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Countdown to Corrections

Sacrifice enabled Tift's survival

Having survived the Civil War and a devastating fire in 1879, the Monroe Female College began to develop into a modern-day school in the early 20th century.

After the Georgia Baptist Convention took over the college and alumna Bessie Tift began boosting school finances, the school upgraded its curriculum and established a program for earning bachelor's degrees in 1906. Enrollment soared, and as the Tifts continued to pour money into the school the Monroe Female College was renamed Bessie Tift College in 1907.

Meanwhile president C.H.S. Jackson launched an ambitious building campaign. Ponder Hall was added to the original Wiggs Hall in 1895 (somehow the two structures became known as just Ponder Hall). Nine years later, Will D. Upshaw travelled around the state collecting money to build a dorm and recruiting students to fill it. That led to construction of four-story Upshaw Hall, which was opened in 1904 to accommodate 130 students and remains the largest building on campus. These buildings still make up most of the historic circle that will soon

house the main Department of Corrections functions.

College trustees reported that due to all the construction, Tift's value rose from \$25,000 in 1898 to \$202,287 in 1908.

But in 1912 the nation's economy turned downward and the price of cotton, long a barometer of prosperity in the Deep South, plunged. To bolster cotton, businessmen launched a "Buy a Bale" movement encouraging locals to

buy the white stuff. It took root at Tift too. In 1914 all the girls made dresses from unbleached cotton and wore them to worship at the Methodist Church on Peace Sunday, so declared by U.S.

President Woodrow Wilson in light of war breaking out in Europe.

In 1915 the college hired Dr. Joshua Foster Jr. as president, and during his seven years in Forsyth he changed the image of Tift College. When Will Upshaw traversed the state for funds to build Upshaw Dormitory, the general impression was that the school was an opportunity for the poor girl. But Foster was different. He carried a dignity in keeping with a cultured background and appealed to people of means. He quickly won over the student body by renting out

the Lancaster Hotel for \$150 per month to relieve overcrowding in the dorms. Enrollment had sunk to 125 when he arrived but was at 463 by 1920. In five years, Foster increased faculty salaries from \$14,000 to \$68,876.

In 1920 Dr. W.B. Warthen of Davisboro donated money for construction of a home for single faculty members -- it is still called Warthen Hall today as a restaurant across from the Tift campus.

Despite the advances, financial troubles didn't disappear. Oglethorpe County planter James Smith, who held the mortgage on the campus, threatened foreclosure as he was owed \$60,000. Once again, the Tifts satisfied the claims.

But in 1922 dissension between President Foster and the dean became unbearable and both had to leave.

Next the trustees tapped Dr. Aquila Chamblee, a former Bible teacher at Tift, to be president. It would take all of Chamblee's skills to keep the college afloat in the coming Depression. He bought cows and turned part of the campus into a grazing pasture, and used idle bricks from a defunct school in Locust Grove to begin a gymnasium on campus.

He also persuaded other colleges, including UGA and Columbia

University, to accept Tift students for graduate school.

Still, finances were so tight that faculty members gave up as much as 70 percent of their pay to the college.

With parents strapped by the Depression, Tift once again accepted barter for tuition. Farmers educated their daughters by means of hams, sorghum and corn.

The King Lumber Co. helped by donating the college 2,022 acres of timberland in Jones County. The land was sold to the federal government in 1936 providing a needed splurge of cash.

In 1938, the trustees named Dr. Claduis McGinty as president, and it was under his leadership that Tift reached a milestone. He wired his wife in 1946 with news that the school had finally been accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. Mrs. McGinty took the telegram to the dining hall and read the news to the girls, who responded with thunderous applause and then by singing the doxology. And so only by a sequence of near miracles, plus the faithful support of alumna and other Georgians, was Tift College not only surviving but preparing to celebrate its 100th anniversary.

