

SHSU, Did You Know?

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“Did You Know”: a collection of SHSU brags. This is Paul Culp, Special Collections Librarian at Sam Houston State University.

Did you know that Sam Houston Normal Institute—our earliest name—was the second institution of higher learning established by the State of Texas? Texas A&M—along with its branch for African Americans, now Prairie View A&M—was the only state institution to begin giving classes earlier. It did not grant the first diplomas, however; SHNI had the first class ever to graduate from a state institution, as Janie Parks literally skipped across the stage to lead off the graduates in Huntsville earlier the same day that A&M was to present its first degrees, June 16, 1880.

Did you know that our oldest building, Austin Hall, is nearly three decades older than the college itself? When it was completed in 1852, it was the wonder of the countryside; Texas was too much the rustic frontier at the time to have many public buildings in the Greek Revival style so popular in the Old South. It is therefore an architectural treasure and the second-oldest surviving collegiate structure west of the Mississippi River.

Did you know that the Peabody Memorial Library, built 1901-1902, was the first separately-housed college library in Texas? Baylor's Carroll Library would not be completed until 1903, and the University of Texas and Texas A&M would continue to use rooms in their main building still longer—*much* longer in the case of A&M. This innovative building was completed for less than its contracted cost of \$9,372, a first and doubtlessly a *last* superlative in the history of the institution. It was restored to its original turn-of-the-century elegance in 1991, for a “somewhat” larger sum.

Did you know that, small as Sam Houston State was before World War II, speakers of national renown often appeared here? The magnificent auditorium which crowned the Victorian structure fondly recalled as “Old Main” was the setting for packed crowds to hear William Jennings Bryan in 1911, Robert Frost in 1933, and Eleanor Roosevelt in 1937, to name just a few.

Did you know that Sam Houston State Teachers' College was the first—perhaps only—college to incorporate a prisoner-of-war camp as a branch campus? The Huntsville Alien Internment Camp, first such facility built anywhere in the United States, housed from 3,000-5,000 German prisoners during the war. Sam Houston State took title to the property in June 1946 for the huge sum of \$1, and used it to house more than 2,000 students and faculty (there were no houses to be had in Huntsville in that post-war era), and their dependants. For several years, Country Campus was the second-largest town in Walker County, with bus service, church, movie, clinic, and other amenities. In contrast to the teeming '40's, recent years have seen Country Campus populated only by grazing cattle, physicists peering through the large telescope at the University's observatory, and golfers enjoying the fairly primitive 9-hole course. The property was recently sold to Distinguished Alumnus Sam Dominey—he had a B.S. in Physics in 1952, Distinguished Alumnus 1995. Ironically, there could be no more appropriate owner, as Mr. Dominey's family had owned the land before it was requisitioned by the federal government in 1942.

Did you know that Sam Houston was the first completely air-conditioned college campus anywhere? How many campuses are more in need of it, you ask? Both the previous two superlatives were the accomplishments of our free-wheeling seventh president, from 1941-1964, Dr. Harmon Lowman. Ever on the alert for a bargain or a bit of “creative financing,” Dr. Lowman heard of a mammoth air conditioning system which had been constructed for a top-secret military establishment, but the end of World War II found the project orphaned and all the cooling equipment languishing in New Orleans. Dr. Lowman made a deal with the federal government—not as good as the \$1 that was paid

for more than 861 acres and 405 buildings of all kinds at the POW Camp, but still a notable bargain—to buy \$200,000 worth of air conditioning equipment for \$30,000. He sent Physical Plant Manager Luther Laskie to take delivery of the enormous purchase and then get it housed in Huntsville. The result made newspaper copy far and wide, and publicity was not something that Dr. Lowman was shy about seeking.