

Diamond Days:
An Oral History of
The University of Texas at El Paso

Edited by
Charles H. Martin and Rebecca M. Craver

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PREFACE

This composite portrait of the first seventy-five years of the life of The University of Texas at El Paso is the result of a collective effort by many individuals. In 1983, Haskell Monroe*, president of UTEP at the time, conceived the idea of the project. A history professor by training, Dr. Monroe envisioned an oral history of the University based on interviews with a wide variety of former students, professors, and administrators. He selected Vicki L. Ruiz, director of UTEP's Institute of Oral History, to head the undertaking. Rebecca M. Craver initially served as the chief interviewer and, after Dr. Ruiz accepted a position at the University of California at Davis, became the project's second director.

Unfortunately, the university's financial difficulties in the mid-1980s forced the Institute of Oral History to reduce its operations, causing the endeavor to be temporarily shelved. In the spring of 1989, Charles H. Martin, David A. Hackett, and Mimi R. Gladstein, director of UTEP's Diamond Jubilee Celebration, revived the project with the encouragement of UTEP President Diana Natalicio. Completed in December, 1990, under the supervision of Dr. Martin, this book is the final product of and a permanent legacy for the Diamond Jubilee.

The forty-four interviews herein are not intended to provide a complete institutional history of the University. Instead they offer a unique window through which to view the school's first seventy-five years, literally its "Diamond Days," focusing on both academic and social life. In the course of the project, approximately sixty interviews were conducted.

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The transcripts of these and some twenty-five previously existent interviews constitute the History of the University Collection and are housed in both the Institute of Oral History's office and the Special Collections department of the University Library.

Selecting the specific individuals to be interviewed was not an easy task, so several priorities were established. First, the project's directors decided to aim for an equal chronological distribution of interviews, choosing subjects from each of the three major eras in the school's history. Secondly, the editors attempted to achieve a "balanced" perspective, deliberately seeking out the recollections of men and women from various ethnic and racial backgrounds, including both engineers and "Peedoggies,"* undergraduate and graduate students, and faculty as well as administrators. Our final priority was to interview as many individuals living outside of El Paso as possible, so that the narratives would not be exclusively based on recollections by local residents.

Due to obvious space limitations, not all of the interviews collected could be incorporated into this volume. The particular narratives included were selected because of their vivid descriptions of important incidents in the school's history, because of an individual's personal contribution to the college's development, and, most of all, because of their remarkable ability to recreate and preserve the spirit of campus and academic life from an earlier era. All of the transcripts have been edited for publication in order to enhance the narrative and eliminate repetitive or confusing sections. The words presented belong exclusively to the narrator, with the exception of the bracketed insertions, which the editors have added in order to clarify certain passages. Occasionally paragraphs have been rearranged so as to place them in a more logical order, and a few inadvertent errors in grammar have also been corrected. A glossary at the end of the book identifies prominent individuals in the university's history who frequently appear in the narratives. A name identified by an asterisk (*) in the text refers to a glossary entry.

Many individuals assisted with the project. Presidents Haskell Monroe and Diana Natalicio provided financial subsidies and faculty release time. Sarah John, Carole Barasch, and several students helped conduct many of the interviews. Anita Burdett, Georgina Rivas, and Agustin Ortega performed the time-consuming task of transcribing taped interviews into accurate transcripts. Angelica Gonzalez and Vicki Fisher provided crucial

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secretarial assistance. The Office of Alumni Affairs, especially Nina Stone, greatly aided our efforts by identifying potential candidates for interviews. Carl T. Jackson and Charles H. Ambler provided assistance from the UTEP Department of History. Nancy Hamilton shared her vast knowledge of the school's history with the editors and saved us from several potential errors. Her help is very much appreciated.

Finally, the editors would especially like to extend our deepest thanks to all of the individuals who so graciously consented to be interviewed and who gave so generously of their time and memories. Without their full cooperation this volume could not have been possible.

INTRODUCTION

*He's a mining, mining, mining,
A mining engineer,
Like every honest fellow,
He takes his whiskey clear.*

From the 1922 *Flowsheet*,
the first yearbook.

In the beginning it really was a “ripsnorting” mining school. Created by an act of the Texas Legislature in 1913, the State School of Mines and Metallurgy opened its doors to twenty-seven adventurous students on September 23, 1914, on the northeastern outskirts of El Paso in buildings that had previously housed the El Paso Military Institute. In order to reach their classes, students arriving by streetcar had to wind their way around tents and cavalry stables on adjacent Fort Bliss before entering the campus. Over the next two years the new institution's modest enrollment slowly grew to thirty-nine, but early one Sunday morning in October, 1916, a fast-spreading fire destroyed the Main Building and almost wrecked the school's future.

Despite this nearly fatal setback, college officials kept the school alive while searching for a more desirable and permanent location. Eventually they found a rugged but promising site on the west side of the Franklin Mountains just above the Sunset Heights neighborhood. Soon, in the midst of rock, cactus, and greasewood, the original four buildings of the

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present-day campus began to take shape. Their distinctive Bhutanese architecture, unique in this hemisphere, easily captured the attention of local residents and visitors alike. The idea for such a special architectural style originated with Kathleen L. Worrell, wife of Dean Stephen H. Worrell*, the first administrative head of the college, who was inspired by a 1914 photographic essay in *National Geographic* magazine.

Reputedly student life at the new campus was almost as rough as the terrain. Although female students began attending in September, 1916, the school had a predominantly male environment, and a rowdy one at that. Dynamite blasts and gun shots were heard on occasion, and many engineers indulged in tobacco-chewing and its inevitable unsanitary accompaniment.

Those early mining engineering students originated one of the school's oldest and longest-lasting traditions. Because St. Patrick was known as the patron saint of engineers, they adopted St. Patrick's Day as their special day of revelry, a day to cut classes and hold a grand picnic. By the mid-1920s virtually the entire student body would trek out to the desert near Oro Grande, New Mexico, where upperclassmen would initiate freshmen into the engineering society by herding them on their hands and knees through the dark tunnels of an abandoned mine, often prodding them along with paddles.

Although the school's original purpose was to train mining engineers, it gradually assumed an expanded educational role. In 1927 the El Paso Junior College merged into the Texas College of Mines and Metallurgy (the school's official name since 1920), adding many new courses in liberal arts and a sizable number of female students. Only 136 students had registered the previous year, but with the merger enrollment soared to a record high of 411. In 1931 the college became an accredited four-year school, headed by a president instead of a dean, and offering both Bachelor of Science and Bachelor of Arts degrees.

The Great Depression brought hard times to the campus. Several faculty and staff members had to be released, and the lucky ones who kept their jobs received a 25 percent salary cut. Many students struggled to scrape together enough funds to register and buy books, often paying on the installment plan or borrowing money from sympathetic faculty. Yet even during these lean years the campus continued to expand physically. With the completion of Kidd Field in 1933, the school's football team, the

Miners, at last had a football stadium of its own, and the addition of an adjacent field house, Holliday Hall*, provided students with a combination gymnasium, auditorium, and dance hall.

Though times were tough during the depression, students still found time for social activities. In order to support the athletic teams and boost school spirit, enthusiastic coeds formed a cheering squad called the Goldiggers. The number of women enrolling at "Mines," as the college had informally come to be called, grew steadily, so that by 1936 coeds comprised one-half of the student population. After Benedict Hall was completed that same year, the college could boast of its first women's dormitory. A growing number of Mexican mining students enrolled in the late 1920s and 1930s, adding an international dimension to the College of Mines. Many of these students returned home after graduation and subsequently played important roles in the development of their nation's mining industry.

The outbreak of the Second World War brought substantial changes to the campus. Almost immediately the male enrollment dropped sharply, as the war effort transformed students into servicemen. When war-time shortages eventually forced rationing of gasoline, many students turned to carpools or the city bus service for transportation to and from campus. The College of Mines also directly aided the war effort by serving as one of the nation's special training and education centers. Between 1942 and 1945 the school not only trained civilian pilots but also provided housing and instructional programs to hundreds of army cadets and navy personnel.

Shortly after the war ended, growing numbers of veterans descended upon the campus. Like schools across the nation, the College of Mines strained to meet the demands of this burgeoning student population. Enrollment tripled during the next two years, as the returning veterans took advantage of the GI Bill. Additional classes were scheduled, more faculty members were hired, several wooden military buildings were moved to the campus to serve as auxiliary classrooms, and a new landmark sprang up on the southwest corner of the campus. It was known as Vet Village, and it served as "home sweet home" for married veterans and their families. A cluster of trailers at first, the development assumed a more settled appearance after surplus army barracks were brought in and converted into apartments. Although planned as a "temporary" facility for World

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War II veterans, Vet Village provided married student housing for seventeen years.

The returning veterans often added a more serious tone to campus life, but the postwar period also witnessed a revival of interest in campus politics as well as traditional social activities. The engineers sponsored their annual beard-growing contest and Hard Luck Dance to cap off St. Patrick's Day festivities, and students still gathered around the jukebox in Old Main's bookstore to socialize, drink Cokes, and listen to the sounds of the Big Band era. The college's curriculum added several new majors and a degree in business administration, expanding the educational choices available to students.

In fact, this growing diversity of majors and degrees aggravated a long-standing rivalry between the engineers and the liberal arts majors, whom the engineers had contemptuously dubbed "Peedoggies," a corruption of the word pedagogues. That rivalry intensified as enrollment in Arts and Sciences far surpassed that of the Mining and Engineering division. Increasingly non-engineers talked about giving the Texas College of Mines and Metallurgy a new name, one that would more accurately describe its expanded role and better suit its future direction. After much discussion, a new name was selected, and on June 1, 1949, the school officially became known as Texas Western College.

Most students and faculty welcomed the new name, but a few engineering students strongly disagreed and came up with a clever way to express their protest. In keeping with St. Patrick's favorite color, they painted a green line down the center of the campus, dividing the mining and engineering buildings on the west (labeled TCM) from the liberal arts section to the east (labeled TWC). In later years painting the green line became an annual prank associated with St. Patrick's Day, and even today it still symbolizes loyalty to the school's mining heritage.

Texas Western grew steadily during the 1950s. Professors had to learn how to lecture above construction noise as, one by one, buildings filled what had been rocky desert expanses downhill from Old Main. A science building, new dormitories, an administration building, and Magoffin Auditorium were all completed. In addition, a new Student Union Building afforded students expanded facilities where they could flirt with the opposite sex, play bridge, and stage various social functions.

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Fraternities and sororities reigned supreme during the fifties, and campus life revolved around afternoon teas, homecoming floats, pep rallies, and formal dances. Contests abounded, and competition was keen for such coveted titles as Miss TWC, King of the Coed Ball, Flowsheet Beauty, Queen of the ROTC Military Ball, and Best-dressed Coed. Each fall new freshmen with their beanies atop their heads lugged sacks of lime and buckets of water up the slopes of Mount Franklin to give the Miner "M" a fresh coat of whitewash. Despite administrative disapproval, some students also participated in such unsanctioned activities as periodic "beer busts" by the river and an occasional panty raid at the women's dormitories. By far the best known prank of the era, perhaps the most famous ever at the school, came in 1952 when several students kidnaped a large alligator from the pond in downtown San Jacinto Plaza late one December night. The conspirators carried their unhappy victim up to the campus and sneaked him into the office of the chairman of the Geology Department, who received quite a shock the next morning upon reporting for work and opening his door.

Like other public educational institutions in the state, Texas Western historically had been racially segregated by law. After the federal courts declared such policies to be unconstitutional, many colleges in the state and in the South evaded or even defied the rulings. But Texas Western administrators chose to set a more progressive example. In September, 1955, twelve black students enrolled in the school without any controversy, reportedly making TWC the first four-year Texas public college to integrate its undergraduate studies. In contrast, The University of Texas at Austin deliberately waited until the following year before accepting black undergraduates, and Texas A&M College did not integrate until 1963. During the 1956-57 school year, Texas Western's athletic teams were successfully integrated, making the school a pathbreaker in this area as well. In 1966 another milestone was reached when Mrs. Marjorie Lawson joined the English Department, thereby becoming the first black faculty member at the college.

Academic development continued during the 1950s, despite occasional financial strain. The Schellenger Research Laboratories were established for electronic research and atmospheric testing, soon winning national recognition and millions of dollars in contracts. A college-wide Graduate School was created, and additional departments and degree plans received

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accreditation. Texas Western Press began printing books bearing the imprint of the college, and although no one was certain about the future of television, TWC added video production to its pioneering radio broadcasting department.

Growth, both in enrollment and in facilities, remained a major theme in the 1960s. In the summer of 1961 the college received a coveted honor when it was selected as the site of one of the first two Peace Corps training programs in the country. About fifty trainees spent six weeks on campus learning everything from language skills to road building in preparation for their tour of duty in Tanganyika. The graduates and several faculty members were even honored with a reception in Washington, D.C., at the White House, where they shook hands with President John F. Kennedy. The Liberal Arts Building soon reached completion, much to the delight of summer school students, since it was the first fully air-conditioned classroom building on campus. In 1963 an impressive new 30,000-seat, county-built Sun Bowl Stadium, carved out of the rugged hills on the northwest corner of the campus, went into service.

The sixties were the heyday of Miner athletics, and the new stadium served as the home field for several of the best football teams ever. On two occasions successful Miner squads were invited to the Sun Bowl holiday football classic. In 1965 Texas Western defeated Texas Christian University in the annual bowl game, and in 1967 the Miners again captured the Sun Bowl title with a victory over the University of Mississippi. Several gridiron stars, such as Fred Carr and Billy Stevens, went on to play professional football. Miner basketball teams also proved highly successful under a young, dynamic former high school coach named Don Haskins. Jim "Bad News" Barnes and Nate Archibald were just two of the outstanding players developed by Haskins. Probably the greatest moment in the school's sports history came in March, 1966, when the Miners captured the National Collegiate Athletic Association basketball title by defeating the University of Kentucky Wildcats by a score of 72-65.

Beginning in the mid-sixties, student concerns began to change. Peace symbols, frisbee throwing, miniskirts, tie-dyed shirts, and long hair styles for male students began to appear on campus. Like younger people all over the country, local students vigorously debated contemporary political, foreign policy, and minority issues, but their protests never reached the extremes of those at many other schools. Some students and faculty

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expressed their opposition to the Vietnam War by participating in marches in downtown El Paso, displeasing local supporters of American involvement.

More frequent campus protests came from Chicano students. In order to dramatize their demands for greater assistance for and sensitivity to the growing numbers of Mexican-Americans attending the college, a group of activists staged a sit-in demonstration at the Administration Building in December, 1971. When they refused to leave, university officials summoned the El Paso police, who removed and arrested thirty-seven protesters. As tempers gradually cooled, university administrators began addressing these issues, one result being the establishment of a Chicano Studies degree program in 1971.

Reflecting the more liberal rules of conduct becoming acceptable in American society, the previously strict regulation of student behavior was relaxed during the late 1960s and early 1970s. When new high-rise dormitories began to tower over the western edge of the campus, displacing Vet Village, their residents enjoyed unprecedented freedom. No longer were there rigid curfew hours for female students, and men and women gained expanded visiting privileges. In fact, both of the high-rise dormitories eventually went coed, though men and women were assigned to different floors. During the seventies a few students briefly adopted the national craze of "streaking," or dashing across campus in the nude. Shaken administrators expressed no regrets when this fad eventually disappeared. While the school's football teams fell on hard times, basketball continued its winning ways. And in track and field, the Miners became the dominant collegiate power of the decade, winning numerous NCAA cross country, indoor, and outdoor track and field team titles.

In 1967 the third and final major name change in the institution's history acknowledged the school's increasing importance to higher education. As the result of a decision by the state legislature, Texas Western College now officially became known as The University of Texas at El Paso. The prestige of the new name immediately won local acclaim and thus avoided the controversy of the 1949 name change. In 1973 its academic promise seemed to be confirmed when the university received approval for its first doctoral program. In light of the school's mining heritage, it seemed quite appropriate that this first doctoral degree would be offered in the field of geological science. The university further

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diversified its offerings in 1976 when it acquired a major new division, the College of Nursing and Allied Health.

Enrollment continued to grow in the 1960s and 1970s. This trend peaked in September, 1977, when a then record high of 15,836 students registered. To serve the seemingly ever-expanding student body, the university embarked upon a substantial building program, adding an engineering and science complex, a fine arts center, and an impressive Special Events Center which not only served the school's popular basketball team but also provided a much-needed multipurpose facility for the community.

The 1980s brought new challenges to the university. Enrollment growth unexpectedly came to a halt. The collapse of previously high oil prices, tight budget restraints, tuition increases, and Mexico's peso devaluations ushered in an era of retrenchment. Women increasingly assumed more prominent roles on campus, especially in student government. This trend was also noticeable in faculty hiring, as a growing number of female professors entered the classroom. And in 1988 the university received its first female president when regents selected Dr. Diana Natalicio to head the school.

The composition of the student body gradually became more diverse, as more "nontraditional" students enrolled. The number of Hispanic students attending the university continued to climb, and by 1990 they comprised 57 percent of the student population. Toward the end of the decade, total enrollment figures finally resumed their growth. In the fall semester of 1990 a new record of 16,526 students was achieved. The approval in 1989 of a second doctoral degree, a Ph.D. in electrical engineering, suggested that the school's academic future was bright. A six-story Bhutanese style library building, a striking symbol of the university's physical development and the largest building on campus, was completed in 1984. For the first time ever, the university possessed a building specifically designed and constructed to serve as a library. Other new buildings on campus adhered to the Bhutanese style, and a re-Bhutanization campaign provided facelifts for several older buildings in order to enhance architectural harmony.

During the 1989-90 school year the university celebrated its seventy-fifth anniversary. The Diamond Jubilee commemoration prompted much reflection on the school's past accomplishments and future aspirations. Much has changed over the years, but many things remain the same. Bells

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still signal the beginning and end of classes, professors still lecture in front of blackboards, students still pause in the Union to chat and flirt with each other, and proud parents attend commencement ceremonies to celebrate the awarding of diplomas to yet another graduating class. Over its seventy-five years the institution has evolved from a small frontier mining school to a large, multipurpose university with an international student body. Regardless of where future needs may lead, The University of Texas at El Paso will remain unique in its border setting and distinctive in its Bhutanese architecture, an educational jewel nestled in the rugged foothills of the Franklin Mountains.