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THE FOUNDING OF LeTOURNEAU COLLEGE

by D. F. Burns

The educational philosophy which had its fulfillment in the LeTourneau Technical Institute of Texas was first implanted in the mind of a fourteen-year-old school dropout named R. G. LeTourneau. In 1902, he went to work as an Apprentice Iron Moulder. His boss welcomed him with one of the age-old cracks of the iron business: "This is a job for a strong back and a weak mind." As had others before him, LeTourneau learned his business the "hard way" — shoveling sand, wheeling barrows, and doing all the back-breaking labor that the journeymen could give him to do — and he learned the value of learning-by-doing.

He also learned that students must be engaged in something worth their effort. Wanting to learn the elements of the machinist's trade, LeTourneau talked an old machinist in the foundry into allowing him to operate the lathe in his shop, a skill he learned quickly. His response to this experience was "Bah, this is nothing. You watch the lathe go round and you learn what comes out. Shavings. To learn something, you must make something." In that foundry was probably born his practical approach to education.

The next stage came about several years later when LeTourneau was chopping wood for his uncle. He let the axe slip and cut his leg. He could do nothing but rest until the wound had healed. To help pass the time, he studied the lessons of an International Correspondence School Course which introduced him to the value of the academic side of knowledge.

From LeTourneau's experiences came the opportunity for LeTourneau workers to have self-improvement while holding regular jobs. One of the guiding principles of H. G. LeTourneau, Inc., was the desire to give every employee an opportunity to learn and to earn more. This desire resulted from LeTourneau's youth, when he found that in building earthmovers there were problems his seventh grade education could not muster.

Prior to the founding of LeTourneau Technical Institute, plants at Peoria, Illinois, Toccoa, Georgia, and Vicksburg, Mississippi, operated plant and administrative training programs based on this idea of learning and doing.

As the LeTourneau enterprises grew into new and untried areas of manufacturing, the men had to be trained on the job. Production training was put into operation and the operators of LeTourneau equipment were trained to operate the simplest bulldozer as well as the complicated scrapers and Tournapulls. LeTourneau teachers became experts in the production of audio-visual aids to help educate the new operators and mechanics.

During World War II, it was difficult to get trained production workers because of the draft. As a result, massive training programs were developed to keep production going. The first 'LeTourneau Tech' was actually a shop college.

Another type of educational activity was developed at the Toccoa, Georgia, plant. The LeTourneau Machinist School was set up for youths from 18 to 21. The course required two years to complete; the boys worked regular eight-hour shifts and were paid the regular shop starting pay; and five nights a week, three hours per night were spent in class. The two principal subjects were blue-print reading and mathematics.

In 1941, the U.S. Defense Department announced plans to build an army hospital in Longview, Texas. By 1942, the Harmon General Hospital had been built, and three years later, deactivated. It was in that state that the LeTourneaus saw the facilities in 1945 while looking over Longview as a possible plant location.

Carl Estes, publisher of the *Longview News Journal*, invited the LeTourneaus to Longview. Unaware that the company had been searching for an ideal place to found an institution for young men, especially ex-G.I.'s, Estes pointed out the vacant Harmon Hospital. "What a place for a school" ran through the LeTourneaus' minds.

After that, things moved fast. After several weeks of vigorous work in Washington, D.C., Estes announced the transfer of Harmon General Hospital to the LeTourneau Foundation to create LeTourneau Technical Institute of Texas.

According to the *Shreveport Times*, LeTourneau bid \$870,000 for the hospital plant and site and finally got it for "one dollar". What actually happened was this: the complete property was assessed for sale at \$870,000 and was sold to the LeTourneau Foundation at that figure less 100% discount. One of the primary conditions of the transaction was that ex-G.I.'s should be priority students of the school as long as there was need; also the contract contained a reversionary clause so that if a national emergency arose, the property would revert to the federal government. As a result, the old barracks were not cleared away and permanent buildings were not constructed on the campus for a period of ten years. These are the buildings that were a part of the property transfer: steam plant, laundry, bakery, \$56,000 swimming pool, gymnasium, theater, tennis courts, outdoor handball court, chapel, library, warehouses, railroad spur.

On January 31, 1946, the hospital was turned over to the district engineer representatives from Dallas by Harmon's post engineer. It was then taken over by the Public Buildings Administration, followed by official transferral to LeTourneau. Approximately one month later, the school was dedicated. Secretary of State Claude Isbell formally presented the state charter for the school. A crowd estimated at 10,000 was on hand for the festivities. The president of Texas A & M College, the superintendent of public instruction in Texas, and U.S. Senator, W. Lee O'Daniel were among the notables present for the dedication.

On April 2, 1946, classes were in full swing with the first catalog being issued with that same date. Tuition was \$30.00 per month, board \$45.00. A single person paid \$8.00 rent per month, married students \$25.00 for their apartment.

Approval of the G.I. Bill for training at LeTourneau Tech was received. Two thousand technical books and 50 different periodicals and newspapers had been ordered for the library.

The 1948 catalog carried the announcement that the school was accredited as a junior college in the State of Texas. During that same year, the college curriculum became identical in format to many other collegiate course offerings.

Between 1948 and 1961, the Alterday Plan was developed. In essence, the school was divided into two schedules — A and B. When A schedule was in class, B was working, and vice versa. In 1961, a new statement of philosophy

and purpose appeared. LeTourneau Tech's *Now* became the LeTourneau College *Now*. A liberal arts curriculum was added to the college program and co-eds were admitted as students.

There were other changes. The first permanent building, Tyler Hall, and the campus Master Plan were instituted. Since 1962, the Science Building, the Margaret Estes Library, the Gymnasium, a new wing to Tyler Hall and a cafeteria have been constructed. Even though the physical appearance of the College has been altered and it no longer depends on the LeTourneau Plant for its support, the actual philosophy of the school has not changed since its foundation. That same philosophy is that the Academic, the Practical, and the Spiritual are inextricably linked together.

In the words of Mr. R. G. LeTourneau the ultimate objectives of the college may be found:

. . . a better job can be done working and studying every day.
It will become a life habit. No man ever succeeded who
didn't acquire this habit . . .