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THE FOUNDING OF HENDERSON COUNTY JUNIOR COLLEGE

by William R. Enger

Bounded on the west by the Trinity River and on the east by the Neches River, Henderson County measures roughly fifty miles east and west and twenty north and south. Thirty-five miles west of Tyler lies Athens, the county seat and hub where the seven main roads converge. There in 1946 was founded Henderson County Junior College, an effort that tied local needs to the postwar surge in higher education. The founding of HCJC was the product of an informal association of civic leaders and public school men who mobilized widespread support, was achieved through steps which could not be retraced today, and illustrative of the junior college movement.

J. P. Pickens, the president of Athens Federal Savings and Loan, remembered proudly the founding of Henderson County Junior College in Athens thirty-five years earlier. He said, "I am sorry to get so personal, but it was my idea, and it was my baby." Born and raised near Athens, Pickens drove with his sister to school in a horse and buggy, but, except for a few weeks, he never attended college. He wanted to do so, but like many kids in Henderson County, he could not. He built a successful insurance agency and became a civic leader. When Clint Murchison left Athens, he appointed Pickens as president to supervise the First National Bank during a period of recovery from some internal difficulties. Murchison instructed his boyhood friend to return any money that the bank made to the community. Pickens fulfilled both that mission and his dream by starting a junior college in Henderson County.¹

Late in 1945, Pickens discussed his idea with Eugene Spencer, who owned a hardware and furniture business, and A. M. Barnes, who with R. T. Craig owned and ran the newspaper. They enlisted the support of other prominent local businessmen and picked Orval Pirtle to head the effort. The superintendent at Cross Roads for fifteen years, Pirtle was well known for helping consolidate many small schools in the county so that their students could attend high school. He also knew his way around Austin, having contributed to forty laws concerning education that passed the legislature.²

Thirty years later, Pirtle described his call. T. O. Milner of Texas Power and Light was working one day at Cross Roads. Pirtle and Milner met in the gym, and Milner sketched a map of the county on the floor with his finger. Athens lay at the center where the seven

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paved roads converged. A junior college located there could draw the graduates of the eight consolidated public schools. Youth from the county (who otherwise would not attend college) could get academic or vocational training.³

J. P. Pickens and Eugene Spencer contacted Pirtle to come to the bank, and they asked him, "Would you be for a county junior college?" Pirtle wondered whether they really meant for Athens, saying that the town lacked the students and valuation to support a junior college. But a county junior college located in Athens could survive by sending buses throughout the area. Pirtle stressed that there would be opposition to Athens because of fears that it would dominate a board of trustees. There was also another squabble between the state superintendent and the State Board of Education over vocational-technical training. Approval by the county superintendent, board, and commissioners would be much easier.⁴

Hard work kept Pickens' "baby" from being stillborn. Pickens sought civic backing, and he paid expenses for Pirtle to visit public schools. Pirtle talked to principals and superintendents across the county. They wanted the college but did not want Athens to dominate the board and ignore the rest of the county. All county school men, except those from Athens, met early in March. Pickens hosted a dinner the next week for these administrators, leading citizens from their communities, and several representatives from his group of businessmen. They wanted a junior college for the county, and they planned for Pirtle to address public meetings to gather signatures on petitions.⁵

Pirtle was ready, and he moved very quickly. Petitions were signed at his sessions by the required ten percent of county voters. Pirtle presented the petitions to the Henderson County School Board, and it approved them. There was a hitch in passing the requirements of the State Board of Education—\$10,000,000 of taxable property, 7,000 students, and 400 high school seniors—because Henderson County had less than 7,000 students and only 250 seniors. However, a junior college might be approved were there 5,000 students, a growing area, and a real need. Pirtle contacted Senator A. M. Aiken to convince the State Board of the need.⁶

Lest Aiken and Pirtle not be enough, the founding fathers stacked the deck. L. A. Woods, the state superintendent, was asked to present the case. Pirtle talked with Royal Watkins, the president of the State Board (formerly of Athens and a friend of Murchison). Meantime, Pickens contacted his friend on the board, Maco Stewart of Galveston, and Stewart arranged a meeting for March 11, 1946.⁷

Judge Sam Holland did the legal work and presented it at the meeting. Pickens, Pirtle, Spencer, and W. R. Moore (head of the Hen-

derson County Chamber of Commerce), all spoke for a junior college. Watkins said that there was no junior college in the senatorial district. Stewart was ready, and he called for the vote to approve the college. Gently, Pirtle asked the meeting whether Woods, the state superintendent, did not have to recommend the junior college. He did so, and the State Board approved the Henderson County Junior College.⁹

From the State Board, matters returned to the county commission's court. An election was required because of a twenty-cent tax on each \$100 of taxable property valuation for the support of the junior college. The election on May 4 would decide three issues: (1) whether to have a junior college; (2) the twenty-cent tax; and (3) candidates for the board of trustees. Incidentally, Pickens contacted individuals who had made fortunes in oil in the county, offering to name the college in return for their donations, but they were not interested.⁹

The vote was critical. Fail, and with Palestine wanting a junior college, Tyler having one (since 1926), and Corsicana getting one (1946)—well, their case for need would evaporate. To insure widespread support, Pirtle chose his trustees from across the county. All candidates were well versed with the public schools, most having served on school boards:

Athens	Eugene Spencer	board president
Athens	H. C. Moseley	teacher, county superintendent, former legislator
Malakoff	Paul Bankston	board member
LaPoynor	T. O. Milner	board member
Brownsboro	W. J. Castleberry	board president
Cross Roads	H. L. Kinabrew	board member
Eustace	X. Hastings	board member ¹⁰

In the month before the vote on the junior college, the campaign intensified. Civic leaders devoted time and money to hold meetings and write publicity. Civic clubs flooded the newspaper with letters to the editor and advertisements, repeatedly making the following points:

- (1) A junior college would be an advantage for the area, educate those who could not otherwise attend college, and bring money into the county.
- (2) 250 seniors from the county, the returning veterans, and the below standard teachers could be educated.
- (3) Education would be cheaper since students could live at home.
- (4) More education was needed today.
- (5) This would facilitate the supervision of youngsters too young to leave home.
- (6) The junior college would be small, and individual attention to their needs would enable students to succeed. They would be lost in the crowd at a large college where they might fail unnoticed and drop out.
- (7) Do it for the boys and girls and veterans.

- (8) Do it for Henderson County.
- (9) Buses running the seven highways would reach everywhere in the county.
- (10) There would be training in agriculture, distributive education, homemaking, and the trades.
- (11) There were 1,600 high school students in the county, but less than fifty a year could afford college.
- (12) It was a duty to establish a junior college where youth might continue their education.¹¹

In the election on May 4, 1946, voters passed the junior college by 93 per cent (12:1 in the county, 30:1 in Athens). The candidates for the board and the twenty-cent tax also carried. The *Athens Review* congratulated the people of the county for recognizing the need for education. There was optimism and opportunity in Henderson County in 1946, as there was elsewhere in America. The Depression was over, the war won, the junior college founded. Returning veterans could build new lives with their wartime savings and the GI Bill.¹²

The Henderson County Junior College District Board of Trustees, an independent political subdivision created under Article 2815H Revised Civil Statutes of the State of Texas, met for the first time on May 11, 1946, in the office of H. C. Moseley. A lawyer, Moseley, was chairman of the board at the First National Bank. Pickens had left the bank to return to his insurance agency, but HCJC still had friends at the bank.¹³

The seven trustees elected Moseley president and Bankston secretary of the board. They located HCJC in Athens and picked Pirtle as president. The board also decided on tuition rates, agreed to "except the GI Program in the College (sic)," allocated funds from tax monies for buildings and buses, hired a faculty, and established a pay schedule for them.¹⁴

Pirtle picked his faculty carefully, as he had the board earlier, seeking to build support for HCJC across the county and in the public schools. It showed clearly:

- Orval Pirtle, president, Cross Roads supt. (15 years)
- H. G. Larkin, dean, registrar, Malakoff supt. (3 years)
- George Tipton, mathematics, LaPoynor supt. (10 years)
- A. M. Anderson, English
- Rufus McElhaney, agriculture, Eustace ag. teacher (15 years)
- Roscoe Francis, agriculture, LaPoynor ag. teacher
- A. L. Tomkins, distributive ed., Cross Roads principal (5 years)

He also felt bound to offer Dr. S. L. LeMay, superintendent of Athens for 24 years, a position teaching education. LeMay had been ignored during the initial meetings and passed over for the college presidency. He was apparently disappointed and declined, leaving Athens for a position at SMU, which he claimed offered more money and prestige.¹⁵

The month of May tested the organizational abilities of Orval Pirtle and did not find them wanting. He set summer registration for June 3, a month after the election, with classes starting on June 6 in English, business, education, mathematics, social science, and agriculture. Bus routes were to begin at seven area high schools; five lay outside the county. The Athens School Board donated space for classes. Textbooks were ordered and received. Pirtle recruited students through the newspaper; they could take six credits in each of two six-week terms.¹⁰

HCJC still had no buildings or campus, no laboratory or library. Some schools are founded with architects and lots of money, but HCJC was built from war surplus and the GI Bill, the support of the people, bank overdrafts, and the vision and scavenging ability of Orval Pirtle.

The Board of Trustees met formally seven times during May and June. They heard about the GI program, approved the purchase of buses and equipment, picked Sam Holland as legal adviser, and chose a depository bank. When their bank wanted too much for loans, the Board found cheaper money at the First National in Athens. On June 24, 1946, the Board found HCJC its own campus.¹¹

The city had a park, the high school had a new gym, but the college had no home. The city wished to back the college, the high school to unload its old gym, and the college to get a campus. Perhaps, they could make a deal. Remember, HCJC trustee Eugene Spencer chaired the Athens School Board.

The City Commission, the Athens School Board, and the HCJC Board met jointly. Fair Park, a 58.3-acre tract, belonged to the city. The Cotton Palace at the park had once housed exhibits, but the high school had since remodeled the building and used it as a gym. The school board was building a new gym, but had invested funds to improve the Cotton Palace. They took \$6,500 for the gym. The HCJC Board next leased 22¼ acres at Fair Park from the city at a dollar a year for 99 years. The city kept the title and mineral rights and promised to revoke the lease only should the college fail or a business be established on the land. No oil wells would be located within 300 feet of a building, and the lease might be renewed. The HCJC Board might remove any buildings should the lease be cancelled. The steady hand that guided this trade must have belonged to Orval Pirtle.¹² Pirtle said that HCJC now had a campus, not just classes and faculty.¹³

However, funds were still needed. Because of the timing, HCJC received no state appropriation during the first year.¹⁴ The Board lost no time in levying the twenty-cent tax and in having the county collect it. They did that on the twenty-seventh. They borrowed \$48,000 at four percent at the First National Bank in Athens to get HCJC through the summer, pay for equipment and six buses, and to remodel the gym into classrooms.¹⁵

During the first summer 17 teachers (11 full time HCJC faculty by this time), held classes at the high school, instructing 256 students. Pirtle encouraged students to enroll, pushing for numbers in the newspaper. Veterans could draw \$65, \$90 if married, a month plus tuition and books. His efforts succeeded by July when he announced that the State Department of Education had approved credits for transfer. Elsewhere, progress was made as well. The first honor roll was listed, the first catalog in August proposed eighty classes for the year, and the students picked the school colors (red and white) and mascot (the cardinal). By the fall term the gym was converted into seven classrooms, a laboratory, library, offices, and restrooms.²

The catalog outlined the curriculum at HCJC which would prepare students for transfer to a four-year college or provide vocational-technical training for work in agriculture or business. With sufficient demand even surveying, electricity, or oil field problems could be offered. High school graduates, or veterans, or those over 21, might enroll. The associate degree in arts would be awarded those who completed sixty credits (thirty at HCJC) with twelve hours in English, twelve of second-year classes, and two years of physical education. Tuition for five classes was \$32.50. The catalog cover proclaimed that HCJC was "a college for Henderson County and the surrounding counties" and that "what builds the college builds the county."³

Three hundred and eleven students and twelve faculty began the 1946 fall semester at HCJC. Two-thirds of the students were veterans taking vocational courses.⁴ At year's end HCJC had grown to 853 students (217 academic, 322 agricultural, 314 trade), with 47 on the faculty (13 academic, 18 agricultural, 16 trade). Its buses combed the countryside (one running 58 miles), serving 28 communities. In December, 1947, HCJC was one of eleven junior colleges in Texas with more than 1,000 students. The State Association of Junior Colleges gave temporary accreditation in 1947, permanent in 1948. Five graduated in 1946 and 59 in 1947.⁵

Although still short of funds, HCJC began to build. The veterans' program was particularly useful for tapping governmental agencies. Camp Fannin (near Tyler) closed, and the surplus lay waiting to be used. When the Office of Price Administration closed, their office equipment was distributed, and R. T. Craig was an advisory board member. In 1946, Pirtle acquired at least 14 buildings, \$10,000 worth of equipment, and \$20,000 worth of furniture, and \$13,600 more in 1947. He got a theater from Camp Howze which became an 800-seat auditorium after \$17,000 was spent on a foundation, roof, and interior. Barracks were converted into classroom buildings, a library, and a cafeteria. Budgeted construction meant continual building projects, weather delays, and a campus that looked like a quilt—patchwork.⁶

The financing of HCJC was varied, complex, and often creative. During the early years the GI Bill and the technical program kept the college afloat, balancing the losses in the academic area. An audit on February 3, 1947, listed \$140,000 worth of machinery, buses, and buildings, and receivables due from funding agencies amounted to \$66,000. The library (2,339 volumes) at \$3,000 was only a ninth of the value of the vocational equipment. Debts from loans and overdrafts were nearly \$80,000 with interest paid on the overdrafts. Even the board president admitted, "This college was built on overdrafts." The auditor reported the financial condition was good although unorthodox.²⁷

Veterans and their vocational-technical programs were a large part of HCJC. The weekly college newspaper devoted at least a page to veterans, more space than for the clubs, sports, and other events. In 1948, the eight vocational agriculture courses required by law were taught on campus, and 14 classes in agriculture enrolled veterans throughout the district. Courses in trades and industries included work in auto mechanics, radio, welding, machine shop, refrigeration, carpentry, and cabinet making. Probably, three-fourths of the students were veterans and three-fourths of the faculty vocational. The technical teachers and their supervisors were paid equal to or better than their academic colleagues (from \$250 and up a month).²⁸

Mrs. Grace Cade and her speech class wrote three choices for the school song in 1947. Elmo Holmes, a leader of the veterans, sang them to the student body, and it voted for one. Mr. Holmes later entered business and is today a board member.²⁹

C. C. Colvert, professor of junior college education at the University of Texas, taught several courses at HCJC for the faculty. He said that the transfer, technical, and terminal programs served a growing need. Some 30,000 students, half of them veterans, were enrolled in Texas junior colleges at the time that Colvert spoke. Later at Kilgore Junior College, Colvert stressed educating the veterans in the junior colleges. The key was general education to develop a boarder perspective, individual potential, and citizenship. The curriculum that his colleague proposed was like the one at HCJC with academic, trades, and agricultural classes.³⁰

Much as Colvert suggested, HCJC was founded in response to changing social needs. The leading proponents of a junior college, Pickens and Pirtle, had themselves experienced difficulty in obtaining their education. Pirtle was especially attuned to students. One of the reasons that he led the movement to consolidate public schools was to get students the chance to attend high school. In the 1930s, employers asked applicants whether they had a high school diploma. Pirtle saw the need and acted, and soon there were more high school graduates

in the county. After the war the returning veterans as well as the seniors were asked whether they had taken any college as they applied for jobs. Pirtle saw the need for a junior college, something that he said was discussed as early as 1925. After the war the time was right because of the veterans. Their return to school stimulated a postwar surge in higher education because of federal support programs such as the GI Bill. Finally, the county backed the establishment of a junior college.¹¹

HCJC "popularized" education in the county by sending its buses down the seven main roads. It offered a general education to develop potential, perspective, and citizenship. While many students did not transfer to the university, they would not have attended college at all but for HCJC. The trades and vocational agriculture programs attracted many returning veterans. Located in an agricultural area, HCJC responded by stressing agriculture. Blacks in that day did not take academic work, but HCJC democratized higher education in starting trades and agricultural classes under black teachers.¹²

According to both H. C. Moseley and J. P. Pickens, HCJC would not have been founded without Orval Pirtle. Senator A. M. Aiken thought that Orval Pirtle was known for junior colleges, especially HCJC. Aiken credited Pirtle's success to the fact that his word could always be trusted. He was not selfish, and his integrity was never doubted. *The Cardinal* (1947) was dedicated to Pirtle for building the college, for his educational values and desire to advance Henderson County, and for getting state accreditation and a high ranking by the Association of American Junior Colleges. Orval Pirtle sacrificed for the school. He was always working, always on the road somewhere. Students and HCJC were first with him. He assigned teachers their duties and backed them, gave them freedom of action, and made them part of the school team.¹³

When asked about the early days of HCJC, most people remembered the fun. The students, faculty, and communities were all infected with the building of HCJC—the construction, the benefits performed for it, the college events. HCJC certainly reflected the junior college experience in its curriculum, open door admissions, community participation, and relationship with county schools.

NOTES

¹J. P. Pickens, interview, Athens, Texas, August 26, 1981.

²J. P. Pickens interview; *Athens Weekly Review*, March 14, 1946, hereafter cited *AWR*. Pirtle (b. 1906) grew up in Henderson County, started teaching and taking normal training during the summers, became principal at Cross Roads, took BA at Stephen F. Austin (1932) and MS at East Texas State Teachers College (1941). 21 years in public schools and 25 years as HCJC president, Pirtle served on many civic and professional organizations, enjoying a considerable reputation across Texas. Pirtle tapes, HCJC, Athens, Texas, c. 1979, hereafter

cited Pirtle tapes; A. M. Aiken, interview, Paris, Texas, August 27, 1981; *Texas Junior College Bulletin* (June, 1951), vol. IV, no. 5, 4; *The Cardinal* (1947), HCJC annual; *The Cardinal* (December 17, 1946), vol. 1, no. 4, and (March 13, 1952), vol. 6, no. 8.

¹Pirtle tapes. The liberal arts college, state college, university, and high school were all established by the time that the junior college began about 1900. A product of the progressive era, the junior college sought to open the door to those who had not previously attended college, an extension upward from the public schools. Two-year programs were offered for general education, transfer to the university, and vocational training. A board of trustees elected by the district oversaw the college and hired administrators and faculty. Teachers often came from the public schools and lived in the district. Technical training and the availability of education most distinguished the junior college.

²Pirtle tapes.

³Pirtle tapes; J. P. Pickens interview; *AWR*, March 14, 1946.

⁴Pirtle tapes; *AWR*, March 14, 1946; A. M. Aiken interview; *Athens Daily Review*, April 24, 1946, hereinafter cited *ADR*.

⁵Pirtle tapes; J. P. Pickens interview.

⁶Pirtle tapes; J. P. Pickens interview; *ADR*, March 11, 1946. A law of 1929 guided the founding of junior colleges in Texas. Both academic and vocational training (24 credit hours) were required. The legislative appropriation for 1946-1947 was \$60 per full time equivalent student in junior colleges accredited by the State Board. Texas ranked second in the number of junior colleges and second in the number of students. Of 86 institutions of higher education in Texas, 22 were junior colleges, and the junior college for Henderson County was one of four more approved in 1946. *AWR*, March 28, 1946; Leland L. Medsker, *The Junior College: Progress and Prospect* (New York: 1960), 279-284.

⁷J. P. Pickens interview; *AWR*, March 14, 1946, and April 11, 1946.

⁸Pirtle tapes; *The Cardinal* (1947).

⁹*ADR*, April 23, 1946, April 24, 1946, April 26, 1946, and May 3, 1946; *AWR*, April 25, 1946, and May 2, 1946.

¹⁰*AWR*, May 9, 1946; Pirtle tapes.

¹¹*Ibid.*; Minutes of HCJC Board of Trustees, MS, HCJC, Athens, Texas, hereafter cited Board Minutes. Minutes were dated May 13, 1946, but the paper reported the meeting held on the eleventh. *ADR*, May 13, 1946. The secretary probably recorded minutes two days afterward.

¹²Board Minutes, May 13, 1946. Mr. Bankston's spirit was willing, but his spelling was weak. Pirtle earlier developed a "manual teaching plan," largely agriculture for returning veterans, as a part of a county vocational-technical program. He wanted the board to serve for the vocational training, even if the junior college was not approved. He offered to back out of the vocational program when HCJC passed (so that the academic and vocational programs were not split, and the board could hire its own personnel). He was, of course, chosen to direct both. Pirtle tapes.

¹³Board Minutes, May 13, 1946, and May 29, 1946; *AWR*, May 23, 1946, and June 6, 1946.

¹⁴*AWR*, May 23, 1946, May 30, 1946, and July 11, 1946; *The Cardinal* (1947).

¹⁵Board Minutes, May 29, and June 7, 14, 19, 22, 1946. Again, the minutes were dated May 27, but the newspaper reported the meeting held on May 24. Probably, the agreement was reached on the first date and the paperwork completed by the second. *ADR*, June 25, 1946.

¹⁴Board Minutes, June 27, 1946. Two documents—the lease agreement and a certificate by a surveyor (Field Notes) filed June 28, 1946, in Henderson County Deed Records, vol. 304, 70—explained the agreements, MS, HCJC, Athens, Texas.

¹⁵AWR, July 11, 1946.

¹⁶Betty Ross M. Walker, "History of Henderson County Junior College, 1946-1964" (unpublished graduate paper, East Texas State College, 1964), 8, 17. She cited an interview with her father, H. C. Moseley, chairman of the HCJC Board. Hereafter cited Walker MS.

¹⁷Board Minutes, June 27 and August 13, 1946. Several documents described the transactions, MS, HCJC, Athens, Texas. Two loan contracts and a letter from Sam Holland to the First National Bank on July 8, 1946, containing Board Resolutions, indicate the loans. Security was in the form of a mortgage on six buses and incoming state and local funds. It was fortunate that H. C. Moseley chaired both the boards at the bank and at HCJC, since the tax valuation for the district was put high enough to cover the notes. The local twenty-cent tax raised \$28,530.79 for 1946-1947 and \$37,332.68 for 1947-1948, while the state appropriation for 1947 was only \$16,586.67. Walker MS, 10, 16, citing HCJC Receipts and Disbursements Journal, 1946-1947, 1. The money went for six buses, operations, and \$3,500 of war surplus equipment that the board bought from the Quinlan Public Schools. C. Simmons' audit, July 7, 1946, to January 31, 1947 included a list of that equipment; February 3, 1947.

¹⁸HCJC catalog, 1946-1947, Athens, Texas; Walker MS, 29, citing HCJC Receipts and Disbursements Journal, 1946, 2; *The Cardinal* (1947, 1977); AWR, June 13, 1946, July 11, 1946, and August 1, 1946.

¹⁹HCJC catalog, 1946-1947.

²⁰Board Minutes, November 11, 1946; AWR, September 11, 1946.

²¹Board Minutes, April 21 and December 20, 1948; AWR, April 10, June 5, and September 18, 1947, and April 1 and May 20, 1948.

²²AWR, March 13, 1947; *The Cardinal* (December 3, 1946), vol. 1, no. 2, (January 14, 1947), vol. 1, no. 7, (February 25, 1947), vol. 1, no. 12, (April 1, 1947), vol. 1, no. 17; Board Minutes, October 14, 1947; C. Simmons' audit. East of the main building (from Cotton Palace to high school gym to main building) was the restroom building. The Board questioned that use, wanting it converted to a chemistry laboratory, which seems to have been done.

²³Board Minutes, February 3, 1947; C. Simmons' audit; Walker MS, 57.

²⁴Board Minutes, February 3, 1947; C. Simmons' audit; Walker MS, 57; HCJC catalog, 1946-1947, 1947-1948; *The Cardinal* (1948).

²⁵*The Cardinal* (February 25, 1947), vol. 1, no. 12; Elmo Holmes, interview, Athens, Texas, August 25, 1981.

²⁶*The Cardinal* (January 28, 1947), vol. 1, no. 8; Nora Zeigler, "Kilgore College Plans Postwar Programs," *The Texas Outlook* (April, 1945), vol. 29, no. 4, 46-47.

²⁷Pirtle tapes.

²⁸Board Minutes, April 24, 1947, and April 21, 1948.

²⁹Walker MS, 3; A. M. Aiken interview; J. P. Pickens interview; *The Cardinal* (1947); Colonel Mills, interview, Athens, Texas, September 2, 1981. Mr. Mills, Sarah George, Willard George, and Frances Grayson taught at early HCJC and provided helpful information.