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## WILEY COLLEGE THE GREAT DEBATERS

*By Gail K Beil*

Having won a four-year college scholarship based on a series of Marshall, Texas' Central High School oratorical contests sponsored by the Black Elks Clubs, James Farmer Jr.'s ability as a public speaker was established by the time he entered Wiley College in September 1934. His father, Dr. J. Leonard Farmer, had been a Bible professor on Wiley's faculty since 1933. Although young James Farmer was only fourteen years of age, he was recruited immediately by English professor and debate coach Melvin Tolson for the college's formidable debate team.<sup>1</sup>

Farmer, enrolled in Tolson's English class, was confronted by the man he would later call the provider of "the banquet of my years at Wiley College." Tolson taught Farmer to use his analytical mind to dig deeper, study harder, and read wider than the average student. The ideas gleaned would be discussed in class, where Tolson would play devil's advocate, forcing his students to defend their ideas against opposing views. And if Farmer failed to do so, Tolson said he would flunk him. Farmer was then offered a real challenge. "Speaking of opposing views," Tolson said, "My varsity debaters come over to the house every Tuesday and Thursday evening to prepare for the intercollegiate debate season. You come over too. Some of them, at least one, will try to make hamburger out of you – a young upstart and Dr. Farmer's son – so fight back, my boy, fight back." Thus was Farmer introduced to a skill that would serve him well for the rest of his life.<sup>2</sup>

Farmer already had spent two years on the Wiley campus, walking the length of the campus every school day on his way from the family home on the north side to high school on the southern edge. He knew Tolson by reputation and personally because Tolson and Dr. Farmer were friends.

Although it took Tolson seventeen years after he arrived at Wiley in 1923 – and the threat of dismissal if he did not – to finish his master's degree from Columbia University, he was considered a formidable scholar when he suggested strongly that Farmer, who was reading Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, "read the meat of knowledge, not just the broth." Tolson had graduated in 1923 from Lincoln University, in Pennsylvania, where his debate partner was Horace Mann Bond, who became one of the nation's leading educators.

Tolson began publishing poems while in high school and had several accepted for publication by the time James Farmer enrolled in his English class. Debate was never offered for academic credit at Wiley. It was an extracurricular activity that Tolson coached in addition to teaching a full load of classes. He was also the drama coach and founded the "Log Cabin Players" for town, gown, and student theatre performers. His playwright and poetic prowess caught the attention of men such as poet Langston Hughes and liter-

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ary critic and magazine editor V.F. Calverton. Calverton, though white, had made a career of writing about the men and women of the Harlem Renaissance. He considered Tolson's creative abilities equal to those of other writers of the time.<sup>3</sup>

Tolson organized a debate team shortly after arriving at Wiley College in 1924. The college published its first yearbook in 1925, and presented, in the purple prose popular at the time, a description of the team and its initial accomplishments.

Believing that the science of argumentation was the greatest instrumentation that could be used in the cultivation of mental alertness, a small group of students under the leadership of M.B. Tolson organized the Forensic Society of Wiley College on October 28, 1924. Hubert Norman was elected president.

The activities of the organization resulted in the formation of a "New Era" at Wiley and brought the first inter-collegiate debate to the campus. The Wiley team, which had been well coached by Tolson, hosted a team from Bishop College. Clearness and force, combined with oratory, brought an overwhelming victory to the debaters of the "Purple and White." Wiley took the negative and defeated the Bishop team. The question they debated was: "Resolved: That the Philippine Islands should be permanently given immediately the same privileges of self-government that Canada enjoys at present."<sup>4</sup>

In 1939 Tolson was asked to prepare a report on his department for Jewell Allen, who wrote her master's thesis on Wiley College for East Texas Teachers College, now Texas A&M at Commerce. Among other departmental activities, Tolson described the debate program. Teams usually had three persons, even though only two would debate per round. The third person was called "the anchor man," according to Farmer, who usually took that role. "He was the person Tolson could use on both sides of a question. He would know all the arguments on both the negative and the affirmative."

Wiley College initiated intercollegiate debating among Negro institutions in the Southwest. For ten years the forensic representatives of the college went undefeated against debaters from Fisk, Morehouse, Virginia Union, Lincoln, Wilberforce, and Howard universities. The debaters also participated in the first inter-racial debate ever held in the history of the South, held in Oklahoma City against the University of Oklahoma City in 1930. Since that time Wiley debaters have engaged in many such contests against Michigan University, Texas Christian University, and the University of California, Southern California, and New Mexico.<sup>5</sup>

One of those early debaters was Henrietta Bell from Houston, the first – and apparently only – woman on a Wiley debate team. At the invitation of Tolson, who told her he had always wanted to "try a woman," she joined the team in 1930. Her scrapbook contains photos and the records of all the debates in which she participated.

Unlike the modern practice where one subject per year is selected by the forensic fraternity Pi Kappa Delta, in the 1930s there were a number of possi-

ble topics. The two coaches would agree on a subject prior to a debate, then flip a coin to see which team would begin with the affirmative side, which with the negative. In 1933, debate coaches were given four questions from which to choose. Top vote getter was "Resolved: that the nations should agree to prevent the international shipment of arms and munitions." Second most popular and one that also would have been debated in 1934-1935, was a topic about limiting the income of the presidents of corporations; next question, whether complete medical services should be provided at public expense, and finally, should the federal government provide a policy of social planning. Debaters had to prepare all possible topics.

"Our debate squad reads hundreds of magazine articles and scores of books on government, economics, sociology, history and literature," champion debater Hobart Jarrett wrote for an article on WEB DuBois' *The Crisis*. "Then we must learn to handle our knowledge with readiness and poise growing out of mastery of the platform.... groping for words or an error in grammar is an unpardonable sin. Sometimes our coach will put a debater on the platform during practice and cross-examine him for an hour. The debater must escape from the most perplexing dilemmas and antinomies."<sup>6</sup>

Although it dictated policies for all colleges, Pi Kappa Delta was a segregated organization, a decision made by "gentleman's agreement," according to one of PKD's founders, J. Thompson Baker of Southwest College in Kansas. In 1934, Baker wrote a history of the forensic organization which appeared in successive issues of *The Forensic*, its monthly journal.

"One mystery grew out of the convention [of 1920] which has never been explained.... The question of greatest interest was over the admission of Negroes. It was argued heatedly in committee and general meeting. So evenly were the delegates divided that it was finally agreed not to write an exclusion clause into the constitution ... but to leave it to a gentleman's agreement that no local chapter would recommend a Negro for membership. The chairman of the committee is positive that an exclusion clause was never adopted."

Imagine his surprise some time later to see a new set of membership blanks which specified that the applicant should not be of the African race. The writer has never learned by what right or upon whose authority this clause was inserted. Observation through a number of years has now made it an accepted practice of the society. Perhaps this Ex Curia method was the best way to settle this troublesome question."<sup>7</sup>

Shut out of Pi Kappa Delta, Tolson created his own Greek-named speech and debate fraternity, Alpha Phi Omega, which would serve historically black colleges. By the time Miss Bell, called by Tolson simply "Bell," was asked to join the five-member team, Wiley College and Tolson had established such a formidable reputation that he was able to schedule debates with the best black colleges and universities in the nation, institutions twice or three times the size of Wiley, which had less than 500 students. From Chicago to Houston, his teams could fill the largest halls available to them with paying patrons. Profits from these encounters not only paid the team's expenses, important in the

midst of the Great Depression, but also added to the general revenue of the struggling institution they represented.<sup>8</sup>

By the spring of 1930, when his team was ready to go on tour, Tolson decided it was time to break new ground. Somehow he managed to schedule a series of non-decision debates with the law students of the University of Michigan, an all-white institution. "It was the first time, as far as Tolson knew, [that] colored debaters met a northern university of the Anglo-Saxon race," a triumph duly noted in the *Wildcat* in 1930. Bell and her partner, junior Harry Hines, met the white students at Chicago's massive 7th Street Theatre, the largest black-owned hall in town, because no white-owned facility would host a racially mixed audience. Miss Bell remembers the auditorium being so full some had to stand. In addition to Hines and Bell, Tolson brought along Henry Heights as the anchor man in case he determined Heights better prepared on a subject or side than his varsity team. Heights was never used. His day in the sun would come four years later.<sup>9</sup>

Michigan was not the only white team Tolson's team encountered that year. On March 21, 1930, Wiley College debated Oklahoma City University, a Methodist-affiliated college, as was Wiley. "This was the first time that white and colored students ever discussed a proposition in the South from the same platform," Tolson wrote in a column for *The Washington Tribune*. "Avery Chapel was packed with black and white citizens who came to see the signal event. When the two teams took their places on the platform, they were received with tremendous applause. The vast audience seemed to realize that history was being made." Shortly thereafter Texas Christian University invited Wiley to its campus in Ft. Worth. "Dr. True had a splendid team, and we were never received more agreeably anywhere."<sup>10</sup>

By the time Farmer joined Wiley's team, Tolson was having trouble finding black colleges to debate. "[Negro] schools were afraid of debating us. Every time they did they got their pants kicked. How do you think they felt, getting spanked by a little Jim Crow School from the badlands of Texas," said Benjamin Bell – no relation to Henrietta Bell – in an article in the *American Legacy Magazine*. Bell was a member of the 1936-1939 team. He is also the unfortunate source of a recent widely spread rumor that Wiley College met and defeated Harvard College, with Felix Frankfurter as one of the judges. The story first appeared, with Bell's attribution, in Sherman's *American Legacy* article. There is no evidence that a debate between Wiley and Harvard ever happened. Farmer, Melvin Tolson, Jr., Hamilton Boswell, Hobart Jarrett, and Henrietta Bell Wells all say the debate Bell remembers was probably with Oxford University of England. "If dad's teams had debated Harvard, I would know it," said Tolson Jr.<sup>11</sup>

The most memorable Wiley College debate was not with Oxford or Harvard but with the national champion, Southern California Trojans. By the time the school year began in 1934, Tolson was an experienced debate coach. Tolson and his team of Farmer, Jarrett, and Heights, scheduled a second tour through the Southwest. Included on their extended schedule were debaters with teams from

The University of New Mexico, the University of California at Oakland, and San Francisco State Teachers College. The climax came on the night of April 2, 1935, before an audience of 2,200 in Southern California's Bovard Auditorium. The night before the debate Tolson would not let his team leave the dorm rooms, according to Farmer. He was afraid the team would be intimidated because the speech department of the University of Southern California was bigger than the whole of Wiley College. He need not have been concerned.<sup>12</sup>

The teams, dressed in tuxedos, took the stage with Wiley on the affirmative side. The Pi Kappa Delta-sponsored question for 1934-1935 was the one concerning the prevention of international shipment of munitions. "From the time Floyd C. Covington, who presided, opened the program until its close the vast audience was held in rapt attention by the scholarly presentations of both teams," described Tolson. Using what became known as "the mighty Tolson method," the Wileyites were victorious. Tolson spent a great deal of time training his debaters in the tactics and strategy of argumentation. "He drilled us on every gesture, every pause," Jarrett wrote in an article for the May 1935 issue of the NAACP magazine *The Crisis*. "Our debate squad reads hundreds of magazine articles and scores of books on government, economics, sociology, history and literature. We are taught to be prepared for anything."<sup>13</sup>

Hamilton Boswell, who had graduated from a Los Angeles high school, was in the audience that night. He was so impressed with the Wiley team's performance that he decided to enroll at the obscure little college in Marshall. He, too, became one of Tolson's debate stars.

Tolson saw the interracial debates, which consistently drew larger audiences than segregated ones, as a breakthrough in the troubled race relations of the country. "When the finest intellects of black youth and white youth meet, the thinking person gets the thrill of seeing beyond the racial phenomena the identity of worthy qualities." For that hour, maintained Tolson, the mixed audience seemed to forget their differences, applauding one team as readily as it applauded the other. "In the South I have seen ex-slaves shaking hands with the grandsons of the masters after the debate."<sup>14</sup>

Jarrett, who eventually played a major role in the civil rights movement as chief negotiator with Nashville's merchants following sit-ins by Fisk University students in 1960, also saw interracial debates as a signal event in his college career: "Interracial debates are a real adventure for both Negro youth and white youth. For centuries the Caucasian has believed that his superiority lies in his brainpower. Debates involve a direct clash of intellects. There was a time when white colleges thought that debating against a Negro institution was mental dissipation, but that view has passed forever. Negro teams have shown that they are as capable as their white opponents despite the library handicaps that limit research. I know several instances personally in which white coaches and debaters of white universities have admitted the superiority of certain Negro debate teams."<sup>15</sup>

Negro teams faced an obstacle never encountered by whites. Almost every debater during this period either observed or was threatened with lynching.

Jarrett's experience occurred on the way to Memphis. "The Wiley debaters are on the road and the road leads through the tremendous circle of mobsters. But there is a mulatto in the car. Coach Tolson tells him to take the steering wheel. The darker debaters [and Tolson, who had a dark complexion] get down in the car. The night is friendly, protecting. The mulatto salutes nonchalantly the grim-faced members of the mob, allaying their suspicions. And the debaters reach Memphis and read about the mob in the morning newspapers."

Boswell told of being warned of a lynching in progress in Carthage, Texas, while returning to Marshall from a debate in Beaumont. At first Tolson elected to detour around the town, but later changed his mind and decided to travel straight through town with Boswell, also a mulatto, driving. Benjamin Bell accompanied Tolson to Ruston, Louisiana, for Tolson to make the commencement address for a high school graduation. He excoriated the audience on the implications of the lynching, the previous day, of four blacks in a nearby town. Tolson ended the speech with, "Where were you good folks when these men were lynched?" Bell said that the sheriff, chief of police, and several members of the school board, all white, were in the audience. The local black residents advised Tolson and Bell to leave as quickly as possible by a back road.<sup>16</sup>

The phenomenal success of Tolson's teams, who rarely lost a debate whether their opponents were black or white, was attributed to that mighty Tolson system, Farmer said. Tolson himself described it in a column for the *Washington Tribune*. "That wise old bird Emerson said there's a crack in everything God made, and I was going to find the crack in the systems of other coaches." Twice a week Tolson gathered his debaters in his living room, arguing points and practicing until late in the night. Melvin, Jr., still in grade school, hid behind a screen in the corner of the room and listened until he fell asleep. "Those sessions were exciting and they were as emotional as you can get. The word "tactics" was always coming up. 'What are you going to do? What strategy are you going to take?'" Farmer remembered. Tolson, finding the cracks in other debater's cases, plotted the debating strategy, according to Farmer.<sup>17</sup>

Tolson said after the debate with Southern California that he realized that there was more to life than winning debates. He wrote, "I had taught my boys to go after the ugly truth and let the judges and respectable audiences go hang. That's not so easy as you think. It endangers one's job." He also taught them debate skills that would be useful the rest of their lives, something Farmer discovered late in the 1960s when Malcolm X's Black Power rhetoric threatened the non-violent path to integration advocated by Farmer, Martin Luther King Jr., and others. "I debated Malcolm X four times and beat him," Farmer said. "I'd think, 'Come off it Malcolm, you can't win. You didn't come up under Tolson.'<sup>18</sup>

The debates with Oxford University were probably anti-climactic. The first time the Oxford debaters toured the United States was in September and October 1924. They drew great crowds wherever they went but they tended to be more showmen than true debaters. As the Englishmen prepared to tour

again in 1937, the year Wiley College was scheduled to meet them, *The Forensic* published an article about English debaters. "This year ... the Oxford team has scheduled twenty-six debates." Another group of British debaters, from Cambridge, also toured the United States. They tended to be older, having finished their undergraduate degrees. Speaking of the Oxford team, *The Forensic* continued, "They require a financial guarantee to cover their expenses [as high as \$300 per appearance]. Many institutions have found the investment a profitable one." The English style was to entertain, so debates were often witty, funny, but tended to get off the subject.<sup>19</sup>

In one of his "Caviar and Cabbage" columns in the *Washington Tribune*, Tolson wrote of two incidents on one of the trips through Arkansas on the way to Fisk University in Memphis about "things I could not explain." Farmer, who was along on the journey, also remembered them. Tolson and four debaters were packed into Tolson's undependable Ford. "Fog covered everything – everything. Our choking, coughing car moved along at a miserable rate of speed. Suddenly we came to a huge sign which informed us 'Railroad Crossing ahead.' We rode on and on. The young man at the wheel, who was an inexperienced driver, kept looking for the crossing; then someone cracked a joke about the slow train through Arkansas. Unexpectedly we came upon the headlight of a train, barely visible. I thought nothing of this for the train was so far away. I simply dropped the remark, 'A train.'"

"The young driver stopped the car. At that split second the Memphis Express thundered by, filling the night with the sound of some prehistoric monster. Nobody spoke for at least five minutes. The driver's hands were paralyzed at the wheel.... And the curious thing is this: the old car had stalled at that very instant and the driver had not intended to stop.... We learned later that the Memphis Express was making a trial run to secure the right of carrying the United States mail. At that particular crossing the train was averaging 69 miles an hour."

Later on the same trip Tolson said that one of the men, sound asleep, began screaming – obviously having a nightmare – flung open the door and leapt from the car, causing the driver to stop again. Only then did they discover they were twenty yards from a broken levee on the Mississippi River. "We had stopped the car twenty yards from death. We were on a road that plunged into an abyss. I had a cold sweat and my knees buckled."<sup>20</sup>

Farmer was only eighteen years of age when he was graduated from Wiley in 1938, an event he called "'anticlimactic.'" His father had accepted a position at Howard University School of Religion, teaching New Testament and Greek. Farmer said he remembered Dr. Benjamin Mays, dean of the School of Religion, arriving on the train in Marshall where his mission was to recruit Dr. Farmer.

James Farmer, Jr. studied for the ministry. When the Farmer family left the campus they gave the family piano to the Tolsons. Less than ten years later, Melvin Tolson left Wiley to teach at Langston University in Oklahoma. By then, debate was no longer a popular activity.<sup>21</sup>



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Farmer, James, *Lay Bare the Heart* (Ft. Worth, Texas: Texas Christian University Press, 1985), p. 118. Farmer's father was Texas' first black PhD, having earned the degree at Boston University in 1918.

<sup>2</sup>Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart*, p. 118.

<sup>3</sup>Lincoln University Debate partner, Robert M. Farnsworth, Melvin Tolson-1898-1966, *Plain Talk and Poetic Prophecy* (Columbia, Missouri University of Missouri Press, 1984, p. 26. Finishing degree; author's interview with Melvin Tolson, Jr., August 8, 2000. Calverton's opinion, *Current History*. "Cultural Barometer," May 1938, p. 47.

<sup>4</sup>The 1925 *Wiley Wildcat*, yearbook of the college. Text on the opening page identifies it as the first ever produced by the college. Purple and white are the school colors. "Debate," p. 144.

<sup>5</sup>Allen, Jewell, *Wiley College: A History* (unpublished Master's Thesis for East Texas Teachers College. Commerce, Texas. 1940), pp. 113-114.

<sup>6</sup>Jarrett, Hobart, *The Crisis*, August 1935, p. 240.

<sup>7</sup>Baker, J. Thompson, *The Forensic: Journal of Pi Kappa Delta*, March 1935 (Series 20 #3), p. 92ff.

<sup>8</sup>*Wildcat: Yearbook of Wiley College*; author's September 14, 2004, interview with Ms Henrietta Bell Wells and her scrapbook (duplicated pages in the author's files), and Tony Sherman, "The Great Debaters," *American Legacy*, (Publication of the Smithsonian Institute, Spring 1997), p. 41.

<sup>9</sup>Author's interview with Bell Wells; *Wiley Wildcat 1931*, pages unnumbered. In John Hope Franklin's autobiography, *Mirror to America*, Franklin claims to be the first black debater to meet a white team when he was a student at Fisk, but Hope's encounter with Notre Dame came in 1932. Franklin, John Hope, *Mirror to America, the Autobiography of John Hope Franklin* (New York: Farrer, Straus and Giroux, 2005), p. 45.

<sup>10</sup>Tolson, *The Forensic* (May 1935), p. 142.

<sup>11</sup>The author was also interviewed by Sherman. Bell, seventy-nine when the article appeared, also told Sherman that Felix Frankfurter, later Supreme Court Justice, was a judge for the "Harvard" debate. Perhaps a sixty-year old memory can become fuzzy. Denzel Washington's film, tentatively titled "The Great Debaters," is funded by media and print star Oprah Winfrey. Tolson quote, author's interview with Tolson, Jr., August 8, 2000. Joy Flasch, a Langston University colleague who wrote a biography on Tolson, also quotes Tolson and others about the Oxford and Southern California debates. There is also no mention of Harvard as a debate opponent in her book, written while Tolson was still living.

<sup>12</sup>Tolson's description of the debate; *Forensic* (May 1935), p. 142. Bell's "Harvard" attribution. Sherman, "The Great Debaters," p. 42. There is a possibility that Wiley debated Oxford twice. Tolson, began his Pi Kappa Delta article, "On my desk lies a letter from Miss Helen Donovan of New York City, debate secretary of the National Student Federation. I am informed that the Oxford debaters considered their interracial debates the most interesting forensic encounters that [sic] obtained during their American tour. That statement was made three years ago," which would have been in 1932.

<sup>13</sup>Sherman, "The Great Debaters," p. 40.

<sup>14</sup>Jarrett's observations; *The Crisis*, August 1935, p. 240. Tolson, *Forensic*, p. 144.

<sup>15</sup>Jarrett, *The Crisis*, p. 240.

<sup>16</sup>Jarrett, *The Crisis*, p. 240. Author's interview with Hamilton Boswell, August 22, 2000, at his home in Point Richmond, California. Bell quote; Robert Farnsworth, p. 103. Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart*, pp. 128-129.

<sup>17</sup>Sherman, "The Great Debaters," p. 41.

"Melvin Tolson, "Judgement Day. March 26, 1938." *Caviar and Cabbage: Selected Columns by Melvin B. Tolson from the Washington Post: 1937-1944*, p. 240. Farmer quote; Sherman, "The Great Debaters." p. 41.

"*Forensic*, September 1936, p. 45ff.

3. *Caviar and Cabbage*, p. 243. A column which appeared April 1938, in the *Washington Tribune*. Farmer's memory. Gail K Beil, *Sowing the Seeds of the Civil Rights Movement* (unpublished thesis for Stephen F. Austin State University, 1999). p. 45.

"Farnsworth, *Melvin Tolson*, p. 105.