

## Class Gifts at SHSU

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Read by Paul Culp, Special Collections Librarian.

This is Paul Culp, Special Collections Librarian, and I am speaking about a long-honored tradition in colleges and universities around this country that has faded away in most, including Sam Houston State. That once-ubiquitous tradition was the Senior Class Gift. For more than seventy years, many graduating senior classes organized donations to bestow on this institution a gift of lasting purpose, beauty, or meaning. Class gifts varied immensely, including art objects, scholarship funds, and even campus structures (or “hardscape” for a more trendy term). The talk itself is deeply indebted to the University Archivist, Barbara Kievit-Mason, who combed through campus publications and official records to compile as complete a list of gifts as possible, and to Reference Librarian Erin Cassidy for her enthusiasm in categorizing and selecting the more significant or representative gifts in the first draft of the podcast.

### *(Statues)*

The first recorded class gift was a copy of the famed classical statue “Winged Victory,” given to the Sam Houston Normal Institute by its very first graduating class. That Class of 1880 always regarded themselves as a very special group, and they were indeed an extraordinary collection of individuals who continued to meet for reunions up until 1940, when all were in their 80's. “Winged Victory” was only the first of several classical statues which would be given to celebrate the 19<sup>th</sup>-century academic ideal. The Goddess Minerva—identified by her Greek name “Athena” by the artist who restored her—was the 1911-12 gift. This work of art, fully restored for a rededication ceremony in 1997, currently stands in Art Building E at the far southwest corner of campus. Spring of 1929 saw the gift of the Mercury statue, and the summer class of 1930 gave the statue “Discobolus,” better known as “The Discus Thrower.” A much more modern statue forms the central figure in the Jewel Garden, located alongside Austin Hall overlooking the Sam Houston Memorial Museum. This tranquil curly-haired maiden gazes peacefully upwards from the edge of what was once a small pond in the midst of camellias, azaleas, and magnolias. The model for that small statue was Cheerleader Ruth Whisenant, and she was selected by her senior class to serve as the model for the centerpiece of the Jewel Garden, given by the summer graduates of 1948.

### *(Campus Improvements)*

Another category of gift is that of adornments and improvements to the campus grounds. The fountain, now non-functional, which stands by the Old Main Memorial was a gift of the 1911-12 class, along with the previously described Minerva statue. In 1916, the funds raised by graduating seniors resulted in construction of the original Greek Theatre; that amphitheater was renovated by the Class of '22 and improved by the Class of '27 before finally being demolished to make way for a parking lot in the late 1950s. In the days before air-conditioning, the Greek Theatre was a nearly-essential venue for commencements, pageants, etc. in the weather that persists a large part of the year in East Texas.

An improved stadium driveway came from the Class of '28, while the gates to Pritchett Field, still residing in that location, were received from the Class of '32. The August 1934 and May 1935 classes donated brick gates and an entrance archway which have since been taken down. The gift dates are unknown for a front entrance gate to College Drive, later demolished, and a set of cluster lights, replicas of which now stand in the quadrangle. Several concrete benches with the year “1936” inlaid in glass were given by the Class of '36.

### *(Stained Glass Windows)*

Stained glass windows were popular class gifts over the years, and most of these historic windows were in beloved Old Main. Class A of 1890 presented the Abercrombie Window, in memory of Colonel L. A. Abercrombie, our state senator

who sponsored the bill to fund the construction of the Main Building (first to be built specifically for SHNI, not Austin College). Class D of 1890 was responsible for the Twenty-First Legislature arch window, the 1887 legislature that approved the bill introduced by Col. Abercrombie. Sadly, both of these beautiful and unique creations were destroyed in the Old Main fire in 1982.

Other class- gift windows lost during the fire included the San Jacinto and Alamo-Goliad windows, 1895; the Baldwin window, 1899; the Curry window, 1904; the Pritchett window, 1908; the front memorial window, date of gift unknown; and a collection of memorial windows presented by the Class of '41 and summer graduates that year to commemorate Ida Lawrence, Anna C. Loring, S.C. Wilson, Ramsey Woods, Louie Sexton Estill, Joseph Pritchett, and Rosa Patton Buchanan. Also lost in the devastating blaze were the Sam Houston stage, a gift from the students of 1898, and the Parthenon Frieze around that stage donated by the class of 1916.

One consolation, however, is that not all the windows donated through SHSU's history have been lost; in the Peabody Memorial Library's reading room, one can still view the handsome stained glass windows given by the Class of 1902.

#### *(Portraiture)*

Portraiture was another common class gift. The first of this sort was the Class of '30's gift of a portrait of Harry Estill, painted by Mrs. Grace Spalding John of Houston. Estill served as President from 1908-1937, and that portrait currently hangs in the east room of the first floor of Austin Hall. Hanging nearby is a portrait of Joseph Pritchett, beloved mathematics professor and donor of Pritchett Field; it is a gift from the summer graduates of 1937. For the class gift in August 1947, a photograph of William Longino, made by Earl Moore of the Photography department, was given to the school; it now resides in the University Archives in the Newton Gresham Library. The most recent class-gift portrait was presented by the Class of '54, a bust portrait of President Harmon Lowman which hangs in the Lowman Student Center; there have been a number of later portraits presented by individuals and alumni organizations, however.

#### *(Woodlands Home)*

Perhaps the most notable gift ever was a project of the entire student body of 1910-11, not just the graduating seniors. Sam Houston's "Woodlands" plantation home was purchased and donated to the state through an effort begun by history professor Bertha Kirkley and her students. This historic house now stands as part of the Sam Houston Memorial Museum.

#### *(Modern Conveniences and Miscellaneous Items)*

Some classes seemed interested in promoting conveniences for the benefit of future students, faculty, and staff. The summer classes of both 1929 and 1935 donated several electric clocks. Several sets of Gorham flat silverware, for use in the College Social Center in Austin Hall, came from the Class of '31. In August, 1938, the graduating class was responsible for the installation of a Webster Public Address (PA) system to allow announcements to be broadcast.

There have been a wide variety of other objects donated through the years. Chapel Bibles were bequeathed by the graduates of 1893 and the student body of 1925-26. The junior class of 1908 gave a brass plaque commemorating Henry Carr Pritchett, former president of Sam Houston Normal Institute; that plaque hangs today where it has always hung--in the Peabody Memorial Library. At the close of World War I in 1918, the students presented the school with a set of Allied Flags. The President's chair, which resides on the first floor of Austin Hall, was presented by the Class of '33. A mahogany table was received in May, 1939, and several chairs were placed in the Memorial Auditorium in June 1940. An organ was placed in the original Student Union Building (now known as Academic Building II or "AB-2") as a result of the 1949 senior class and the 1951 summer class gifts. The Class of '50 provided the Student Union Building Record Book and display case which stand today in the University Archives in the Newton Gresham Library. The students of 1953 gave their alma mater a trophy case.

#### *(Money)*

Instead of tangible presents, some graduating classes chose to donate money collected for meaningful uses that would help the college and its future students. In 1921, money was donated towards the goal of starting the College Print Shop, which was an outstanding achievement for the school at that time. The Class of '24, Summer 1924, Class of '25, and Summer 1932 classes donated to the Student Loan Fund. It should be noted that the summer class graduates were not usually holdovers from the basic four-year group that constituted the regular graduates; most were graduate teachers receiving special certificates.

The tradition of class gifts has faded away over the last half-century as the university has grown; it might be especially noted that the gifts have declined in significance over the years, especially in terms of the relative number of students. A sociologist could write a major paper on the factors contributing to this nearly universal phenomenon, some of them being a more diverse and protracted course to the degree, more distractions competing with the institution for loyalty and identity. Nevertheless, this tradition's legacy remains in the objects that endured, which remind us daily of the fondness and gratitude that so many alumni have felt for this university.