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“The 946: The 1957 Statement of Attitude Regarding Integration” display in the Brackett Library

HARDING AND CIVIL RIGHTS: CREATING “THE 946:” THE PROVENANCE OF A HARDING HISTORY DISPLAY

By Hannah Wood

“Bruce was stolen again.”

The refrain, an unfortunately familiar one, was spoken in a librarians meeting early in the Fall 2020 semester. For several years the library displayed various faculty READ posters on the curved wall of the stairwell landing. The students had their favorites, and every once in a while a READ poster would find its way to a dorm room wall. On this day, it was Dr. Bruce McLarty who had gone missing. Maybe it was time to take down the READ poster display and remove the temptation. But what could we display in its place?

Inspiration struck.

Since becoming the Archives & Special Collections Librarian in 2013, I have been fascinated by the original copies of the 1957 petition (or “statement of attitude” as I have since learned to call it) signed by members of the Harding community expressing their support for the full integration of the school. My father started his freshman year at Harding College in 1963, the same semester that Lewis Brown, Walter Cunningham, and David Johnson opened the door for Black students to attend Harding. Here in the archives, fifty-seven years later, sat a statement of attitude signed six years before those men arrived on campus. A statement with pages and pages of names, many of which I recognized: G. E. Baggett, Jerome Barnes, Finis and Marilyn Caldwell, Mary Jane Christmas, Jimmy Citty, Billy Ray Cox, Marvin Crowson, Kenneth Davis, Bill Diles, Jack Lewis, Mrs. Erle Moore, Edwina Pace, Dean Priest, Neale Pryor, Mr. & Mrs. Andy Ritchie, Jack Wood Sears, Dwight Smith, Sidney Tate, Harold Valentine, and Winfred Wright. There were undergraduate and graduate students, high school students, wives of students and faculty, students from Asia who wouldn’t have been welcomed in many colleges across the nation, staff, faculty, and even a few members of the administration. Nine hundred and forty-six people in total signed in support of Black students attending Harding. How? Why? I wanted to know more. I wanted our students to know more.

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The newly emptied curved wall of the library stairwell inspired me to research further and provided the perfect place to share this piece of Harding history with our community. I scoured the Harding archives for information. A colleague put me in touch with someone who connected me with Bill Floyd, the Student Association president during the 1957-58 school year. I emailed him questions, and he provided me with his thoughts and motivations and perspective. I tasked a student worker to type up a list of the names. I scanned the statement signature pages in high-resolution, then enlarged, straightened, and cropped the images so that the signatures could be easily read from a foot or two away. I read *Bison* articles, course catalogs, and meeting minutes. In short, I immersed myself in the project.

Here is what I learned.

In the wake of the landmark May 1954 Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* and the integration crisis in Little Rock at Central High School in September 1957, many Americans debated the merits of integration in our schools. Students and faculty at Harding College were no different. In the Fall of 1957, S.A. president Bill Floyd listened to numerous students' concerns about Harding's continued segregated status while also hearing Harding president Dr. George Benson's public comments stating one reason Harding was not integrated was because the student body was not ready for integration. According to Floyd, students wanted to "declare who we are and what we feel,"¹ and what they felt was a desire for a fully integrated Harding.

With the assistance of English professor Robert Meyers, the S.A. wrote and refined a statement of attitude.² They planned a strategy to contact every student and faculty member at Harding, asking them to read the statement and sign it if they agreed. S.A. members resolved to not argue with anyone or attempt to persuade them into signing, and no judgement was to be given if someone declined to sign. Printed at the top of each legal-sized signature page, the statement read like an open letter to the Board:

¹ Bill Floyd, email message to the author, September 27, 2020.

² Floyd, email message to the author. Floyd felt strongly that a petition would be seen as the students trying to make demands on the administration and the Board of Trustees. A statement of attitude, however, would let the administration know that the student body was ready to integrate whenever the Board chose to make that decision.

Harding and Civil Rights

To the Administration and Board of Trustees of Harding College:

A number of Members of the Harding community are deeply concerned about the problem of racial discrimination. Believing that it is wrong for Christians to make among people distinctions which God has not made, they sincerely desire that Harding College make clear to the world that she firmly believes in the principles of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. To that end, the undersigned individuals wish to state that they are ready to accept as members of the Harding community all academically and morally qualified applicants, without regard to arbitrary distinctions such as color or social level; that they will treat such individuals with the consideration and dignity appropriate to human beings created in the image of God; and that they will at all times face quietly, calmly, patiently, and sympathetically any social pressures intensified by this action.

Furthermore, the undersigned individuals wish it clearly understood that this statement of attitude is by no means intended as an attempt to precipitate action by the Administration or Board of Trustees of Harding College but that it is instead intended entirely as an expression of the internal readiness of the Harding community to end discrimination, such expression being tendered as one factor for the consideration of the Administration and the Board of Trustees when a re-evaluation of the admission policies of Harding College is undertaken.

Even though Dr. Benson and others in Harding's administration spoke against the statement both publicly in Chapel and privately to Floyd and other members of the Student Association, the statement of attitude received 946 signatures from students, faculty, staff, and other members of the Harding community. To put that number context, in 1957, Harding College boasted approximately 126 faculty, staff, and administration, and 1369 total students on campus (graduate,

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undergraduate, and academy).³ In other words, approximately 62% of the Harding community signed the statement of attitude.

In early November 1957, Floyd delivered the original statement of attitude to Dr. Benson and a copy to Dr. L. M. Graves, then Chairman of the Board of Trustees. Benson officially presented the statement to the Board during their next meeting on November 26. According to the minutes from that meeting, the Board took the statement's contents under advisement, but no immediate course of action would be taken.⁴ Though disappointed at the lack of immediate action by the Board, Floyd said, "Many of us felt it would happen when it [was] safe to do so and when it [was] financially advantageous to do so."⁵ Harding College would not integrate until the Fall of 1963.

When speaking of the 1957 statement of attitude, Bill Floyd's name receives the most press. My goal with the display "The 946: The 1957 Statement of Attitude Regarding Integration" was for the Harding community, particularly the students, to see that in addition to Floyd there were 945 other people on campus in 1957 who were ready for the college to welcome Black students as members of the student body. Women and men of multiple generations envisioned a Harding College where the color of a student's skin did not preclude them from actively participating in the Harding community. They signed their names to speak with one voice in support of this dream. They had a voice. We have a voice. You have a voice.

³ Harding College, *General Catalog 1957-58 1958-59* (Searcy, AR: Harding Press, 1957), 7-18; Harding College, *General Catalog 1959-60 1960-61* (Searcy, AR: Harding Press, 1959), 128. These numbers do not necessarily include the number of spouses of people on campus, some of whom signed the statement of attitude.

⁴ Board of Trustee Meeting Minutes, November 26, 1957, box B-020, folder 9, George S. Benson Papers, Ann Cowan Dixon Archives & Special Collections, Brackett Library, Harding University.

⁵ Floyd, email message to the author.