process would be minimal and low-key. This desire for minimal publicity is clear from a July 7 news release written by Dr. Jack Bell, head of the Department of Journalism and director of the college's News



Service. In the release, Gee's speech to the faculty and staff was outlined, along with a message to the press that East Texas State desired to downplay the event as much as possible. With the twin goals of informing and admonishing the local press, Bell wrote:

We assume that one or more qualified Negro students may enroll for the next summer session. These students will be handled in exactly the same way in registration as any other student except that they will be given special counseling as to their responsibilities--in keeping with another recommendation of the ad hoc committee. We will not be able to identify from registration forms either "who" or "how many" since information on race will no longer be a part of our records. . . . We plan no stories on the integration--no pictures. We won't know how many, and the only way for you to learn that--if you consider it important for your purposes and needs--is to have someone here during registration to make your own physical count. We hope you will not want a picture singling out any Negro registrant, although that will be your privilege. We will take no such pictures ourselves. . . . [S]o far as we are concerned, integration is an accomplished fact; and we propose to treat it just that way. We hope that you will feel the same way. We do not anticipate any "incidents", and we recognize that this would change the perspective if there were some. We would still hope, of course, that nothing would be ballooned out of proportion.<sup>38</sup>

The local press followed Bell's suggestions. Indeed, the Commerce Journal and the East Texan (the East Texas State student newspaper), each printed portions of Gee's speech. Also, the initial announcement of the Regents' desegregation decision had been front page news in the Journal, as well as in the metropolitan dailies around the state; but, as Gee and Bell hoped, these local papers simply did not report on the actual registration of the school's first black student. And, once the semester was under way, nothing further was written in the local press on the topic.

There were several attempts to prepare the Commerce community for the inevitability of integration at East Texas State. Recent experiences in Little Rock, Arkansas and in Oxford, Mississippi had no doubt demonstrated the importance of townspeople in the desegregation process. In January, 1964, the Commerce First Baptist Church and its pastor, the Rev. Julius M. Stagner, sponsored a week-long civil rights forum by a panel of experts to address "a problem that faces all Christians

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everywhere." In February of that same year, Dr. Frank B.

Jackson, head of the Department of History at East Texas State, spoke to a social club on the history of the Constitutional facets of black civil rights. He concluded by saying,

"[s]ometimes we find the Negro is seeking rights in a manner which we and their leaders deplore." Jackson then went on to give verbal support to the concept of equal voting rights for blacks, although he also recognized that enfranchisement alone was not enough. With the public relations sector well-covered, the

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school had only to worry about how desegregation would work in the community, on campus, and in the classroom.

Reactions to the racial desegregation of East Texas State College by its teaching faculty doubtlessly varied widely, depending on the views of each individual instructor. Some members of the faculty did admit difficulty in making the transition to the racially mixed classroom. One example is Professor Mary Lou Williams, Department of History, who had just



which caught his attention; among these were articles having a negative view of integration of the races in education. Articles supporting integration did not appear. For example, one of the articles Gee saved (and initialed) was the moderately segregationist response by Texas Senator Price Daniels to the Brown decision. In it Daniels argues that integration would be negative for both whites and blacks. He asserted "they [blacks] won't enjoy as great privileges under non-segregation as they have in separate schools." and, yet, the South must "abide by the law as it is now written and maintain peace, order, and harmony."<sup>26</sup>

In another interesting "memento" saved and initialed by Gee, former Supreme Court Justice James F. Byrnes argued in a special U.S. News and World Report reprint that the Brown decision had been an "usurpation" by the Supreme Court which would educationally damage white children. His only hope was for "voluntary segregation" and further argued that "we must preserve what is left of the powers of the state."<sup>27</sup>

Despite apparent personal misgivings about the matter, Gee recognized the reality of coming desegregation at East Texas State. The lessons of not only Brown, but also Little Rock, "Ole Miss," the prolonged battle at the University of Texas, and the West Texas State case each served to show the futility and disruptiveness of resistance to desegregation. Thus, in 1962, Gee appointed an ad hoc committee to investigate the matter of desegregation and charged it with recommending the least destabilizing method possible. In what was probably a frequent occurrence across the South during the period, a former supporter



University in Fort Worth, had received her bachelor's and master's degrees from East Texas State and was originally from the neighboring Delta County community of Cooper. Williams reported that she had been taught by both her parents and grandparents to believe that the races ought to be separated.

Not surprisingly, then, Williams was anxious about racial integration and remembers being afraid of the thought of teaching black students. Williams' first African-American student (whom she encountered after the first "desegregation summer session" was past) was Sam Walton, a member of the East Texas State varsity football team. Williams described Walton as a "delightful person--congenial and courteous," and yet, she (and apparently her white students) were uneasy with the presence of this single black student in the classroom with them. All of the white students avoided sitting near him; instead, they sat near the front of the room. Walton sat in the back of the classroom surrounded by empty desks. Said Williams, "When I think back on it, I feel shame. I didn't look at him or talk to him the entire semester. During the next few years, as I began teaching more and more black students, I began to realize they were just as sweet and smart as the white students."<sup>42</sup>

Another member of the history faculty during this historic period, Dr. Ralph Goodwin, recalled no specific incidents in the classroom and asserted that within his experience there were really no problems. He did recognize, however, that some of the "old-time faculty members were segregationists."<sup>43</sup>

Dr. Jack Bell, long-time faculty member and former head of the Department, was responsible for the press release

sent out after Gee's speech to the faculty and staff. Bell was also advisor of the student newspaper, the East Texan. His staff of student writers carried out Bell's policy, outlined in the first press release mentioned above, of treating the topic of desegregation in a low-key manner. There were only four articles covering the sequence of events. The first appeared on June 12, 1964, which explained the Board of Regents' order to East Texas State and Sam Houston State and told of Gee's plans for complete and immediate integration, including dormitories, cafeterias, the student center, and all other buildings, facilities, and activities.<sup>44</sup> The next two articles reiterated Gee's commitment to complete integration.<sup>45</sup> The only other written account in the school paper came later in July as an editorial. It congratulated the college for its achievement of peaceful integration.<sup>46</sup>

The process was indeed peaceful, according to Bell. He remembered no real problems with either the faculty or the students. In fact, Bell asserted, "out of my friends and those I associated with, I never heard a contrary word."<sup>47</sup> He claimed that within his journalism classes there were both "good" and "bad" black students just as there were with white students.<sup>48</sup>

Bell was also the first department head to hire a black secretary, Karen Carlos. She was the wife of East Texas State athlete John Carlos, the controversial and outspoken track star. Carlos eventually left East Texas State after denouncing what he perceived to be racist discrimination on the part of Athletic Director Jesse Hawthorne. According to Bell, Carlos left ETSC at his teammates' request.<sup>49</sup> He won further fame and notoriety with



a second-place finish in the 100-meter race at the 1968 Olympics. When the the U. S. national anthem was played during the awards ceremony Carlos lowered his head and raised his fist. <sup>50</sup>

Four years after black students were first admitted to East Texas State, the university hired its first black faculty member, Dr. David Talbot, who is currently Professor Emeritus of the Department of Counseling and Guidance. Born and raised in British Guiana, South America, he was educated in private schools before receiving his bachelor's degree from Oxford University. In 1935 he began a second bachelor's at Morris Brown College in Atlanta, Georgia, and graduated Cum Laude in 1939. Talbot also earned two master's degrees in 1954 from Columbia University, and, in 1966, a doctorate from the University of Arkansas. In 1968, he accepted a position as professor of Counseling and Guidance from East Texas State. <sup>51</sup>

Talbot feels certain that his own hiring was a deliberate move by President D. Whitney Halliday, who began actively seeking to hire a black faculty member at East Texas State in response to pressure from a black students' group. The Afro-American Students' Society at East Texas (AASSET) was formed in the wake of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination in April of 1968. This group's membership reflected the growing disillusionment and disappointment of the post-King era. One of their demands at East Texas State was for the university to recruit black faculty.

In the summer of 1969, Talbot was awarded a federal grant to develop an experimental program designed to aid prospective teachers in coping successfully with integration in the classroom. Soon, his program was adopted by East Texas State. The



program was called the Interracial Residence Hall Experience. A group of sixty black and white students (who called themselves "checkerboard students," Talbot recalled) lived together in one of the campus residence halls. They ate together, talked with one another, watched movies together and had group discussions in order to learn more about each other's culture. As a result of the program's success, Talbot often traveled to other campuses to explain and promote the idea. By the time the program ended in 1976, it had been well-received on the national level. Talbot said, "I think the atmosphere during those years was the best this college has had."<sup>52</sup> The program eventually broadened from solely interracial experiences to intercultural ones involving American students (white and black) living with foreign students.

Inevitably, perhaps, Talbot found himself becoming a leader, spokesman, and model for black students at East Texas. Regarding his own early experiences at East Texas, Talbot could not remember any overt acts of discrimination against him. If such acts occurred, Talbot said he did not choose to acknowledge them.

While there were few overt incidents on campus during the early phase of desegregation, there was a variety of viewpoints and reactions among the white East Texas students to racial integration. Pat Spurlock Vance, a Journalism student who attended East Texas from the summer of 1964 through her May graduation in 1967, remembered being afraid of going to classes with African-American students. She had grown up in the Commerce area and had not mingled socially with blacks before. Her early social environment had imparted the segregationist viewpoint as

part of her upbringing. Her only previous contact with blacks had come from interacting in a limited way with African-Americans her father had hired to help pick cotton on the family farm. In spite of her fears of having to deal with black classmates,

desegregation at East Texas State apparently had little effect on her personally; she could not remember having a single black classmate during her college career. She did remember going to classes with newly arrived Middle Eastern students from Iran and Iraq, and offered this analysis of the potential for interracial dating at East Texas State during this period: it would have been, she said, "worse for black and white students to date than<sup>53</sup> it was for white and Middle East students."

Another white student, Connie Greenwell Landmann, attended East Texas State from the first summer session of 1964 until her graduation in May, 1968. According to Landmann, she believed most of the white students were ready for integration and thought it was "silly that it hadn't already occurred at the campus." Therefore, she said, she has "no remembrance of it at all. It was no big deal. It was not an event." Like Vance, Landmann could not remember actually having black students in her classes. Her only recollection of the issue was remembering the administration's obvious concerns that the process go smoothly and that there would be no trouble for the black students. Landmann believes that the "small scale" nature of integration at East Texas helps<sup>54</sup> to account for there being "no trouble." As might be expected, many among the "first generation" of African-American students at East Texas State College had somewhat different experiences to report.

The first black student to enroll at East Texas State was Velma Waters. Although Gee had denied her admission request earlier, she was accepted as a student shortly after the Regents' decision was announced for the second summer term, 1964. Waters grew up in Greenville and Commerce and "always assumed" that she would one day attend East Texas State College. Her father had helped to build Mayo and Binnion Halls, and, when Waters was a child, she would bring her father his lunch on the campus. Although she was then aware of East Texas State's whites-only policies, Waters asserted that even then, while walking across the campus, she "knew" she would someday go to college there. When the news came out of the Regents rescinding East Texas' segregationist policies, Velma Waters, by then a working wife and mother, did not hesitate.

Waters heard the news of the Regents' decision on Monday and learned she must register by Tuesday. The transcripts she needed for registration were not available, so she was forced to demonstrate her competence by taking a General Equivalency Degree exam, although she had graduated from St. Paul's High School in Neylandville (a black community school between Greenville and Commerce where Hunt County blacks had to go if they wanted to graduate from high school) and had already completed one year of college at Texas' Prairie View A & M, a black state college a great distance from her home. East Texas State officials warned her that the test would take between eight and ten hours. Since Waters worked full-time, she did not have that long. She successfully completed the exam in one-and-a-half hours and went on to her job. By the time she reached home after work, the news



of her test-taking skills had already circulated through her proud neighborhood. Soon she learned that she had been accepted as a student at East Texas.<sup>57</sup>

Speaking of walking across campus those first few days of the summer in July, 1964, Waters insisted that "it was no big deal." She had been on campus a great deal as a child and later as an adult resident of Commerce. Many in the black community in Commerce worked on campus in various maintenance, cafeteria, and custodial positions. As a student, however, she did come into contact with some prejudice. Often, other (white) students pretended that she was not there and refused to speak to her. In some ways it was a lonely life; she did not recall seeing any other black students that first summer term. Even later in her career, Waters met few other African-Americans in her courses.<sup>58</sup>

In describing her days at East Texas State, Waters focus upon the positive came across quite clearly. Nevertheless, Waters discussed, albeit somewhat reluctantly, instances during which some of her instructors demonstrated both overt and covert racial prejudice. One such incident occurred in an advanced Home Economics course, "Home Management," taught by a graduate assistant. Waters had received a grade of "96" or better on all of her written work but had the grade of "C" recorded as her final grade in the course. When Waters confronted the instructor about what she felt was a discrepancy, the teaching assistant told her that her fellow (white) students' evaluation of her (part of the grade requirement) had been "C - -". That seemingly minor component of the evaluation process apparently was the sole

criterion the instructor had used in determining her grade.

During Waters' second year in school another such case arose, which she remembers in vivid detail. An English professor gave her the same grade on every essay she wrote, regardless of how well she had performed. She tolerated this until he rewarded one effort with the grade of "F." "I nearly hit the ceiling," she said. Determined to have an explanation of his grading procedures, Waters went to the man's office, but he saw her first and turned away from his office and did not return. The next day the professor likewise absented himself from his office. According to Waters, it was the third day before she was able to see her teacher by simply staying at his office until he was forced to return to it. According to Waters, he told her: "Your content is good, your thoughts are great, but you have a comma problem." Then he said, "I don't like commas." She responded, "I was taught to use commas to separate clauses, phrases, and series of words. I've never been told I have a problem before." Then she told him, "I intend to be treated fairly. I don't expect you to give me anything, but don't take it away from me!" According to Waters, for the rest of the semester that instructor "couldn't look [her] in the eye"; nevertheless, she received a satisfactory grade after all.<sup>59</sup>

A final example of the sometimes daily petty reminders of prejudice occurred during Waters' senior year. Dr. J. Cullen Sowers, Dean of the Graduate School, began encouraging Waters to begin taking graduate courses. He assured her that she would be a successful graduate student and insisted that she immediately go to the appropriate office and pick up the necessary application

forms. There she was confronted by a belligerent office worker who refused to give Waters the forms for admission to the Graduate School. When Sowers learned of the incident, he simply asked Waters to return to the office and see if things were not different. Indeed, they were. Waters reports, "I don't know what he said to her, but this time she greeted me at the door and kept begging my [forgiveness]." Another racially related hardship Waters faced her senior year had to do with student teaching. Those in charge of teacher training reported that they could find no "openings" for her in the nearby school districts, mainly Commerce and Greenville, which usually absorbed East Texas State student-teachers. She was told that if she wanted to do her student-teaching, she must do it nearly sixty miles away in the Mt. Pleasant School District. Reassured by her husband and mother, Velma overcame this obstacle by boarding with relatives in Mt. Pleasant during the week leaving her husband and mother to care for the Waters' children. Among other aggravations she could recall was the way in which white students avoided sitting near her during her first year. Waters reported that she was a voracious note-taker, and as such, liked to sit on the front row in order to hear everything the lecturer said. At first, she recalled, the white students would leave a circle of unoccupied desks around her rather than risk getting too close. Similar behavior occurred in a Physical Education class when none of the white girls would share her clothes basket as was the requirement. Finally, one student separated herself from the group and volunteered to share, thus alleviating to some degree



an embarrassing ordeal for Waters. Yet, Waters asserted that she was able to maintain a positive outlook throughout her career at East Texas State College by choosing to ignore the negative experiences. "I was there to get a degree not stir up trouble." <sup>60</sup>

Although there were negative experiences, Waters insists that the good outweighed the bad. For example, she expressed a deep fondness for some of her teachers who helped to make her college career rewarding. Among the standouts were Dr. Frank B. Jackson, former head of the Department of History, and Dr. Wathena Temple, former head of the Department of Home Economics. Both were very supportive of her desire to attend East Texas State, and each encouraged her when times became hard. On several different occasions anonymous benefactors forwarded tuition money to her at critical moments, most certainly, she is convinced, at <sup>61</sup> the instigation of her special mentors on the faculty.

Waters also received much-needed support not only from her family, friends, and church, but from the white community itself. Mrs. Grace Jackson, wife of Frank Jackson, was always very supportive. Other members of the white community also helped her <sup>62</sup> with necessary items such as clothing.

Waters graduated with a Bachelor's degree in May 1968, the first black undergraduate to do so. She does not personally consider herself to be a pioneer. She said she simply went to get a degree, "not to cause trouble." She expected more social problems than she actually encountered. According to Waters, when confronted with racism by individuals she told herself, "it's not my problem if they're prejudiced." She went on to a successful career as a Veteran's Administration nutritionist.

and, later, educator. Along the way Waters earned an advanced degree from Stephen F. Austin State University and also was able to send each of her nine children to college. Thus, she was able to realize the goal which had spurred her on to educate herself in the first place: a college education for her children. <sup>63</sup>

In the years just after Waters' pioneering efforts at East Texas there were only three notable racially related incidents on campus. Two of these involved accusations of racially motivated mistreatment of black athletes by the white coaches within the Athletic Department. One occurred in 1969, another in 1972. Rightly or wrongly, both were resolved fairly quickly through the intervention of the Athletic Council. In the first instance, a group of black trackmen first quit the track team and then requested the firing of their track coach and the Athletic Director Hawthorne. They were incensed over an incident at an out-of-town track meet where the black athletes had been denied a noon meal and were forced to ride over 200 miles in rain-soaked sweats. Their white teammates had been allowed to eat, shower, and to change into dry clothes. Through the intervention of East Texas' only black faculty member, Dr. David Talbot, Department of Counseling and Guidance, the athletes received what amounted to an apology from their coach and were reinstated on the team. <sup>64</sup>

In 1972, several black football players complained of abusive treatment at the hands of East Texas Head Football Coach Ernest Hawkins. They charged Hawkins and members of his staff with various instances of bigoted and discriminatory behavior. According to the students, Hawkins made disparaging comments

about blacks to his team, asserting that blacks had no leadership abilities. It was further charged that injuries to black players went unattended, and that the staff often assumed that they were not really hurt. Finally, the black athletes felt that their coaches failed to provide aid or interest in their academic studies. In an appearance before the Athletic Council, Coach Hawkins and a member of his staff denied that any of the allegations were true. After deliberating, the Athletic Council took no action except to suggest the hiring of a black coach and the acquisition of tutoring resources for interested athletes.<sup>65</sup>

The most significant early racial incident concerned the black student population in general. On May 7, 1968, the new president, D. Whitney Halliday, who replaced the recently retired Gee, was presented a "Declaration of Rights," signed by sixty representatives of a newly formed group known as Afro-American Student Society at East Texas. Some of the rights the students demanded of the administration were: to belong to AASSET without fear of intimidation by the Administration, to live in any apartment available to any other University students, to have black students proportionately employed by the university, to have a Negro history course added, or, to have black history assimilated into the American history courses, to have black faculty members, and, finally, to end all activities which expressed "racist" attitudes.<sup>66</sup> East Texas State student Joe Tave, spokesperson for the group, requested an immediate response from Halliday.

President Halliday responded to the AASSET "Declaration" the next day in a letter to Tave. Halliday asserted that some of the



demands were already "under consideration." He then assured the group that its members would be free from Administration intimidation as long as AASSET (or any other campus organization) did not "work contrary to the stated purposes, objectives, and responsibilities of the institution." In response to the housing question, Halliday assured Tave that the problem was being pursued, and that "[s]everal apartment complexes have indicated that they will accept Negro occupants." Halliday stated that there was to be no discrimination in employment practices at East Texas, and that employment would be based solely upon the applicant's qualifications. Further, Halliday asserted that "the effort to recruit full-time Negro faculty members has been underway for more than a year. I must advise you that this is an extremely difficult task because this person is in great demand throughout the United States." Furthermore, said Halliday, "despite these problems, we are now in conversation with several Negro prospects in the hope that they would join our faculty next fall."<sup>57</sup>

On May 13, Halliday, Tave, three faculty members, and the Dean of Students met to discuss more fully the issues brought forward by AASSET. Two days later, Halliday reported on his negotiations with AASSET to the Student Senate--a meeting well attended by AASSET members at the invitation of Halliday. Afterwards, at a follow-up AASSET meeting, four blacks (non-students, according to Halliday) urged AASSET to begin protest demonstrations on the East Texas campus. According to a letter from Halliday to Commerce mayor and Journalism Department Head,

W.J. "Jack" Bell, the four had been identified by the Texas Department of Public Safety as being "well-known in the broad black power movement." AASSET members apparently rejected the idea of demonstrations since none were held. In the same letter to the mayor, Halliday complained that "during this period of approximately one week a great deal of tension developed on this campus." Halliday also confided to the mayor that "an anonymous telephone call to a faculty member . . . advised that an attempt would be made on the life of Mr. Tave. . . . [The university reacted immediately, removed Mr. Tave from the campus, and took every possible precaution for his safety." <sup>68</sup>

Shortly after this period, East Texas State did hire its first permanent black faculty member, Dr. David Talbot. By 1972, there were four full-time black faculty and professional administrative staff at East Texas State, among them the new <sup>69</sup> Assistant to the President for Minority Affairs, Ivory Moore.

Ivory Moore began his twelve-year career at East Texas State in 1972 after leaving a teaching position in the public schools of Wichita Falls, Texas. Now retired, he is currently involved in state and local politics, and has served on the Commerce City Commission for the past sixteen years.

In 1972, East Texas President F. H. McDowell felt he needed someone on his administrative staff who could "sympathize with black students," and, at the same time could fulfill the need for more black faculty and staff.

One of Moore's first moves as the new Assistant to the President for Minority Affairs was to force the racial integration of the East Texas State varsity cheerleaders. Of the forty-four

Texas State's sister colleges had racially desegregated. Yet, once Gee was directly ordered to desegregate by the Board of Regents, he lent his considerable energy and leadership abilities to carrying out a rapid and complete racial integration of the college.

The second summer session of 1964 saw only a small number of black undergraduates and graduate students at East Texas State College. For reasons noted at the time by Professor Jack Bell, the exact number of black students entering East Texas State that historic summer term is impossible to determine. All observers agreed that the number was quite small, perhaps only one or two. Velma Waters encountered no other black students that summer term. By 1968, however, there were approximately 325 African-American students attending East Texas State. During the Spring semester, 1990, East Texas State had 430 black students enrolled in a student body of 7,599, or 5.7%.

In most East Texas State General Studies courses today, one will find a similar percentage of African-American students along with a smaller proportion of other ethnic minorities including Hispanics and some foreign students. While there are exceptions, for the most part there still exists a self-imposed segregation between white and black students in many areas of campus life. For example, all East Texas State social fraternities and sororities remain racially segregated. There is seldom interracial mingling at the tables of the campus cafeterias and other dining facilities. Nevertheless, as increasing numbers of African-American students are able to attend East Texas State (and other such public universities and colleges), the better the



football players on that year's varsity team, twenty-eight were black; yet, there had been no black cheerleaders. Moore felt that both the black athletes and the black student population in general ought to be represented on the cheering squad. Thus, Moore urged that the cheerleader squad be increased to eight by adding two black cheerleaders to the six-member, formerly all-white squad. Despite the complaints of many disgruntled whites who resisted the idea of a racially mixed cheerleader squad, Moore reported that McDowell firmly supported the decision.

Another change initiated by Moore was the creation of a new department on campus--Mach III. Mach III was designed to be a tutoring program to help otherwise qualified students, both black and white, who were experiencing academic problems in a particular area. Moore said, "We want everyone who comes to college to get a degree."<sup>70</sup>

Ivory Moore acted as an important liason between black students and the otherwise all-white Administration from 1972 until 1984. Moore also actively recruited new students as a wide-ranging representative of the university. His tenure on the administrative staff doubtlessly served a crucial transitional function as the traditionally segregated college sought to rid itself of the older vestiges of discrimination.

It was no accident that East Texas State was the last state college in Texas to admit African-American students. After all, the college's forceful and authoritarian president in the post-World War II period, Dr. James G. Gee (1947-1965), had consistently enforced racial exclusion years after some of East

chances are for a more balanced interracial atmosphere at the university.

East Texas State College's racial integration in 1964 was only one among many across the American South during this eventful period. Some of the dramatic social adjustments were peaceful and some were traumatic and violent, some were achieved voluntarily while others were coerced. One unifying theme throughout, however, is that all of these post-World War II victories by the NAACP, other civil rights groups, and common people on the local level, changed the face of the south forever.

The Supreme Court's decision in the Texas case Sweatt v. Painter (1950), and in the landmark Brown v. Board of Education (1954), tore away the first pieces of the legal foundation to segregated educational systems in the United States. Yet, nothing would have come of these national-level triumphs if it had not been for the individual acts of courage by hundreds of ordinary Americans on the local level seeking to make the far-away Supreme Court's decisions real. Thus, throughout the 1950s and 1960s legal segregation gradually fell under the pressure of newly-resistant Southern blacks. Even though the struggle to obtain true equality between the races and to eliminate the remains of centuries of racism continues today, the pioneering black students who first ventured into the previously whites-only world of Southern institutions of higher learning, such as East Texas State, were taking the necessary, though probably excruciating, first steps toward the ultimate goal.

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