

PARK COLLEGE: THEN AND NOW

By Charnel Anderson, Ph.D
Retired Professor of History
Inter American University, Metro Campus

INTRODUCTION

In January 1895 a tall, lanky, Texas cowboy arrived at Parkville, Missouri, to enroll at Park College. The cowboy was John Will Harris. It would have been hard to imagine a student less prepared and less likely to succeed in education.

John Will Harris was born in 1876 in Dripping Springs, a small town a few miles from Austin, the Texas capitol. Texas was growing rapidly and the town was becoming “too settled” for John Will’s father so he moved his family to the wild, open range country of Frio County southwest of San Antonio. John Will grew up on cattle and sheep ranches between Dilley and Cotulla.¹ When he was seventeen years old, John Will had a dramatic religious experience. One night while herding 3,000 sheep and sleeping out in the open, John Will dreamed that he saw God in a rift of clouds and was warned “Thou shall be punished for the iniquity thou hast done”². Shaken, he began to read the Bible and applied for membership in the Cibolo Presbyterian Church. He was rejected because one deacon objected that he was “wild and would dance”.³ He kept applying and was finally admitted and baptized in 1894.

During this time John Will began to form the idea that he would like to be a minister. He broached the subject to the church pastor, W. H. Wright, who explained to him that he “would have to study many, many years in school, and also three years in a theological seminary”. John Will’s reaction was: “that pleased me”. There was just one problem. John Will’s education up to this point had been rudimentary, to say the least. He later described the schooling in Frio County as a “race horse course of instruction in reading, ‘riting, and ‘rithmetic”. The simple fact was that John Will Harris did not even have an elementary school level education.

John Will’s father wanted him to go to Texas A&M which was little more than a teacher’s college back then with 100 students. His mother wanted him to leave Texas to get away from the cowboy life. Pastor Wright recommended Park College in Missouri. John Will applied to Park College and was not accepted (“turned down” as he put it). Then there was a stroke of good luck. A man named J. P. McAfee (everyone called him “Coronel”) had recently arrived in Dilley and built the first general merchandise store. He was from Missouri and was a cousin of John A. McAfee, the founder of Park College. On a visit back to Missouri Col. McAfee called at Park College and personally recommended young John Will (“pleaded for my admission” in John Will’s words). Harris reapplied to Park College and was accepted. On January 10, 1895, a five foot, nine inch, hundred and

¹ See Charnel Anderson, Texas Places in John Will Harris’ Life: Then and Now, *Káthalos*, Vol.6 No.1 fecha 5-11/2012

² The experience is told in Harris’ memoirs, *Riding and Roping, the Memoirs of J. Will Harris*, pp.6-7, Inter American University Press, 1977, herein cited as *Riding and Roping*.

³ *Riding and Roping*, p7

sixty pound cowboy from Texas appeared unannounced at the office of the President of Park College. He had been traveling for five days by railway cattle cars and was “dirty, tired and smelling like a cattle train”.⁴ What could Park College possibly do for a student like that? Fortunately, Park College was not just any college. It was a new experiment in college education and would later serve as the model for John Will Harris’ own school in far away Puerto Rico.

PARK COLLEGE: THEN

Park College was founded in 1875 by John A. McAfee on land donated by George S. Park, a prominent Missouri pioneer and businessman. George Park was an interesting character. Born in Vermont, he left for Texas and was involved in the Texas War of Independence. In 1835 he served under the unfortunate Texas commander, James Fannin, who witnessed his 400 troops slaughtered by the Mexican general, Antonio López de Santa Anna after they had surrendered (the infamous “Goliad Massacre”). Park was one of the few survivors. He left Texas the next year for Missouri. He taught school for a while then took a 99-year-lease on a steamboat landing site on the Missouri River. The land had only recently come into Missouri’s possession following the Platt Purchase of 1838 in which Native Americans sold what is today northwest Missouri. Park built a home on the bluffs above the Missouri River and platted the town of Parkville in 1844. In 1845 he organized the Parkville Presbyterian Church. In 1853 he started the *Industrial Luminary*, a newspaper some believed to be abolitionist. Park, however, owned slaves and described the newspaper as “pro-commerce”. Park generally believed that slavery in Kansas would be bad for business. Park's newspaper was raided by a pro-slavery mob on April 14, 1855, and the printing press was thrown into the Missouri River.⁵

Immediately after the 1855 incident, Park moved to Magnolia, Illinois, where he made a fortune in real estate, but he returned to Parkville again in late 1855. In 1859 he promoted a railroad from Cameron, Missouri to Parkville to be called the Parkville and Grand River Railroad. The road would then cross the Missouri River at Parkville. However in 1869 Kansas City won the race for the first bridge across the river by building the Hannibal Bridge which was to transform Kansas City into the dominant city in the region. Park remained a prominent citizen in the area. He was elected to the Missouri State Senate in 1866. Park formally moved back to Magnolia in 1874. He died in 1890 and was buried on the Park College plot in the Walnut Grove Cemetery in Parkville.

Park had always been interested in education. In 1858 Park pledged \$500 toward establishing a college in the Kansas territory. The school, Bluemont Central College, would later become Kansas State University. While serving as a Missouri State Senator in 1866 he introduced a bill to establish an industrial college. The bill failed. When Park moved back to Magnolia in 1874 he donated part of his land on the bluffs for a college. The college was to be headed by John A. McAfee, then president of Highland College in Highland, Kansas. The school became known as Park College.

⁴ *Riding and Roping*, p9

⁵ All the information on George Park is taken from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_S._Park

Park College was initially a school aimed at preparing students for missionary life for the Presbyterian Church. The original concept called for students to receive free tuition and board in exchange for working up to half day in the college's farm, electrical shop, printing plant or in construction of the campus buildings. According to the terms of the arrangement, if the "Parkville Experiment" did not work out within five years, the college grounds were to revert to Park.

One of the first structures built with student labor was the College landmark, MacKay Hall⁶. The building was constructed using limestone mined on the campus grounds and built largely by student labor. Construction began in 1883 and was finished by 1893, only two years before John Will Harris arrived on campus. It became the defining landmark of the campus. Harris notes in his memoirs that after five days of travel by cattle cars he "was glad to see the campus and the Mackay Building".⁷

As a missionary training institution Park College was small (17 students in the first school year) but had a diverse student body. There were five women in the first graduating class and the first international student arrived in 1880 from Japan. Harris settled down to campus life working in the college bakery. He had no outside financial support other than what he could earn at odd jobs such as sawing oak wood into stove length at 75cents a cord. Twice Col. McAfee sent him \$25 from Dilley, Texas. Later he offered to repay McAfee the \$50, but McAfee refused it, telling John Will "to pass it on to some good, needy boy after I finished my college studies".⁸ This made an impression on John Will and he later recorded in his memoirs, "this planted an idea in me to found another Park College, in Texas or somewhere, where students could work their way to an education under wholesome Christian direction".⁹

Young cowboy Harris was well equipped for the physical labor at Park College. He worked four and one half hours daily in the college bakery besides his odd jobs. But he was much less equipped for the academic challenge. When his scanty school record was evaluated he was told that he had to make up the first half of the school year he had missed (he had arrived in January), four and a half more years in preparatory school, and four years in college to graduate. As he put it: "I left Texas to find to find my sentence of nine years' work in Park College".¹⁰ But young John Will Harris was intelligent, self confident, and highly motivated. He rose at 4:30 every morning to study. He finished the nine years work in seven and a half years.

John Will's memoirs are full of humorous school incidents. When he first started the elementary school year he had to sit sideways in desks constructed for children. As he said: "I had to sit like the girls rode their side saddles in Texas"¹¹. In another incident¹² when the teacher announced there would be "rhetoricals" on Friday, John Will had no idea what she was talking about. Friday "was the day for the teacher to whip all the big boys in Texas". He had no way to find out what "rhetoricals" were since he "did not know of such a book as a dictionary, and had never heard of a library". When he saw the

⁶ Named after a wealthy Illinois banker, Duncan Mackay, who donated \$25,000 in materials for the structure shortly before his death.

⁷ *Riding & Roping*, p9

⁸ *Riding & Roping*, p14

⁹ *Ibid*

¹⁰ *Riding & Roping*, p10

¹¹ *Ibid*. The elementary school at Park College was for the children of the professors and missionaries.

¹² *Ibid*

young girls get up and recite poems, John Will bravely marched to the front and belted out the only poem he knew: *Hell in Texas*. The teacher immediately dismissed the class and fled the room.

But Harris did get a good education at Park College and finished two years early. Even more he grew spiritually. The curriculum at Park College was strongly oriented toward religion. Chapel was held every morning with devotionals. The dedication of his professors made a huge impression on John Will. He had the opportunity to preach some Sundays at country churches and he taught a Sunday School class of college girls (one of the girls he met at Park College would be his future wife, Eunice White). One summer he went on a mission assignment to Indian tribes in Kansas. More and more he saw a clear calling to be a missionary. During his senior year the students elected him to represent them as student elder in the Session of the college Presbyterian Church.

One particular experience, reminiscent of the dream he had as a young cowboy on the Texas prairie, was a defining moment in his life. Rooming in Hill House, he dreamt one night he was walking along the banks of the Missouri River that washed along one side of the college campus. Someone took his hand and pointed to the turbulent river filled with children, white, black, brown and red in water up to their armpits. His guide told him, "This is a vision of the people among whom you are to live and work. Among these people you must serve and help to save".¹³ Harris recounts that the dream "left me a changed candidate for the ministry...and a consuming desire to help other young people to get what I was receiving at Park College".¹⁴

Park College prepared Harris well for this high calling. He went on to complete prestigious Princeton Theological Seminary in three years and accepted an appointment from the Presbyterian Home Mission Board to go as a missionary to Puerto Rico. Arriving in 1906 he immediately understood that education was the most pressing need on the island: "...it dawned on me that my dream in Park College of children in the Missouri River was a true vision of my mission in life. The streets, highways, and country paths [in Puerto Rico] were filled with thousands of smiling, bright, and eager children, of all classes and colors: white, black, brown and tan, very few of whom were in school".¹⁵ In 1912 Harris established a school in San German which would grow into one of the largest private universities in the nation – Inter American University with seven campuses today, two professional schools and over 30,000 students.

PARK COLLEGE (UNIVERSITY) NOW

If John Will Harris visited Park University¹⁶ today he would hardly recognize the place. The only familiar landmarks would be its location, situated high on a bluff overlooking the Missouri River and maybe one or two of the oldest buildings. The 700-acre campus is just minutes from downtown Kansas City¹⁷. It currently has an enrollment of 1,600 students. But that is only at the main campus in Parkville, Missouri. It operates

¹³ *Riding & Roping*, pp14-15. The above is a simplified summary of the dream. In his memoirs the account of the dream is much more detailed and complicated.

¹⁴ *Ibid*

¹⁵ *Riding & Roping*, p29

¹⁶ the College was renamed a University in 2000

¹⁷ unless otherwise noted all the information on Park University today is taken from its on-line home page at <http://www.park.edu/>

satellite campuses in downtown Kansas City (the graduate school) and Independence, Missouri. In addition, in 1972 Park College entered into an agreement with the U.S. Air Force to offer courses through its Military Resident Center System on or near U.S. Air Force bases. Park's total enrollment skyrocketed and today it encompasses 40 campuses in 21 U.S. states and an annual student enrollment of 23,000 in the entire extended system.¹⁸

Although no longer associated with the Presbyterian Church¹⁹, Park University retains much of its original service orientation that attracted John Will Harris to the campus. Its motto, *Fides Et Labor*—faith and labor— sums up the founders original vision of an institution that encourages a strong work ethic and wide access to education. The current mission states that Park University “provides access to a quality higher education experience that prepares a diverse community of learners to think critically, communicate effectively, demonstrate a global perspective and engage in lifelong learning and service to others”. The “global perspective” is in keeping with the missionary perspective of early Park College. The diversity in student enrollment is reflected in its student body from 50 U.S. states and 106 international countries.

Limiting ourselves to the main campus at Parkville, we will visit Park University as it is today and compare it to what we know of Park College in Harris' time. We begin our tour at the one landmark that we are certain would have been familiar to John Will – Mackay Hall. When Harris arrived at Park College in January, 1895, after five days of traveling by cattle train from Texas, he records how he “was glad to see the college and [the] Mackay Building”.²⁰ Today the building is still the main focal point of the campus and dominates the hillside, overlooking the town of Parkville. Construction of Mackay Hall began in 1883 and was finished by 1893 only two years before Harris arrived at Park College. The three-story building is constructed of limestone quarried from the University's grounds, and built largely with the labor of students. The central clock tower is 135 feet tall and is the heartbeat of campus, marking the hours and chiming the Park fight song from time to time. Mackay houses the office of the University President, and other administrative offices, classrooms and the academic departments of business, criminal justice and political science, as well as the Park School of Business. The building is listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

We move on to “historic” Thompson Commons, built in 1927,²¹ a popular spot for activities and events. The first floor serves as the University's student center, and contains a contemporary lounge area, the student-run Pirate Grounds coffee shop, featuring Rotisserie coffee; the Office of Campus Safety (open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week); the Student Leadership & Engagement Office; and the new Department of Military and Veteran Student Services, home of the Park Warrior Center. On the second floor is the campus dining hall. The cafeteria is an all-you-can-eat menu concept featuring a sandwich bar, soup/salad bar, pizza, 2-3 hot entrees and side dishes, available

¹⁸ The multi campus concept would be familiar to Inter American University who pioneered the founding of regional colleges around the island starting in the 1960's. As already noted IAU today is a multi campus university with seven campuses, two professional schools and a total enrollment of over 30, 0000 students. IAU also pioneered educational services to the numerous U.S. military installations in Puerto Rico.

¹⁹ Inter American University likewise later terminated its ties to the Presbyterian Church but retains a strong emphasis on Christian values.

²⁰ *Riding and Roping*, p9

²¹ Apparently Mackay hall is the only building still existing from Harris' time. Harris would have been graduated and gone by 1927.

for 19 meals a week.²² The Office of Student Life can be found adjacent to the cafeteria. The third floor holds the Gibson meeting room and offices for the Park Student Activities Board.

Another old building on campus is the McCoy Meetin' House, built in 1932, and renovated in 2001. It was originally the home for a Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA). In the early days at Park College when the bell rang from the Meetin' House the men and women knew that it was their only opportunity to come together and mingle. Women walked casually down the steps close to Herr House while the men raced up the steps by Copley and across campus to the Meetin' House to meet their friends. Today it is used for various meetings, functions and campus gatherings.²³

Herr House, also built in 1927, was once the women's honors dorm but is now home to Park staff and faculty offices and International Student Services and Study Abroad. Park University is known for its international student population. It has about 650 international students from nearly 100 countries studying on campus.²⁴

Further on is the Park University Bookstore. Operated by Barnes and Noble, it offers new, used, rental and digital textbooks, and various school supplies and convenience items. The bookstore also carries all of the apparel and gift items students need to show their school spirit. The Park University mascot is the "Pirate", a rather strange symbol for a college that was founded to train missionaries.

Next stop is the McAfee Learning Center. The McAfee Memorial Library has more than 160,000 volumes, 770 subscriptions and study rooms and computers available for students to use, with access to other citywide library electronic card catalogs.²⁵ Computer facilities are open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. There is access to a printer and Park University provides wifi access throughout the campus for laptops.

Park University is known for its excellent sports program. Breckon Sports Center is the crown jewel of athletics facilities, housing athletic administrative and coaches offices. Breckon Sports Center has been home to two of collegiate athletics' most recent success stories, helping vault the Park women's volleyball and women's basketball programs to the top half of the American Midwest Conference. Park's men's basketball team is a regular in postseason play, both in the AMC and in the NAIA. Park's men's volleyball team has two national championships, and Breckon Sports Center is known for being one of the toughest venues for visiting teams across the NAIA. The west dome of the Center seats up to 1,200 spectators.²⁶

²² Harris would have been astonished by the abundance of food. In exchange for tuition he worked 4 hours a day in the campus bakery to furnish bread for the student body.

²³ Harris records the strict segregation of the sexes at Park College during his day. On one occasion he and some friends invited girls from their dorm to observe a meteor shower for astronomy class. They overstayed closing time and tried to sneak the girls back into the dorm through a window. They were caught and received a serious reprimand. (*Riding and Roping*, p21).

²⁴ Although there were some students from other countries on campus during Harris' time, the international focus then was in the preparation of missionaries to go to other countries after graduation. For example, Harris young elementary school teacher in his first year at Park College later spent over 25 years in Persia as a missionary.

²⁵ Remember that when Harris arrived at Park College he did not know what a dictionary was and had never heard of a library.

²⁶ In Harris' day probably the only thing remotely resembling sports or exercise would have been swimming in the Missouri River in the summer and ice skating on the frozen river in the winter.

Our tour could go on and on, such are the pleasant surroundings and the friendly smiles of the students. But this short visit is enough to assure us that Park College has been in good hands since John Will Harris graduated in 1902.

CONCLUSION

The histories of Park College, John Will Harris and Inter American University of Puerto Rico are intertwined. Without Park College John Will Haris probably would never have completed his education; he never would have gone to the mission field in Puerto Rico; Inter American University would never have been established.

But their relationship goes even deeper. John Will Haris consciously used Park College as a model for the new school he founded in Puerto Rico: the work/study policy where students could contribute labor in lieu of tuition; strong emphasis on Christian values in the curriculum; orientation toward community service. Even the physical plan of the two schools originally were similar.²⁷ Park University and InterAmerican University today have evolved into large and respected private universities. They share characteristics that are surprisingly similar: very large enrollments; multi campus locations; value oriented education, international awareness, to mention a few.

For decades the two schools remained in close touch. Harris made frequent visits back to Park College after 1902. Several Park College graduates were hired by Harris in his new school in Puerto Rico. In 1920 Park College conferred an honorary LL.D degree on Harris in recognition for his work in the field of education. In 1927 the Park College campus newspaper, *The Park Stylus*, ran a long article on Harris and the school in Puerto Rico.

Today there appears to be little or no contact between Park University of Missouri and Inter American University of Puerto Rico. As Inter American University celebrates its centennial in 2012-2013 it would be a good time to reestablish an awarness of the shared history and kinship of the two universities.

²⁷ John Will Harris' put a great deal of time and effort in drawing up a master plan for the college in Puerto Rico. The master plan graces the cover of his memoirs *Riding and Roping*. That his master plan was inspired by Park College cannot be disputed. In his memoirs (p20) Harris recounts this incident: "Mr. Howard B. McAfee [Superintendent and Business Manager at Park College] asked me to take a walk with him one afternoon and he showed me where he expected to erect future college buildings in Park. The long hill facing the river was for girls' dormitories. The boys' campus extended from Mt. Zion east and north and between was to be for teachers' homes, library about where [it] is and Science Hall nearby. Above the cow barn was to be the lake for supply of water to the college. He never knew what he planted in me for use in Puerto Rico...a Master Plan".