The Troubles That Plague College at Prairie View

BY TOM CURTIS
Chronicle Reporter

The bucolic, 1440-acre campus in Waller County is the former site of a Confederate colonel's plantation, bought by the state in 1876 for an "Agricultural and Mechanical College for Colored Youth."

Two years later the college opened its doors—the doors of the former plantation house—to eight students. The house was located on the only hill in the surrounding prairie—hence Prairie View.

Angry But Afraid

The old plantation house is long since gone, and the campus is now in the throes of a major building program. But what some students and faculty members have to say suggests that perhaps a plantation mentality lingers on, complete with the endemic suspicion, fear and intrigue that once existed between "house niggers" and "field niggers."

Many students and faculty members at still predominately-black Prairie View A&M College, east of Hempstead and 46 miles northwest of Houston, are angry but afraid.

Air of Dictatorship

They say if they make their complaints about school conditions openly they will be fired, suspended or expelled. Faculty members are on nine-month contracts, they say, and students must reapply for admission each semester.

Again and again different faculty and students refer to the administration of college president Dr. A. I. Thomas as a dictatorship, autocracy and totalitarian system.

Constitutional rights such as freedom of speech, of the press and of association are routinely denied, they say, and a network of student informers reports to the administration.

Deep Frustration

They say frustration over these conditions plus strict social rules, bad food and other grievances caused the massive protests and minor destruction that rocked the campus the nights of Feb. 24 and 25 before Thomas closed the school.

And at least one faculty member worries that if the sources of frustration aren't dealt with after classes resume Monday, new protests may erupt into violence. This time, he fears, state police might be called in "and Prairie View will become another Jackson State or Kent State."

Spokesmen for the college were unavailable for comment on these charges. Thomas refused to talk to newsmen last week, but Feb. 25, when the student complaints were phrased more generally at a press conference after the first disorders at the school, he shrugged them off as vague and ambiguous. He blamed the trouble on "three or four real professional agitators."

Thomas, 47, a native of New Orleans, joined the college in 1949 as a woodwork instructor. In 1952, he became dean of the School of Industrial Education and Technology. He became president in 1966.

Prairie View, one of three colleges in the 11 divisions of the Texas A&M System, now has about 4000 students, almost all of them black.

Increasingly over the past decade, protests, boycotts and —occasionally—violence have hit the school, sometimes over issues strikingly similar to those expressed by students and faculty this year.

Students say Thomas turned a deaf ear to their complaints for almost six months before he closed the school Feb. 27 for a week following disorders.

During that half-year period of alleged intransigence, they say, issues that were first presented as complaints and

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New Strife at Prairie View A&M

ROTC Building Put to the Torch

Feb 26 1971
Chronicle

BY TOM CURTIS
AND OLEN CLEMENTS
Chronicle Reporters

Prairie View — Militant students set fire to the military science building of Prairie View A&M College early today as a second straight night of campus violence flared at the predominantly black state-supported school.

Three floors of the brick building were seriously damaged by the 2:40 a.m. blaze.

Other students, manning the campus fire brigade, put out the fire before the building was destroyed.

Students had burned down the campus police building and dean's office early Thursday.

Among other things, some students have demanded an end to compulsory ROTC training.

A band of 150 students, an anonymous source said, cut off the school's electrical power for an hour early today. They roamed the campus hurling bricks through windows of dormitories and other buildings.

Students said meetings Thursday that went well into the night failed to resolve their differences with school administrators.

They said President Alvin I. Thomas left the gathering promising to return but didn't, angering the waiting students.

A faculty member toured the 3900-student campus shortly before 5 a.m. and said firemen were cleaning up debris at the ROTC building. He said he saw students peering at him from dormitory windows but other than firemen there were no others on campus.

Sheriff Jimmie Whitworth said a deputy had last reported at 2:30 a.m. the campus was quiet. State police said they had watched the campus until 1 a.m.

As the regular 10:30 p.m. curfew began, students poured out of dormitories. Abolishing of the curfew is one of the many demands of students.

Other demands include the resignations of Thomas and two or three deans.

Earlier Thursday things had seemed to be getting back to normal on the bucolic campus.

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Violence Flares Second Straight Night on Prairie View Campus

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Tight knots of students had dotted the campus talking about the previous night's events and venting their grievances.

Other students had left the campus for the weekend.

As an afternoon shower sent students indoors, prexy Thomas stood under an overhang at the wrecked and looted college exchange, a book and supply store, and talked about student grievances.

One is the curfew that says freshmen women must be in dormitories by 10 p.m. and other co-eds by 10:30.

Before 1000 or more Prairie View students went into the streets Wednesday night, an estimated 700 girls had emptied out of the dorms to protest the curfew.

"This is strictly a matter between the parents and the children," Thomas said. Parents could write letters giving students permission to enter and leave dorms at will, he said.

'Responsible People'

"The point is, you don't treat us like we're responsible people," Glenn Johnson, 21, a senior from Marlin, told the president.

"I heard you say 'boys and girls' earlier," Johnson continued. "That just doesn't go down anymore. People are growing up earlier. We can even vote. But we can't travel over to this side of campus after 10 o'clock at night."

Thomas told the student he didn't have any business being on that side of campus after 10 p.m.

Other students complained that the administration runs the student newspaper and the student government association.

Thomas said the newspaper is "basically a public relations organ for the entire college" and that the student government association needs administration help because students are just learning how democracy works.

Other Complaints

Other student complaints are bad cafeteria food, lack of hot water in dorms, numerous restrictions in the student handbook and absence of student participation in college decision-making.

Another sore point with students was last week's dismissal of several student members of People for Afro-American Life, a group Thomas refuses to charter as a campus organization because he said he considers it subversive and revolutionary.

The president said that except for one, the students were among 200 dropped last week for academic failure. The exception, a girl who edited the student newspaper, was expelled for being "absent without leave" from her dormitory, Thomas said.

Dr. D. W. Solomon, dean of students, said he suspects a relationship between the student organization and the Black Panthers, based on information from the FBI and Texas Department of Public Safety.

Thomas said he would ask the FBI and DPS to investigate the campus violence.

A faculty member defended the student organization.

Black Pride

"As far as I know, they're just a black pride group," he said.

A student who said he is a member of the organization said, "It has no Black Panthers; there are a a few Muslims, but most of us are plain old Baptist-Catholics."

He said the group has a membership of about 30 and is committed to "black awareness, black identity and black pride.

"Thomas won't give us a charter because we plan to work in nearby communities organizing a voter-registration drive and that's bad business for the college," the student said.

He said his group wasn't involved in any of the destruction of property and blamed it on "a few frustrated individuals."

Many students interviewed said they supported the campus rampage and said the administration had deserved the violence because of its intransigence.

"This has been brewing for five, six months," said Richard Leno, 23, a junior from Baytown. "Students went about the whole thing peacefully at first, but they the administration) wouldn't listen."

But not everybody agreed.

Ernest Salsberry, 22, of Port Arthur, said he was angry because looters had broken into the campus laundry and taken $200 worth of his clothes.

"I don't see the point in that," he said.

Prairie View Students Claim Frustration Led to Violence

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grievances hardened into demands.

Recent Suspensions

Fueling the discontent, both sides agree, was the recent suspension of several members of People for Afro-American Life, which some students and faculty call a black pride group and which Thomas insists is a subversive and revolutionary organization.

One sophomore, Geneva Chapman, was editor of the school newspaper, the Panther, which she says was administration-dominated.

Thomas says she was dropped for being "absent without leave" from her dormitory. She says she went to Mardi Gras over a weekend and called the charge a pretext.

Thomas says the other students were dropped for academic failure, but students say two were first-semester freshmen who normally would have been put on academic probation.

Unanswered Questions

Unanswered questions this week included on what evidence the college chose to press charges against freshman Quincy Brooks and junior Leonard Baker, both jailed Feb. 26 on misdemeanor charges of acting to promote damage to property and held in Waller County jail on $100,000 bonds each. Students said the pair did join a march on Thomas' residence, demanding his resignation, but they also said the two actually helped quell violence.

Bond on new charges against Baker was set at $2000 Saturday in Conroe by Dist. Judge Ernest J. Coker Sr., and Baker was released.

Brooks is still being held in the Waller County jail until state and defense counsels make recommendations on the amount of bond to be set by Judge Coker.

Also, Thomas said after the disturbances that about 100 students would be dropped, but no college spokesman would say how they were chosen, whether they would get hearings or how the figure squared with Thomas' claim that three or four agitators were responsible.

Some faculty and students say the absence of known standards for readmission raise a serious issue of due process and say they plan to ask the American Civil Liberties Union to look into the question.

One of 19 demands presented to the college administration by SPADE, a campus group, calls for the "immediate firing of all student pimps (salaried student informers)."

Charges Denied

In a formal response, the college said: "The college has no salaried student informants. Many students are employed on student jobs. Their views may or may not agree with their fellow students."

One Houston junior, asked whether she suspects the college of paying students to spy on other students and faculty, said, "I know they do—I know some of the informers."

She said one man, a veteran, told her the college helped him to buy a car for his services. "He said he felt like he was just taking care of himself," she said.

Another volatile issue on campus are present curfews for women, 10 p.m. for freshmen and 10:30 p.m. for upperclasswomen.

Varying Versions

Thomas said curfews were strictly an issue between women and their parents since "permanent permission" letters from parents would exempt the students from curfews at any time.

"If it's okay with their parents they could stay out all night if they wanted to," he said.

Several women students had a different version of the rules.

"Those (permanent permission letters) are just for weekends," said Sandra Carter, a junior elementary education major from Galena Park. "The dorms are locked up tight at 10:30 p.m., and you have to be in," said Miss Carter. She said even married women who live in the dorms have to abide by the curfew.

Food Protested

In response to a SPADE demand for a compromise in the curfew, preferably 11:45 p.m. weekdays and 3 a.m. weekends, the formal administration response said the Women's Council and Women's Residence Hall committee was dealing with the matter and would be asked "to immediately complete the work they have already begun."

Another widely-voiced issue and one that has been a recurrent source of protest at the school for more than a decade is the food in the student cafeteria.

'Just Not Clean'

One sophomore who said he had worked in the cafeteria said food was prepared under unsanitary conditions and said he had seen rats in and around the kitchen and foreign matter in the food.

"It's just not clean" said a junior co-ed. "Sometimes kids find roaches and stuff in the food; you go up and show it to them in the line and they just tell you to take some more.

"My roommate used to work in the dining halls and she would tell us when the food was spoiled. Then we would just go up to Hempstead and buy food for ourselves," she said.

She said another friend "had to drop out of school because she got ptomaine poisoning from the food." That girl wasn't reachable.

'Best Food Possible'

The official school response said students pay 55 cents for each meal, 22 cents of it going for food and the dining hall "gives the best food possible for this cost."

"The management will make a concerned effort to improve all aspects" of the dining halls, the written statement said.

One major complaint of students has been the Student Handbook, with rules limiting Afro haircuts to one inch in length, advice to students not to wear sweatshirts to formal dances and to "change daily; be fresh, smell clean," and warnings that students may not, under penalty of expulsion, "engage in immoral acts alone, with person(s) of the same sex, or person(s) of the opposite sex or with animals."

"The handbook starts with the basic assumption that we're idiots and that we're emotionally incapable of any kind of intellectual achievement," said one sophomore.

'Vague and Ambitious'

A rule in the handbook dealing with three or more persons assembling unlawfully "clearly violates the Constitution," says the student who also contends that rules prescribing conduct "are vague and very ambiguous."

In response to student demands for throwing out the handbook, the administration said a student handbook was required by the Southern Assn. of Colleges and Schools. The administration said students were invited to submit suggestions for revisions.

The Student Handbook refers to the Panther as Prairie View's student newspaper, but Thomas said it was "a public relations organ for the entire college."

Says Geneva Chapman, the expelled former editor of the paper: "Dr. Thomas told us all information in the newspaper would have to be positive; a lot of articles students were interested in were knocked out because administrators wanted stories on grants and things like that."

'Considered Militant'

She says she feels she was dropped by the school because "I was considered a militant student, and Prairie View doesn't allow militant students around campus."

"I didn't consider myself a militant," she said, "but the administration considers anyone who speaks for other students a militant. I was vocal in my criticisms. You just can't express your criticisms freely."

Some students have more far-reaching aims than any of the demands expressed by groups. One previously quoted sophomore says he thinks Prairie View should be severed from the Texas A&M system, of which it is a division, and says it should get its own board of directors and direct funding.

He complains that there are no black members on the board of directors of the Texas A&M System.

Teachers Slighted

Indeed, at least in the area of faculty salaries, Prairie View doesn't seem to get a very fair shake compared to Texas A&M.

According to figures released in a Texas Assn. of College Teachers bulletin and based on figures from the Coordinating Board, Texas College and University System:

- In professors' salaries. Prairie View ranks lowest of 22 state institutions, with an average salary of $13,343; A&M at College Station ranks third in the state with an average salary of $17,842.
- In average salaries for associate and assistant professors, it ranks next to last in both categories out of 22 institutions, with $10,769 and $9617 respectively; A&M at College Station ranks fifth and fourth respectively, with $13,763 for associate and $11,568 for assistant professors.

'Keeping Lid On'

However, in instructors salaries Prairie View ranks just below the middle, 12 out of 22, with an average salary of $8561, while Texas A&M at College Station pays instructors an average of $7878, putting it 18th of 22 institutions ranked.

Some students and faculty say this kind of evidence supports their theory that Thomas is just "keeping the lid on for the Man" at Texas A&M.

Dr. Jack Williams, president of Texas A&M and the Texas A&M System, says Thomas has "operated in very fine fashion" in dealing with the disorders and dissidents.

He says Thomas acts with complete autonomy in dealing with administrative matters and reports to him only on policy questions—such as whether to close the school, a decision which Williams says was made jointly.

"Always Be Black"

Williams brushes aside a question about Thomas maintaining a widespread network of student informers. "I haven't heard of it," he says, "but apparently there is a widespread network of student agitators."

And he calls Prairie View "one of the finest predominately Negro institutions in the country."

Will it remain mostly black? "It always has been," Williams says, "and because of the way people are, it always will be."

As it is, one young white faculty member says, the school does serve a necessary function of offering a college education to poor or academically marginal blacks who might otherwise not go to college.

Some maintain, as deceased author Louis Lomax once did in a speech at Prairie View, that it simply perpetuates a segregated system and makes it harder for blacks to compete against whites. Not many Prairie View students or administrators argue that, however.

Good Teachers

A young, white teacher points to the high faculty turnover, particularly among young teachers, who, he says, are often asked to leave because they are liberal and outspoken.

Nonetheless, even ousted editor Geneva Chapman, who says nothing could persuade her to return, says the school has some things going for it.

"I had a lot of good teachers," she says. "Prairie View has a faculty to be envied by many other colleges.

"And it has a lot of brilliant students, some skilled students and," she paused, "some other students just interested in a degree and a good job, like any place else."

Students Destroy Security Building At Prairie View

Feb 25, 1971 Chronicle

Chronicle News Services

Prairie View — Militant students at Prairie View A&M College burned down the campus security police building early today after nightlong demonstrations protesting various conditions at the school.

Waller County Sheriff Jimmie Whitworth said about 1000 predominantly black students went on a rampage at 10:30 p.m. Wednesday, wrecking the campus store exchange, breaking windows out of two dormitories and the Memorial Center and overturning and burning a security police car.

State police assembled on the highway off the 3500-student campus but did not go onto school property, leaving school police and deputy sheriffs to restore order. There were no arrests, but order returned to the campus early today.

Just after midnight, the students marched to the off-campus residence of President Alvin I. Thomas and demanded

ALVIN I. THOMAS
Refuses to Resign

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Prairie View Students Destroy Campus Building

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his immediate resignation along with those of the college dean and deans of men and women.

The sheriff said the students were angry over the explulsion of four militant students, prices in the school cafeteria and campus exchange store, and dormitory conditions.

The exchange store was looted of clothing and general merchandise, the sheriff said.

When President Thomas refused to step down, the students marched back to the campus, half a mile away, and set fire to the police security building, virtually destroying it, Whitworth said.

It was the second time in less than two years Prairie View students have gone on a rampage. Three buildings were burned March 29, 1969, following the fatal knifing of a football player in a student fight. Ultimately 22 indictments were returned after that riot.

The school, about 40 miles from Houston, is near Hempstead, Waller County seat.

Violence - P.V. University

CHRONICLE

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62 Students Are Given Suspension At Prairie View

BY TOM CURTIS
Chronicle Reporter

Prairie View—Dr. Alvin I. Thomas, president of Prairie View A&M College, Saturday said 62 students who "clearly committed unlawful acts" during the Feb. 24-26 trouble on campus were suspended and will not be permitted to return to classes.

The school was closed Feb. 27 after violence on the campus, including the burning of one building and other damage. The school will open again today, with classes resuming Monday.

Told in Letters

Thomas said the 62 students were identified "through the preliminary investigation of the Department of Public Safety." The students have received letters with the charges against them stated, he said. They will be permitted hearings if they so desire, Thomas added.

There were no DPS men on campus during the disturbances. Thomas would not elaborate on how the investigation was made.

Thomas said he knew of no faculty suspensions or firings. Sources on the campus said a black faculty member was fired and a white teacher was suspended for 15 days with pay. Both were said to be sympathetic to student demands.

Two Charged

"It's at the level of the deans right now," Thomas said.

Two students, now suspended, have been charged in the violence. Leonard Baker, 20, a junior from Kansas City, Mo., and freshman Quincy Brooks, 28, an Air Force veteran from Prairie View, were charged with acting to promote damage to property.

Hearing Not Set

Waller County Dist. Atty. Oliver Kitzman succeeded Saturday in a legal move at Conroe to void charges against the pair in a hearing before Dist. Judge Ernest J. Coker Sr. However, new and similar charges were brought against the pair in a Waller County court in Hempstead. No hearing date on the new charges has been set.

Bond set on the original charges was $100,000 for Baker and Brooks. However, bond on the new charges presented before Judge Coker was set Saturday at $2000 for Baker.

Bond will be set on Brooks, who remains in Waller County jail, when state and defense attorneys make their recommendations, Judge Coker said.

Craig Washington, Brooks' lawyer, and George J. Parnham, Baker's attorney, had sought a habeas corpus hearing Saturday in Conroe to force the state to produce evidence to justify holding the men. Both attorneys are from Houston.

Judge Coker voided the original charges because the

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charges did not specify what property was said to have been damaged. New warrants were drawn immediately, and the two men were rearrested on the judge's instructions as they left the courtroom.

The new charges allege that the students acted to promote damage to the college exchange, a campus book and supply store owned by the college, during the first day of disorders at Prairie View.

Washington said he was offered a $10,000 bond for Brooks but declined. "I wasn't given a sufficient reason why his bond should be five times that of Baker," Washington said. He called it "a matter of principle."

Washington called Kitzman's move in getting the charges voided "a shrewd, dilatory tactical maneuver" and said it meant his client would be in jail "another 10 days before I can get another habeas corpus hearing."

Parnham said he was "pleased at the vast reduction in my client's bail."

Relatives Present

Baker's parents and Brooks' mother and wife were in the courtroom. All said any students who expressed themselves freely at Prairie View would be dismissed from the school.

Mrs. Cornelius Bolton, Baker's mother, said her son was a good student who had been president of the sophomore class at Prairie View and an academic honor society and "last year he went to the Danforth Foundation to represent the school at a conference on student disorders.

"The only reason they took these boys is they stuck up for the students," Mrs. Bolton said.

Mrs. Dorothy Brooks said her husband wasn't a radical and said he was at home with her, their three children and his grandmother when the damage to the exchange took place.