

Eighteen years ago: 'Integration with dignity'

It is a rare occasion when this columnist deigns to write positively about Clemson University. To do so is to compete with an abundance of public relations propaganda that Clemson generates every day.

However, there is one particular incident in Clemson's history that I am quite proud to relate herein, since few seem to be aware of it.

Eighteen years ago yesterday, on Jan. 28, 1963, Harvey Gantt enrolled as the first black student at Clemson.

The fact that Clemson desegregated is not so extraordinary. It is taken for granted now. And practically every other college and university in the South integrated at about that same time.

But the peaceful, dignified way that Clemson handled Gantt's entrance is noteworthy, especially in light of the tumultuous uproar at other southern institutions over the issue.

In Mississippi, Gov. Ross Barnett had presided over a circus in 1962 when a black man, James Meredith, enrolled at Ole Miss. The ensuing riots injured 160 federal marshalls, 28 of whom were shot. Two bystanders, including a French journalist, were killed. Order was finally restored at Ole Miss by over 6,000 U.S. Army troops and the Mississippi National Guard.

And in Alabama, Gov. George Wallace promised "segregation now—segregation tomorrow—segregation forever" in his 1963 inaugural address. Later that year he made his infamous stand in the schoolhouse door to block the admission of two black students to the University of Alabama. They were admitted when President John F. Kennedy activated the Alabama National Guard to enforce the law.

Scenes like this could easily have been the case in South Carolina.

But at Clemson, desegregation was quiet and orderly. "Integration with Dignity" read the Saturday Evening Post magazine's headline on the article about Gantt's uneventful entrance.

The Post article stressed to the nation the importance of Gantt's dignified enrollment. "The South Carolina story is one of the most significant—and reassuring—stories in the recent history of race relations in this country," it said. "If South Carolina could keep the peace, so could any southern state."

Gantt had applied to Clemson in 1961. He wanted to major in architecture, and Clemson offered the only program in the state.

South Carolina had a law at the time that if a black resident of the state—which Gantt was—wanted to major in a field that was only offered at a white school, the state would pay his out-of-state tuition at an institution which would accept him. So his application was turned down, and he went to a northern school.

C. W. Integrated



January 28, 1963: Harvey Gantt enters Clemson. (Photo courtesy of The Saturday Evening Post)

But Gantt still wanted to attend school in his home state, so he reapplied to Clemson in 1962.

Realizing that it was only a matter of time before desegregation would become a reality here, as it had in Mississippi, some foresighted and powerful state leaders decided that South Carolina would integrate on its own.

This small group of influential men included Charles Daniel, a Greenville businessman; John Cauthen, executive director of the South Carolina Textile Manufacturers Association; Edgar Brown, president pro tempore of the state senate and chairman of Clemson's board of trustees; Wayne Freeman, editor of The Greenville News; Robert C. Edwards, Clemson's president; and Ernest Hollings, governor.

They successfully overcame efforts to set off a defiant spectacle at Clemson by the state's two leading racists, A.W. "Red" Bethea, a state legislator and Clemson alumnus, and Marion Gressette, called "Mister Segregation in South Carolina" in the Post article.

Hollings endured pressure to put on a Barnett-like show in defiance of federal law. But he stood firm and said in his farewell address in January 1963, "If and when every legal



President Robert C. Edwards in 1963. (Photo courtesy of The Saturday Evening Post)

remedy has been exhausted, this General Assembly must make clear South Carolina's choice, a government of laws rather than a government of men.

"As determined as we are, we of today must realize the lesson of 100 years ago, and move on for the good of South Carolina and our United States. It must be done with law and order."

A week after Hollings' speech, Gantt entered Clemson. About 200 curious students just watched, far outnumbered by the horde of reporters who expected who-knows-what in the way of violent disorder.

Edwards, determined that he would not tolerate a freak show at Clemson, had worked out a comprehensive security plan, without the aid of federal troops or marshalls, that made Gantt's entrance anticlimactic after all the preceding controversy.

South Carolina, for once, didn't have to joke about its ineptitude by saying "T-G-F-M" (Thank God For Mississippi). Clemson had handled a major crisis, under the watchful eyes of the entire nation, efficiently and—most important of all—with dignity.