Centennial & Beyond

The Administration of Elliot T. Bowers, 1970-1989

Just before the first fall semester of the Seventies, the Sam Houston Alumnus was already thinking about the next near future, its lead article booming: “1980!” The publication of the ex-students’ association reflected on the weight those words carried: “A few months ago the date had a comforting remoteness about it…but now…1980 has become the next milepost to strive for.” All the transforming events that had marked the previous ten years suddenly had everyone speculating what the next ten years would hold. A panel of administrators and professors envisioned growth as the most common theme. Measured in terms of sophistication, it meant training for degreed specialists in such nascent Sam Houston degree fields as computer science, nursing, and laboratory technology, as well as a renaissance for traditional programs like the humanities and home economics. Measured in terms of numbers, some predicted their departments would see as much as a four-fold increase, and President Templeton forecasted a total enrollment of 18,000 with straight-faced resolution.

Even as the magazine went to the printer with the feature intact, the first unexpected turn of the new age necessitated the hasty appendage of a lead article announcing the ascension of Elliott T. Bowers as acting president. Just like that, Arleigh Templeton was gone. Soon afterward the Board of Regents officially proclaimed Bowers ninth president of Sam Houston State University. The course he set would unfold over a nineteen-year tenure that came to represent a period of fulfillment, more than change, the school reaching destinies along paths already blazed.

Some of the respondents’ predictions, such as a dramatic surge in computer science majors and the cultivation of the humanities, came to pass. Others did not. A nursing program, for example, never got much farther than the starting gate. Most everyone expected the new criminal justice program to shine, but few could have foreseen the veritable incandescence it achieved. On the other hand, the rosy outlook for enrollment failed to bloom. Nobody anticipated the
community college boom, or that the University of Houston going public would siphon off an important part of Sam Houston's student base, nor even the effect of Texas A&M's decision to begin admitting women. In light of the leveling enrollment, the dramatic expansion in physical plant that characterized the years on either side of 1980 was greeted like a windfall.

The investiture of Elliott T. Bowers came at a time when higher education was abuzz with expressions of self-doubt and predictions of a dire future. "One of the greatest issues of the new decade," declared a special report, is "a legacy of dissatisfaction, unrest, and disorder...that has no historical parallel." Yet the new president, according to the Houston Post, believed such turmoil was "not likely to become a problem at his school." Bowers explained: "I think the reason it doesn't get exciting up here is that we listen."

The students, he asserted, "can come in and discuss these things and have an opportunity to present their ideas for a solution before we have a crisis." Bowers himself averaged about three student appointments a day, and the deans' council typically followed his lead.

Equally important in heading off discontent, asserted the new chief executive, was developing a curriculum that would keep students "abreast with this accelerating society." With the initiation of an Ethnic Studies program the school seemed consciously to be cultivating an environment of racial tolerance. It certainly heartened students of color during the 1970-1971 academic year when John Indakwa of Kenya became the first black instructor to teach one of its courses. Yet, he quickly left after completing his dissertation, which earned him a Rice Ph.D. The reality facing schools like Sam Houston were understandably concerned that minorities among the faculty were so underrepresented and wondered aloud whether the administration wanted it that way.

Then, at the beginning of the spring semester of 1974, a stunning gaffe on the part of R. G. Brooks, Vice-President for Academic Affairs, provoked the kind of crisis Bowers was so confident of avoiding. Ed Wilkinson, Student Association Vice-President, had gone to Brooks' office to air out his constituents' discontent with the Ethnic Studies program. Reportedly, the administrator had already reached the boiling point over a recent meeting in which he had unsatisfactorily covered the same ground with John Hall, president of the Black Student Union. According to Wilkinson, a white student who eventually submitted to a polygraph test that came up positive, Brooks unleashed an invective at him, laced with racial epithets. The conversation apparently ended when the administrator referred to one of the black stars of Sam Houston's basketball team as a "six-foot, ten-inch ape."

It was not only African-American students who were upset. Among the protestors who soon marched around the administration building carrying placards were Hispanic and white students who expressed their sympathies. Even the Young Republicans issued a measured and insightful response: "Logic dictates that Brooks, if he is guilty, be fired, otherwise the problem [will be] passed on to another university.

President Bowers compounded the problem by refusing to address the matter directly, openly, and in a timely manner. No doubt he had read too many of those special reports on the travails of higher education to see the crisis at the visceral level that so upset way of Cambridge, England, where he had received a classical education. His flawless diction impressed his fellow professors, but left some of his students baffled. One day, he came into the department office noticeably irritated and heaved his lecture notes onto the desk as he slumped down in a chair. "What's wrong, Paul?" a colleague asked. "These students can't understand me!" Then, with an affected twang, Chen mocked: "Yew don't tawk English rite!"

After Indakwa's departure, Ethnic Studies was composed entirely of white faculty until Dr. James W. Kelsaw joined the sociology department in 1973. Among roughly 350 faculty, professional staff, and administrators, the only other African Americans were librarian Jaspyr Sanford, a native of Huntsville who came to Sam Houston in 1965; Dr. Bettye Weatherall, who taught Home Economics; and William Powell, the Assistant Dean of Student Life. Black students at Sam Houston were understandably concerned that minorities among the faculty were so underrepresented and wondered aloud whether the administration wanted it that way.

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the students. Rather, he seemed to perceive the protest as a challenge to the administration’s authority. He did create a fourteen-member Minority Affairs Committee, charging it with the responsibility of providing a forum where students of color could voice their concerns and ideas. He also reaffirmed his commitment to the Ethnic Studies Program. At the same time, he refused to abandon R. G. Brooks. Eventually the embattled vice-president rejoined the ranks of the regular faculty, but only after the message had sunk in that Bowers was indeed the man in charge.

A postscript to the affair regards John Hall. After graduating he received another degree from the LBJ School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas. Recently, he reflected: “What happened was not that unusual for Texas, especially East Texas. I just figured if you were an African American, you were going to encounter some of that.” Following Hall to Huntsville were four brothers, each who earned a bachelors degree. Overall, their experiences at Sam Houston, like the vast majority of students, formed an attachment to their alma mater that transcended any particular episode that caused them anguish. Through the years John Hall occasionally returned to campus for visits—once as a commencement speaker. After his daughter Adrienne was born, she began accompanying him and his wife. When it came time for the young woman to choose her college, she kept the family tradition alive by becoming a Bearkat.

With each successive class that matriculated, students at Sam Houston State University created a mainstream whose channels became more fluid. By the 1980s ethnic organizations provided a social touchstone more than a means of protecting the rights of its members. Hispanic students, who had organized an active chapter of Los Amigos in 1970 and supported the agribusiness boycotts that activist Cesar Chavez was then championing, later reorganized as the Mexican-American Student Association. In 1998 a more encompassing Latino group founded the International Hispanic Association whose stated purpose was to “share Hispanic culture among the students and faculty of SHSU.” Throughout the Bowers era and beyond, Hispanic and African-American students, like their white counterparts, immersed themselves in the life of the campus. They served in student government and rushed Greek. They joined the ROTC and competed in intramural sports. Some became cheerleaders and athletes, and others members of honor societies. It was destined to be that way. The culture of youth and the shared life of the university fostered a bonding experience whose glue was stronger than any force that threatened to tear it apart.

President Bowers acknowledged as much earlier in his tenure, when he traveled to Corsicana to speak to one of the university’s alumni groups. “I get the feeling that a great many adults are uncomfortable in the presence of youngsters,” he quipped. Then came the punch line: “The truth is that young people have never been safe to be around.” At a more serious venue he gave students a vote of confidence, dismissing the merchants of “gloom and despair [who] assure me that the...younger generation is going to pot—both literally and figuratively.”

During the Seventies, however, it must have looked that way to most adults. At the outset of the decade the Houstonian issued a reminder for anyone whose short-term memory might be affected by the illicit weed that even possession could carry a prison sentence as well as a felony that would rob them of many citizenship rights. Yet, if the younger generation were not going to pot, it was surely lining up for beer at local convenience stores. Joining forces with thirsty townsfolk, student activists mobilized around the cause of making Huntsville “wet” in 1971.

When the student senate first took the proposal into consideration, it recognized immediately that the issue pivoted on getting out the vote. “If the eligible students would register,” asserted student senator Norman Van Pelt, “Huntsville could be
in the Wall. But only Bearkats can claim the Jolly Fox. Since 1973 the club has been the college hangout in Huntsville, achieving a kind of institutional status in a line of business where staying open more than five years is akin to sprouting gray hair. During its thirty-one years of operation, doormen have pressed the rubber stamp onto the back of patrons’ hands about four million times.

The club was founded by the inimitable Mike Fox, a former basketball star who graduated from Sam Houston with a bachelors degree in economics and a masters in business. By all accounts he was indeed a jolly man—most of the time. At six-foot-seven and well over three hundred pounds, he was not one to be tested often. An assortment of flashy rings, a Rolex watch, and a gold neck chain that held together diamond-encrusted letters spelling “F-O-X” provided a fitting touch for his swaggering personality.

Long-time manager Carey Birdwell called Mike Fox “one of the best bosses and best friends I’ve ever had.” To the many students who tended the bar, waited its tables, and bouncened the occasional troublemaker, he was a demanding, but avuncular figure. “If you weren’t going to school, you weren’t working at the Fox,” asserted present co-owner George Spentzos. Their boss made sure they had a fair chance to do so, however. “At the first of every semester,” continued Spentzos, “we’d have a stack of money to loan out for tuition and books.”

A mutual loyalty was just one of the ingredients that made the Jolly Fox successful. A sense for anticipating changes in technology, music, and fads also helped it stay on top. When the club opened, it was about half its present size. A raised dance floor with colored lights that skipped under dancing feet dominated the center of the room. Overhead a giant disco ball shot points of light across the crowd, making endless laps around walls covered in bright orange with streaks of foil. It was disco hell, but the kids loved it. Then, about the time John Travolta went from polyester to denim, the Fox switched to C&W. Today, it caters to all kinds of students, playing everything from hip-hop to alternative music, and the “outlaw” sounds of Texas country rock.

For a while, it looked as if the good times would come to an end. Just short of midnight, on August 12, 1993, Mike Fox left the grand opening of his second nightspot, The Filler Up Club and drove his Lincoln Continental onto an I-45 entrance ramp. For reasons unknown, he suddenly turned perpendicular to the freeway and under the wheels of an eighteen-wheeler. He died instantly. Fox’s many friends and acquaintances were shocked. They were also angered to learn that the first person on the scene had stripped his body of all that jewelry as well as a big roll of cash—he always carried a big roll of cash.

The club remained open for six years while Fox’s sister and ex-wife, Melissa, battled in court for ownership. Barely two months after Melissa Fox won the case, she was unable to meet her payroll. In the summer of 2000 she sold the club, but when its temporary liquor permit expired, the lights went out, the doors closed, and the parking lot sat empty. Rumors followed. “The Jolly Fox closing down [is] a travesty,” chided a desperate student interviewed by the Houstonian. “How can someone attend Sam and not get to go to the Fox?”

Before long, however, its present owners, George Spentzos and Charles Parks, bought the club and announced they would run it the way Mike Fox intended. Today the Jolly Fox is as busy—and as famous—as ever. When former secretary of state James Baker III delivered the Spring 2004 Commencement address, he remarked that Sam Houston, the man, “would have enjoyed the festivities surrounding the graduation.” After relating a story of the general’s wild youth, he also expressed that “Sam Houston might feel just as much at home at the Jolly Fox as he would handing out diplomas here today.” While that point is debatable, that is, as long as Sam’s wife Margaret was waiting for him at their Woodland Home just up the street, there is no denying that the raucous applause inside the Johnson Coliseum let Baker know he had hit a chord everyone knew either by experience or reputation.

Mike Fox

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Cheap Trick performs at Bowers SHSU in 1984

Bowers

of their supporters remained at their dorms and apartments on election day.

It was a fad, rather than a cause, that attracted in the spring of 1974 the greatest gathering of students ever assembled for a non-official activity, “A Streak of Lightnings” provided the Houstonian’s headline for announcing the inexplicable craze that saw dozens of “bare cats,” so to speak, race naked across campus individually and in small groups. “It’s hitting campus like an epidemic,” the student paper declared, “resulting in seven arrests after several nights of excitement involving crowds of thousands.”

In a side piece laying out the consequences, the Houstonian blithely reported: “The bare facts are that a few streakers will be arrested while the majority go scot-free.” University police chief Charles Tackett could only shrug: “It’s like fishing—we can just catch so many.” Even President Bowers could not bring himself to get too stirred up. In fact, he put a scholar’s spin on the matter by pointing out that in 1804 a young man was arrested for running naked through the streets of a New England town, America’s first incident of streaking, he believed. He then went all the way back to Biblical times, citing an incident described in the “Gospel of Mark,” Chapter 14, verses 51-52. Bowers did turn serious for a moment, though, warning that any faculty or staff member caught streaking would face immediate dismissal. Rightly, despite the wrong, it was “a student thing.”

Just before a daring daylight run, a lucky Houstonian reporter caught up with one “Flash Fergusen.” When asked why he was going to do it, the young man intoned: “I figure if you’re old enough to run naked in it.” With that, he stripped off his T-shirt and shorts and headed toward the dormitories below Old Main wearing only an orange ball hat and a big grin. The reporter ended: “I heard cheering in the distance.” With that, he ran naked through the streets of his campus.

Enthusiasm could also peak when the Program Council struck the right chord. It brought rock bands such as ZZ Top and Cheap Trick to campus, drawing capacity crowds to the LSC Ballroom. They also packed the venue in 1981 when a screening of the cult musical Rocky Horror Picture Show drew over a thousand fans. Many in the audience participated as well, with students dancing and singing, throwing rice, and opening umbrellas in synch with the actors. It came to an end, however, when one overenthusiastic revealer enjoying his twenty-seventh viewing leapt onto the stage and tripped, falling through the $3,000 screen.

It was just about that time when styles and attitudes started to change. Students themselves acknowledged the new era in 1984, basing their homecoming around the theme, “Sam Houston State—The New Generation.” By then, students had lost all recollection of hot pants, and only their grandfathers wore leisure suits. Boys with long hair persisted, of course, but gone were the bushy sideburns, along with shag haircuts that had been so popular among the girls during the decade of malaise. On the outer edge of young women’s fashions, peasant blouses and long skirts could still be seen, along with the faded jeans and rock band T-shirts worn by both sexes. During the Eighties, however, such a style became identified as a kind of homage to the old hippie culture, and it was echoed in the way wearers’ spent their free time. “Punks,” however, were as scarce on the SHSU campus during the Eighties as those who wore leather jackets and ducktails during the Fifties. For the boys, Polo and Oxford shirts and deck shoes—sans socks—became standard fare. The hemlines on girls’ dresses came down, too, and the typical coed who wanted to be “with it” learned how to do a “perm” from the back of a box.

The conservative mood of the country, so obviously reflected in the predominant fashions, certainly filtered down to students at Sam Houston State University, many who rediscovered “family values.” Adults came to realize they could, in fact, be comfortable “in the presence of youngsters” after all. The local Church of Christ, for example, developed a program called University Student Adoption—USA for short—by which members of the congregation “adopted” lonely students in the denomination’s campus club. SHSU alumni Ray and Maria Busby adopted three girls, one of them identified only as JoAnne, from the Panhandle town of Spearman. “I’m 800 miles from home,” she whimpered, “and I want a mom and a dad here.” In 1989 the Catholic Student Center gloated that its retention among the previous year’s freshmen was 100%, and the Baptist Student Union reported 25% growth. Still, BSU director Don Coleman pointed to his flock of 350 students and sighed: “When you look at the total enrollment, it is a little depressing.”

Baptist Student Union, 1986

Catholic Student Association, 1986
No doubt he failed to consider that if the pasture were not
shrinking, someone had surely left the gate open. During the 1980s,
two decades of an increasingly migratory student body finally gave
Sam Houston State the dubious distinction of having become a
“suitcase college.” The Alcalde contended that such a reputation
was not all bad, at least for the students who went home for the
weekend. “One, it meant free washer and dryer use, and two, a few
home-cooked meals,” the annual said. “Whatever the reason…it
was a nice feeling to know that home was always there for us.”

Even for students who remained on campus, times had
changed. A telling commentary in 1989 lamented: “With classes,
jobs, homework, and social activities many students did not
have time for the annual school-sponsored events.” While the
homecoming game attracted 13,110 fans, participation in planning
the pre-game parade was so low the event was cancelled. “Usually
the Greeks get involved and others will fall in behind them. But
they weren’t interested,” grieved alumni director Norma Dell Jones.
And that, even after she dangled prizes in front of them and offered
to drop the entry fee. After the game the crowd that turned out for
the Homecoming Dance withered to an all-time low of 75.

By then students had found other ways to kill time. Usually
small groups gravitated around common interests, and there was
never any shortage of friends. Most of the new apartments where
students lived featured swimming pools, and couch potatoes could
always find some kind of sports program on. Others spent time at
the library, or studied at the LSC, where they waited for chance
encounters that would lead them away to livelier pursuits.

For a quasi-commuter college like Sam Houston State,
Thursday nights in Huntsville were like an entire weekend rolled
into one spirited evening. Raising the legal limit to nineteen did
little to dampen student participation. Then, in September 1986,
the Houstonian ran a fateful headline: “21 now magic number
for drinkers.” Joseph Serapin, a Huntsville sophomore, celebrated
his nineteenth birthday by enjoying his first night on the town.
Commenting on the new law, he speculated: “I think it was done
to keep people from coming to school drunk.” The next day he
showed up for classes with a hangover, but it was the last one,
legally at least, he would suffer until he turned twenty-one two
years later. Another sophomore, Joe Curry, from Dallas, was already
pining for his favorite pastime, a diversion that had nothing to do
with alcohol. “I think 18 and 20-year olds should be able to go to
nightclubs just to dance, not to drink...to still have a night life,”
he moaned. Nobody, however, took the loss of privilege harder
than one unidentified young woman who was dragged kicking
and shrieking out of Variations II as the clock struck midnight,
pleading: “I can’t leave these doors; you don’t understand!” Bar
owners, too, took the news hard, predicting it would cut a third of
their business. Within a couple of years, clubs such as the Paradise
Bar that had enjoyed a five-year run closed their doors, while once-
happy spots like the SNS Comedy Club and the Oasis held on
grimly for a while longer. Only the Jolly Fox, which changed its
format from rock-n-roll to country and western, survived to see a
new round of hopeful competitors.

With the standard raised to twenty-one, drinking contests
in the apartments and rental houses of students became a popular
pastime for those who could not go to the clubs. There always
seemed to be a game of “Indian,” “Bunny rabbit,” or “Chug” going
on somewhere in Huntsville after the sun went down. The most
popular game, however, was “Quarters.” It involved a quarter, of
course, a shot glass, and beer. The object was to bounce a quarter
Students on the mall into the glass; you miss, you drink. It “was a fun and easy way to get ‘high,’” chortled the Alcalde, “and once a player began to ‘lose’ a few times, the level of laughter increased with each glass raised.”

Chasing a degree, of course, was still serious business, and students who never saw the inside of a bar always outnumbered those whose GPAs were not much higher than their blood-alcohol levels. During the Eighties, moreover, non-traditional students first began applying for admission in appreciable numbers. A group of them formed the Association of Returning Students in 1983 to case, as the Houstonian put it, the older students’ sense of “alienation...because of age, established peer groups, and...off campus...living arrangements.”

There were others, too, who could function in the library as well as in the bar scene, all the while keeping their perspective and priorities on an even keel. Every edition of the Alcalde during the Bowers era devoted page after page to Sam Houston students who made the Who’s Who in American Colleges and Universities. Their lists of activities were staggering. They held prestigious scholarships and were accomplished musicians and published authors; they were scholar athletes and officers in university clubs and honor societies; biannually they made the deans’ lists and volunteered regularly for community service. They represented the best of what the institution had to offer, and provided reassurance that the next generation of society’s leaders would be serious, productive, and well-rounded.

By the end of the decade, tuition for Texas residents had climbed to $16 a semester hour, yet by comparison a fifteen-hour load in 1989 was less expensive than a single class today. The same held true for textbooks. The price of a solitary volume in 2004 often costs more than the $125 stack of books the average student accumulated in 1988. Dorm rooms for a semester typically went for around $540, with a $90 student service fee added to the tab. Students then, as today, complained about the oppressive costs associated with going to college, but by-and-large undergraduates during the Eighties had more disposable income than ever before. They arrived at Huntsville to find a growing town with strip malls beginning to feature many of the same chain stores as Wendy’s, Burger King, McDonald’s, Subway, and Jack-in-the-Box started edging out local eateries like Bubba’s Big Bird, although there was never a shortage of entrepreneurs willing to take a risk on tapping the college market.

The growing sophistication of the student body enjoyed a growth and diversity in the faculty as well. SHSU was on its way to becoming a true university in every sense of the word. By 1975 well over two hundred of the 356-member faculty held doctorates. They were doing research, too, and gaining professional recognition. The expansion of the graduate program and the availability of outside money fostered what appeared to be a nurturing environment. By the mid-Seventies so many funding opportunities via state agencies and private foundations became available that the Department of Research and Grants was created to help professors find sources of money.

Still, when the SACS team returned at the end of the decade they found that the commitment had flagged and reported: “the primary cause of this decline appears to be the lack of a policy which encourages research.” There was, in fact, a policy, but truth be known, not everyone was on board, not even some administrators charged with the responsibility for carrying out Bowers’ agenda. While a faculty committee in 1969 had conceded that “research is a worthwhile activity,” it also cautioned that it “should not become so extensive that the educational program is endangered in any way.” Many professors took the comment to heart. Others who made a commitment to write and conduct research found that those endeavors actually strengthened their grasp of the material they taught. It was only a surface irony, then, that many of them gained as much recognition for their prowess at the podium as they did gaining kudos for scholarly inquiry.

James S. Olson provided a case in point. The future Regents Professor, who would earn the school’s highest recognition for both teaching and publishing, was on his way to the library in 1977 to do some research. By chance, as he passed in front of the Math and Foreign Language Building (now AB1), he encountered his dean, J. Stewart Allen. The young history professor was then basking in the glow of praiseworthy reviews for his first book, a monograph on the Depression-era Reconstruction Finance Corporation. Commenting on Olson’s success, Allen admonished: “We don’t want you to do too much of that around here. We’re not that kind of place.” Over forty books later, the dispiriting moment lingers prominently in his memory. “I just stood there, thinking: ‘What’s
the use?" Fortunately for Sam Houston State University, scholars such as Olson made the institution "that kind of place."

Another Regent's Professor, Paul Ruffin of the English department, had better luck, but only because he was able to take his outside interest into the classroom. He helped launch the Sam Houston Literary Review in 1976. The poems, short stories, and book reviews submitted by its contributors allowed his upper-level Creative Writing students an opportunity to analyze the work of up-and-coming authors from as far away as Australia, China, and Germany. When UT's Texas Quarterly folded in 1978, the Sam Houston journal became the Texas Review. As submissions grew with the publication's prestige, the advisory board added a committee of students to help decide which works would be included in the 150-page-plus biannual publication.

Despite such self-starters, changing the academic culture proved to be one of the greatest challenges Bowers faced. While he made significant strides, it would be up to his successors to realize his vision more fully. The little country teachers college on the edge of the woods that he had attended existed only in pleasant memories of another time. Yet the vestiges of that earlier age still remained in the expectations of many, if not most, senior faculty. When Bowers became president, rank and years of service—in a word, seniority—determined who would get raises and how much. As chief executive, he realized that if Sam Houston State were to recruit and retain prominent professors, the institution would have to reform its standards for tenure, initiate merit pay, and support research.

"Here was our dilemma," explained Olson: "If you want to have a national reputation, you're going to have to have faculty functioning at a national level." To do that, he continued, "you have to have a system of merit." Bobby Marks, Bowers' vice-president for academic affairs at the time, agreed, adding: "To recruit the best available faculty, we were going to have to offer salaries competitive with the market and then reward them for their work once they got here." The only way to do that, of course, was to create a faculty evaluation system, which at first met overwhelming resistance. Fortunately, it was a time when the Criminal Justice Center was ascending, and the College of Business Administration was trying to gain accreditation. Joining forces with like-minded colleagues scattered throughout other departments, the steady drumbeat of doing what was right for the institution eventually prevailed.

The Institute of Contemporary Corrections and Behavioral Sciences led the way. At a time when the country's criminal justice system fell under the microscope, revealing such problems as poorly run prisons, ill-trained policemen, and dysfunctional courts, Sam Houston State University stood ready to educate a new generation of law enforcement officials, and even to re-educate willing veterans of America's war on crime. When the U.S. Congress passed the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1968, grants in the hundreds of thousands of dollars started rolling in, allowing the ICC&BS to enhance considerably its already growing faculty and curriculum. A probation-training academy, for example, provided continuing education for veteran officers after 1972. The previous year a masters program for the Army gave military policemen a chance to earn an advanced degree. When Professor Sam Souryal came on board, he developed the "Study Abroad Program," which presented students the opportunity to see firsthand how criminal justice systems functioned in places as familiar as Great Britain and as alien as Egypt. The most noteworthy development, however, was the creation of a doctoral program. Professor Glen Kercher, who would serve as mentor and advisor to the select students accepted into the program, headed the team that developed a curriculum worthy of the degree. It was a first, not only for Sam Houston, but also for the field itself. Upon gaining approval, it was a humble-as-usual George Killinger who proclaimed: "We are especially grateful to be the first university in the nation to be authorized to offer the professional doctorate in criminal justice." At the May commencement in 1973, Randall McCaulley and Ronald Waldron became the first two graduates in the institution's history to receive the prestigious degree.

In the meantime the ICC&BS acquired the 5,000-item collection of eminent criminologist Sanford Bates. Killinger also arranged for the purchase of other personal libraries, assembling the core of perhaps the country's finest research collection on works of criminology and corrections. The Board of Regents, moreover, approved a bill to construct a first-class center to house the institution's flagship program. Dr. George Beto, who would step down as director of the Texas Department of Corrections in
1972 to join the faculty, remarked that when the school created the ICC&B, “the prophecy was made that the criminology program at Sam Houston State could well become the most outstanding in the nation….In five years that piece of wishful thinking has become a reality.” His statement was no idle boast. When the National Joint Commission on Correctional Manpower during the early 1970s made its assessment of America’s criminal justice programs, it rated Sam Houston’s “best in the nation.”

It would soon be the home of the nation’s most up-to-date facility as well. When Governor Dolph Briscoe came to dedicate the new Criminal Justice Center at the beginning of the 1977 spring semester, he beheld a sprawling three-level complex situated on four acres of land donated by the Houston Endowment. In addition to classrooms and offices, its 197,000 square feet of space housed a 500-seat auditorium, a courtroom, crime lab, television studio, library, computer center, and even a hotel for its many guests and trainees. The governor was obviously pleased by what the state’s money had bought. Pointing to the “age-old dilemma of punishment versus rehabilitation,” he surmised that if society could ever break the impasse, “those solutions may well be developed here.”

Until the day of the ceremony, the Texas Department of Corrections actually held title to the Center. In that way the prison system was able to use inmate labor to build a twenty-million-dollar facility for only seven million. Prisoners not only constructed the Center, but also produced most of the materials that went into it. At the Jester Unit near Sugar Land, for example, they fired a million bricks; in the shops scattered around Walker County they put cabinets together and configured the electrical wiring and plumbing. Professor Charles Friel, who would serve a five-year tenure as dean and director beginning in 1986, called the Center “a monument to those state prison inmates who did the work, many of them thought unemployable.” One convict, expressing a gallows humor, so to speak, exploited what CJ instructor Robert Pierce called “an architectural fluke.” In the projection booth was a door leading to a sixty-foot drop. The opening having no other obvious purpose, the prisoner suggested his own by tying a noose to a pipe just within reach. Several practical jokers got a good laugh giving tours of the room until the door was sealed.

In 1985 the recently re-designated Institute for Criminal Justice commemorated its twentieth anniversary. It certainly had a lot to celebrate. That year it awarded its 5,000th degree. Its creative training programs attracted experts across the spectrum of criminal justice and sharpened the skills of such law enforcement officials as municipal judges, oilfield theft investigators, halfway house staffers, and many others. New programs cultivated specialists who created procedures for collecting and analyzing statistics that tracked worldwide trends in crime and created ways to deter serial killers. At the same time the Center also inaugurated in 1985 the Criminal Justice Research Bulletin, which enjoyed a seven-year run dedicated to publishing the conclusions of scholarly inquiry and reporting the development of new ideas and practices. The journal added to an accumulating body of literature authored by Center faculty.

In 1979 the Houston Endowment funded a chair in honor of George Beto that annually brought to campus some of the leading criminologists in the field. The Center’s two decades were also punctuated by the continual showcasing of prominent speakers, special conferences, and trials conducted in the Hazel B. Kerper courtroom, dedicated to one of the founding members of the criminal justice faculty. The next year Sam Houston State hosted members belonging to the Ministry of Public Security from Communist China, opening an exchange that would kick off the next twenty years with an emphasis on international law enforcement.

The Institute for Criminal Justice succeeded in large part because it produced graduates capable of fixing a system that the public perceived as broken. The program took the heat off of appreciative state legislators and federal officials, who in turn rewarded it by funding a growing mission. At a time when so many resources were pouring into the Center that it had to add staff to administer grants and contracts, Radio/Television/Film (RTF)
Dean Charles Schmidt insisted, “I practically got down on my knees to plead [for President Bowers] help in finding a way to get training equipment.” Shaking the tree of the school’s new “capital expenditure fund” loosened enough cash to set up a 10-watt FM radio station in the old Peabody Library and provide some equipment to set up a TV studio. It was 1988, however, until the school built a new tower, increasing KSHU’s power to 3,000 watts. At that time the station also moved from 89.3 on the dial to its present location, 90.5.

On the television screen, KSHU Channel 7 took to the air during the early Seventies with a two-hour program shot in black-and-white with a single camera—no cuts, no fades, and when you go to something else, plug in the tape and watch the picture roll,” commented Schmidt. The RTF department was a long way from aspiring to the “national eminence” that President Templeton had earlier envisioned for the School of Communications. Yet, once it began securing adequate resources and made adjustments to compete with schools situated in urban markets, the program held its own—and then some.

One distinguishing feature the RTF program developed by the 1980s was total student involvement. When the anchor said: “One evening, this is Newsense 7,” it was a junior or senior enrolled in the Broadcast Journalism class. Freshmen and sophomores prepared the stories they read and fed them updates via a typewriter with oversized print. They were prepped by a news director and coached by floor managers—classmates all. Beloved the three $8,000 color cameras, the latest sound equipment, and a rack of klieg lights, were other students learning a valuable trade. Responsible for the entire production was a student station manager, in charge of both the operation and the programming. On Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday evenings, the news highlighted the schedule, and on Thursday night a date of interviews and entertainment provided the main attraction.

Anna Bell Lopez, who served a stint as news director during the early Eighties, summed up what the program meant to those who put so much work into keeping it going: “It was always something that broke down or didn't go right, but that's what was so great about the program. You just expected it and learned how to adjust.” One evening, for example, the host of an interview program inadvertently offended an invited guest, provoking the interviewee to rip off his microphone and stomp off the stage. “So there [the host] was, ad libbing the entire program—but, she got through it,” Hurst emphasized. Upon graduating and taking media jobs, Sam Houston students, he declared, “didn't have conniption fits like some others who didn't have the training we had.”

Other departments across campus caught up with the times as well. In 1970 Psychology became an autonomous department within the College of Education, and then merged with Philosophy in 1981. That same year it began offering a masters degree. Education itself at times was anticipating the needs of the state’s public schools, refined its programs of study, strengthened its ties with state agencies, and remained ahead of the technological curve. Likewise, the College of Business, which dropped “Applied Arts” from its title in 1974, organized into four separate departments.

Just as the faculty and curriculum grew, so too did the physical plant. New buildings and athletic complexes more than doubled the size of the grounds. When students returned for the fall semester of 1977, they found the familiar north-south roads bordering the east end of the original campus blocked off. The mall in front of the LSC, afterward provided an uninterrupted passage connecting the Quadrangle with the eastward-expanding campus.

Elliott T. Bowers, personally, was largely responsible for the breathtaking construction campaign that transformed the university by hook and crook. He pushed all the right buttons, drawing on his many connections among businessmen and politicians. Bobby Marks contended that Bowers couldn’t walk across the grounds of the capital without at least a couple of people stopping him to say hello.

A single anecdote conveys the chief executive’s ability to make things happen. “There was a lot of ad valorem taxes left over after we went to a new system, but the Coordinating Board was saying that only it had the right to tell the college how it could be spent,” insisted Marks. “At the time, we were trying to renovate the old education building, he continued, referring to the paternal sister to the administration building next door. The elegant structure, however, was beyond saying. ‘The architect told us the foundation was shot,’” Marks recalled, and with officials in Austin in no mood to fund a new building, “it looked like we were stuck with a hulk.”
The General Sam Houston Folk Festival. A grave crisis, averted only by creative and resolute action, hit the university in 1987, when Governor Bill Clements line vetoed funding for the Sam Houston Memorial Museum. Suddenly it was just like old times. The people of Huntsville rallied around the university’s staff and students, and together they held the first East Texas Folk Festival on the museum grounds. The theme of returning to the days of the Republic yielded a fair of arts and crafts, historical characters, dramatic presentations, and musicians, all representing various early-day Texas cultures and ethnic groups. Money raised from entry fees and concessions, membership in the New Army of the Republic of Texas, and a generous grant from the Meadows Foundation kept the museum afloat until funding was restored in 1989. Workers then, as today, were volunteers. In addition to local people, as many as seven hundred students from twenty campus organizations participated. The festival was such a success that it became an annual event, growing into what is called today, the General Sam Houston Folk Festival. The Ravens Rangers took the mantle of the New Army and also continue to support the museum as the most vital function of its expanded mission.

Bowers then approached Attorney General Mark White and asked him if the board really had any authority over the leftover ad valorem fund, since the system had been mothballed. Siding with the president, White declared that the board could not lord over money that rightly belonged to the schools, and so Bowers authorized the razing of the old building and engineered a capital construction contract to build the present Teacher Education Center. When White became governor, the new attorney general reversed the decision and put the board back in charge of the ad valorem account. By that time, the oil recession of 1986 had frozen virtually all new spending measures, and except for Sam Houston State, every other member of The Texas State University System was locked in place.

The oil bust signaled the end of the ambitious Campus Master Plan that had all but given the school a new identity. Among the buildings for which Bowers was chiefly responsible were a General Purpose Classroom Building and a Communications Building (renamed later for Lee Drain and Dan Rather, respectively), Centers that housed Criminal Justice and Theater, the Music Building, a complex for Health, Physical Education, and Recreation (now the HKC), and a massive coliseum and a football stadium.

Despite everything that went up, Bowers’ one regret was not being able to rebuild Old Main after a fire gutted the Gothic hall just eight years shy of its century mark. Just after 1 a.m., Friday, February 12, 1982, a security guard spotted a tell-tale glow inside the building and made a desperate call to the Huntsville Fire Department. Soon, volunteer units from as far away as Navasota and Onalaska rushed to scene. A stunned crowd, many in tears and holding their hands over quivering mouths, gathered as the inferno consumed the tinder-dry wooden interior of the doomed monolith. All the while firefighters soaked the roof of Austin Hall and cooled its 129-year-old bricks with a steady blast of water. Students who had poured out of the dormitories formed a line into the Quadrangle and passed priceless records and artifacts stored in the older building to safety. By three o’clock in the morning, all but a few wafer-thin interior walls of the venerable Old Main clung precariously to the remains of its charred shell. It took several more hours to ensure the survival of the gutted, but enduring, Austin Hall.

During its 92 years of existence, the iconic Old Main had come to represent the school itself. Its image graced everything from china place settings to postcards, and from official documents to diplomas. The loss was ineffable. Even President Bowers could only grieve: “It’s the saddest day of my life at the university….It’s all gone. The spires, the stained-glass windows, the auditorium, all those things that meant so much to anyone who has known Sam Houston.”

The loss of Old Main, coming as it did during the Master Plan building campaign, underscored the realization that the face of the school was changing considerably. Nothing gave Sam Houston the appearance of an upwardly mobile university more than the construction of the Coliseum for indoor sports in 1977, and the new Bearkat Stadium and field house in 1985. The former was...
February 12, 1982
renamed the Bernard G. Johnson Coliseum in 1988 upon its namesake’s retirement from eighteen years on the Board of Regents. The rechristened pigskin palace honored President Bowers in 1990 after he stepped down as president the previous year. Together the two facilities provided what college athletic directors like to call the “front porch,” for their positive effects on recruiting.

The Bowers era certainly saw the emergence of a successful sports program that embraced a wide range of collegiate athletics. As it jockeyed for additional prestige, the Bearkats moved from the Lone Star Conference to the Gulf Star in 1983, when it ended its affiliation with the NAIA and joined Division II of the National Collegiate Athletic Association. When Sam Houston moved up to Division I in 1987, it became a charter member of the Southland Conference, the league in which it competes today. The higher classification allowed the various programs to schedule stronger opponents, which in turn meant bigger gates and greater name recognition. Perhaps the most significant change in the sports program, however, was the passage of Title IX in 1972.

The Lady Bearkats responded by filling up the trophy case. In 1981 they captured the first-ever NAIA National Softball Championship with a nail-biting 1-0 win against Emporia State of Kansas. A double in the last inning of the game drove in the solitary run. The very next year the girls won it all again, this time at the NCAA Division II World Series in Bridgeport, Connecticut. In 1984 and 1985, the volleyball team won conference championships and consecutive trips to the Final Four.

No Sam Houston sports team during the Bowers era, however, fared as well as men’s golf. During the early Seventies the team had put some good swingers on the links, but could not quite bring home a conference trophy. Lou Plummer, a former professional wrestler and avid golfer himself, had come to Elkins Lake in his retirement and started following the local collegians. Elkins boasted the closest eighteen, and allowed the boys to call it their home course. Tired of watching them get beaten, Plummer asked coach and SHSU alumnus Ronnie Choate: “What’s it going to take to win?” The answer was a $600 scholarship per player, which would allow the coach to recruit some promising talent. The old wrestler twisted every arm in town, and quickly raised the needed funds. “A year later,” in 1975, said Choate, “we got second in the nation at Colonial in Fort Worth.” The team followed it up with a pair of conference championships the next two years. Then, as host of the 1978 NAIA national tournament on their home course at Elkins Lake, the Bearkats won it all. They did it again in 1979. And again in 1980. And a final time in 1981.

The basketball team, too, claimed a national championship during the 1972-1973 season. On the strength of its 27-0 record, the Bearkats climbed to first place in the wire service polls, earning them the mythical “college division” title. In the national tournament, Xavier eliminated Sam Houston in the second round. During the Bowers era they brought home five conference trophies and broke athletics. Its passage set the stage for an explosion of women’s sports and all the benefits that were previously enjoyed mostly by male athletes. For women’s athletics at Sam Houston, as in most colleges and universities, it meant more scholarships, better facilities and coaches, and a wider range of job opportunities that arose from the cultivation of girls’ sports in the public schools.

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into the national tournament again in 1986, this time going down in the first round to Delta State in a two-point heartbreaker.

In football, the fortunes of the Bearkats mighty eleven waxed and waned, but they managed to capture the Gulf Star Conference title in 1985 and 1986. Nineteen eighty-six marked the first time in 75 years that they did not play their home games at Pritchett Field. That year the new 14,000-seat Bearkat Stadium opened with a 23-6 christening at the expense of Montana State. The team would enjoy a two-year run of victorious home games before it finally conceded its first defeat in 1988.

By the time Elliott T. Bowers stepped down as president and chief executive of Sam Houston State University following the spring semester of 1989, it was abundantly clear that the institution had achieved the kind of momentum that would allow his successors to reach for the next level. Whenever he was asked what he was proudest of, Bowers would always respond that he wanted to be remembered for his focus on the students. He was president in a new age, however, one that placed most of its demands on his executive abilities. His greatest legacy, then, was the unprecedented growth in construction. Upon the president’s retirement, a colleague proclaimed: “The face of the campus is the face of Elliott Bowers.”

Elliott T. Bowers. Elliott Toulmin Bowers was born in Oklahoma City in 1919 and moved to Mexia, in Central Texas, where he completed his secondary education. Well known for his musical talent, few realized that he also ran amok on the gridiron and earned all-state honors as halfback for the Mexia Blackcats. Both Bowers and his high school sweetheart, Frances Handley, matriculated at Sam Houston State in 1937, where they continued their courtship and were married in 1940. While Bowers was still an undergraduate, he played in a local dance band that attracted the attention of renowned orchestra director Lawrence Welk, who was passing through Huntsville. The popular musician, Bowers deadpanned, needed to “pick up some local yokels to fill out his saxophone section,” and in that way the Sam Houston student joined the summer tour.

In his usual self-effacing manner, Bowers would admit without shame that he had graduated “without honors,” but he was always quick to add: “It was an honor to graduate.” Until that time and afterward, Bowers taught band at Huntsville High School until being called into the service of the Air Force during World War II. After teaching meteorology and navigation to pilots, he shipped out for the Asian theater, where he surveyed Japanese activities for counterintelligence. Upon returning to Sam Houston State, Bowers and his wife settled in at the Country Campus where he directed Veteran Affairs. As he rose up the organizational chart—directing the student union, teaching future educators, and serving as dean of students—he was always working toward his doctorate at the University of Houston, which he received in 1959. First, at the end of Harmon Lowman’s tenure, and again after Arleigh Templeton resigned, Bowers served as acting president. Just before the fall semester of 1970, the Board of Regents named him ninth president of Sam Houston State University.

As chief executive Elliott Bowers projected a personal style reminiscent of the genially accessible Harmon Lowman, who had taken him under his wing much as Joseph Baldwin had adopted a young Harry Estill so long ago. At the same time, Bowers learned from Templeton that only a businesslike efficiency would push forward the kind of agenda the times demanded. The president revealed in his idiosyncrasies as well. He could be spotted many a morning taking a walk in his pajamas, and kept a circle of close friends who got together regularly and played dominos. The many pipes he puffed on became near-appendages. Bowers also kept an open-door policy, and he tried to make all visitors feel welcomed. A fifty-two-year association with the school had cultivate deep roots in Huntsville, and he made the town his home during his retirement. He maintained an active interest in the affairs of the school, of course, but was content to look lovingly on its progress from arm’s length. Mostly, he took advantage of his free time to keep the circle of his many friends intact. Bowers died at Huntsville Memorial Hospital in 2003 at the age of 83.