

Tift College soared in the 1960s

In just 21 days, long-dormant Tift College will open its doors in its newest incarnation as the headquarters for the Georgia Department of Corrections. As Monroe County and Forsyth prepare for 400 new DOC employees who will fill offices at the former campus, the Reporter is looking back at Tift's colorful history. Our source is "Yesterday at Tift", the 1969 volume written by long-time Tift teacher and registrar Eugenia Wootton Stone.

Having survived Civil War, two world wars and a fire, Tift College had reason to celebrate when it reached its 100th birthday in 1948.

Mr. William Frederick Gunn was hired as president in 1947, and faculty members Dr. Leslie Williams and Miss Eugenia Stone were quickly put to work organizing the festivities. In fact it was such a big deal that the celebration was phased in over three events during the school year, an academic celebration in the fall, a denomination-
al one in the winter and a historic pageant in the spring.

A centennial banquet on Oct. 8, 1948 included a talk from the president of Brenau College, Dr. Josiah Crudup, on "Liberal Arts in a Scientific Age," and included singing from Miss Edith Bugg of Tift's voice department.

The centennial convocation held the next morning was broadcast by WMAZ radio in Macon. Representatives of more than 80 colleges around the U.S., indeed the world, participated in full academic regalia, including one Dr. W.J.R. Thorbecke from the University of Leyden in Holland, which was founded in 1575.

Keeping the thread of history, Dr. Philip Weltner, president of Oglethorpe University, was among the speakers, just as the president of Oglethorpe had spoken at Tift's first commencement in 1854.

One university president could not make it though. Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower wrote from his post at Columbia University that he regretted that he was unable to make it.

"Were it at all possible I should make every effort to attend the

centennial of Bessie Tift College, for I believe a small independent college that has pioneered the educational path, weathered the stress of war and financial depressions, and is now engaged in a vigorous campaign of development and expansion, merits all the support and encouragement a man can give," wrote the war hero and future president.

Despite the festivities of the centennial, enrollment stagnated in those years. Yet unexpected blessings kept things going.

In 1950, a Jones County man called Tift offering to pay a nominal amount to clear some timber of the college's property. That was the property donated by the King Lumber Co. and which Tift thought it had sold to the federal government in 1936. But in fact Dr. Gunn learned it had not in fact sold all 2,022 acres to the government, but still had 323 acres leftover. So the school auctioned off the timber rights on the front steps of the school for \$78,100 to Mr. Butler and Mr. Lee Vaughn.

Still, enrollment languished and by 1952, the school had just 184 full-time students. But someone soon arrived on campus who changed that. Dr. Carey Vinzant was hired away from his pastorate at First Baptist Church of Fitzgerald to run the college. The energetic Vinzant looked around and quipped that it would take him 15 years to do all that he wanted to do at Tift. It was a prophetic word.

The first priority was the library, after the accreditation group SACS noted the school needed a better library. So Hardin Library was built in 1954.

Meanwhile, the Columbus Roberts family of Columbus donated funds to build the Fannie Cobb Roberts Memorial Chapel. Mr. and Mrs. C.O. Smith of Moultrie donated a pipe organ inside in honor of Esther Cutts Smith of the class of



Vinzant Hall, named for Tift's energetic president, gave the college a first-rate physical education facility.

1914.

Over the next 15 years, building after building went up: the president's home (1955), Monroe Hall (1957), Wiggs Hall addition (1958), Vinzant Hall (1960), Sewell Hall (1961), Upshaw renovations (1961), Dr. Centers' home (1964), Rutland Hall (1965) and West Hall (1967).

The school was worth \$1.4 million when Vinzant arrived in 1952 and by 1968, the campus was valued at \$5.2 million. And enrollment grew to fill all the new space: to 648 students in 1968. But the school was also beginning to show some effects of changing times. In 1958 the college dropped its home economics department. And perhaps it's related that the school dropped Bessie from its name to be simply Tift College in the 1960s. In 1965, Tift College signed the civil rights compliance act.

So the college enjoyed perhaps its greatest growth and prosperity under the leadership of president Dr. Carey Vinzant. But all the improvements and expansions would be put to the test by the strong cultural changes brewing outside the genteel, sleepy campus of Tift College.

