

A HISTORY OF THE VALLEY TRAINING CENTER

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INTRODUCTION

The Valley Training Center is an agricultural branch of Texas A. & I. College which is located northeast of Weslaco in the Rio Grande Valley. This center has the distinction of being unique both in its location and the type of activities with which it is concerned. The Rio Grande Valley of Texas is one of the few places in the United States where citrus production is an industry of multi-million dollar proportions. It may also be one of the few places where conscientious citizens have taken the initiative in assuring that proper educational facilities would be provided for the development of the area economy.

It is the general consensus that the establishment of the agricultural branch of Texas A. & I. College at Weslaco was originally the idea of "interested men" of the Rio Grande Valley. While this statement may be entirely true, it does not in any manner divulge information concerning the men and events leading to this establishment. Why the college agreed to the establishment of this center during a time of war is still another question. It is only one of the many questions which present themselves. Some will have answers - others will not. It is possible that at best only a summary outline may be obtained.

EARLIEST HISTORY OF THE TRAINING CENTER

On May 13, 1946, C. H. Britton, President of the Valley Planning Board, speaking before the Educational Committee of that Board, stated : - *"This idea of a specialized school to teach Valley boys how to care for and improve our citrus and vegetable products is the Planning Board's own baby. We started it almost simultaneously with the creation of the board; we have nursed it along. Now A. & I. is ready to establish school in the Valley and it seems to me it is up to us to do everything we can to get them a suitable site."* ⁽¹⁾.

This statement would seem to shed light on the general belief that the establishment of an agricultural branch of Texas A. & I. College in the Rio Grande Valley was originally the idea of “interested men” of the Valley area. It would seem from Mr. Britton’s statement that these “interested men” were none other than the men of the Valley Planning Board.

RIO FARMS AND THE VALLEY TRAINING CENTER

Rio Farms has a colorful history of its own. It was brought into being as an insurance company which sold land to development companies. When the depression came, the entire concern went bankrupt and was possessed by the Federal Government. At this time it was set up as a cooperative which was almost immediately financially successful. It paid off its debt to the government and the question immediately arose as to the ownership of Rio Farms. The question was submitted to the court whose final decision was that Rio Farms would be set up as a public trust to be administered by a board of directors appointed by the court ⁽²¹⁾.

Evidently these men appointed by the court as directors of Rio Farms were civic-minded men with an eye to the future. Early in the year 1944 these men embarked upon a series of farm research projects which were financed from the Rio Farms treasury. The proposals of aid, which were first made to A. & I. College in September of 1944 for the establishment of a training center in the Rio Grande Valley, were only one of this series ⁽³⁾. The timing of these offers was very opportune, for A. & I. officials were at this time planning conferences at the main campus for the purpose of discussing A. & I.’s post-war expansion ⁽³⁾.

It is interesting to note that Rio Farms had close connections with the Valley Planning Board located at Weslaco. This connection was in the person of R. B. McLeaish who was executive director of the Planning Board ⁽³⁾ and also president of the Rio Farms Board of Directors ⁽²⁵⁾. This might, in part, explain the interrelationship of the “interested men” of the Valley, the Valley Planning Board, Rio Farms, and A. & I. College.

It is general knowledge that A.& I. College was not the first to broach the idea of a training center in the Rio Grande Valley. The most acceptable explanation of the entire affair is that “interested men” of the Valley, looking toward the future of agriculture in that area, brought the subject of the training center to the attention of the Valley Planning Board. From this point it was “nursed” by the Planning Board, which by working through Rio Farms and influential men of the Valley managed to bring the idea to the attention of the college. It was by this train of events that A. & I. College and Rio Farms began a series of meetings which were to eventually lead to the establishment of the center almost four years later.

EARLY CONFERENCES WITH RIO FARMS

The first meeting which actually dealt with the establishment by A. & I. College of an agricultural branch in the Rio Grande Valley was held at Rio Farms on September 12, 1944. Attending this meeting were Dr. E. N. Jones, President of A. & I. College, and Mr. Sam Tayloe, Manager of Rio Farms. Evidently the thoughts of these men were found to be in harmony, for this preliminary conference resulted in a request that a joint meeting be held between the board of Directors of Rio Farms and representatives from the Board of Directors of A. & I. College ⁽²⁵⁾.

Representing A. & I. College at this meeting which was held on November 24, 1944, were A. L. Cramer, L. C. Hill, H. E. Butt, and Dean O. R. Neilsen. This meeting resulted in an agreement between these men and the Rio Farms Board of Directors that both bodies would enter into a joint agreement for the establishment of a training center in the Rio Grande Valley. It was further stipulated that Rio Farms would use land available for the site and a substantial financial contribution to defray the initial expenses ⁽²⁵⁾. This promise of a substantial financial contribution was followed up by the deliverance of a \$10,000 check under the date of December to the college as a donation by the Rio Farms to cover costs of launching a cooperative program in agriculture and agronomy in the Rio Grande Valley area ⁽¹²⁾.

A. & I.'S POST-WAR EXPANSION

On December 6, 1944 there was held in Kingsville a meeting of the A. & I. Board's Agriculture Committee and an Advisory Committee composed of leading farmers, ranchmen, and citrus and vegetable growers of South Texas. The purpose of this meeting was to draft plans for the expansion of A. & I.'s facilities in the field of agricultural education in the post-war years ⁽²⁾.

There can be no doubt that the proposals for the establishment of a Valley Citrus Center were one of the main topics of this meeting. The project by this time seemed all the more inviting with the receipt of a \$10,000 check only two days before and the promise of land to be made available for the establishment of the center.

Following this conference on the main campus, Dr. E. N. Jones accompanied by Professor R. J. Cook and A. L. Cramer, again met with Sam Tayloe, Manager of Rio Farms, on December 21, to discuss the general outline of the proposed program and to look over various sites which were being considered as building locations. It was also announced at this time that the proposed site consisted of substantial acreage bordering the reservoir of the Willacy County Water Control and Improvement District, approximately 17 miles southwest of Raymondville. This meeting of December 21 was followed up by another on December 29 at Rio Farms headquarters in which President E. N. Jones and the Rio Farms Board of Directors agreed to the final draft of plans for the establishment of the training center ⁽²⁾.

Growing out of the meetings of December 21 and 29, the Rio Farms Board of Directors adopted a resolution providing for the transfer of land to A. & I. College for the establishment of the training center. Official notification of acceptance was at once given by the A. & I. Board of Directors. Plans had already been drawn up and the matter was referred to attorneys for the drafting of the legal papers to complete the transaction. It is also interesting to note that even at this early time, five points had been set forth as the prime objectives of the center ⁽²⁵⁾.

The next step came when it was reported on January 17, 1945, that President E. N. Jones had returned from a business trip to the East which had been concerned with the planning of A. & I.'s post-war expansion. Although this journey was concerned with many other aspects of the expansion program, it is noteworthy that mention was specifically made to the President's consultations with the Department of Agriculture at Washington, D. C., on matters concerning A. & I.'s proposed establishment of an agricultural branch in the Rio Grande Valley ⁽⁴⁾. Presumably these conferences met with favorable attention, for plans went ahead for the establishment of the Valley Center.

On October 25, 1945, Lon C. Hill, President of Central Power and Light Company, Corpus Christi, and a member of A. & I.'s Board of Directors, was host to citrus growers and processors of the Valley at a barbecue-supper at Bay View, 16 miles east of San Benito. The purpose of this gathering was to discuss the proposed establishment of the Valley Training Center ⁽⁵⁾. It was reported following this meeting that pledges of \$100,000 had been obtained for the financing of the training center. These pledges were to extend over a three-year period and were to be secured by a committee of fifty Rio Grande businessmen. It was also disclosed at this time that the amount of land tentatively promised by Rio Farms was 160 acres with a possibility of increasing this to a 450-acre total in the future. Ready cash was also at hand, for the state legislature had appropriated \$20,750 at its last session for the foundation of the Valley Training Center ⁽⁶⁾.

Following this meeting of October 25, it must be assumed that plans for the establishment of the Valley Center were proceeding through official channels. No reports were made until January 1, 1946, when it was disclosed that Dr. J. B. Corns had been appointed as director of the Citrus Center effective as of that date ⁽²⁵⁾. There was no office available at this time, and it was later reported that Dr. Corns had set up headquarters in the Valley Planning Board Building at Weslaco ⁽⁷⁾.



Dr J. B. Corns, Director
Citrus Center project (1946-47)

At this time it seemed that everything was progressing satisfactorily and it would only be a matter of time until the entire project became a reality. However, on March 28, 1946, the Board of Directors of A. & I. College were notified by Rio Farms that,

“The Board of Directors of Rio Farms, Inc., finds that the donation of land for the establishment of a branch college on Rio Farms property may not be permitted under the provision of our charter which specifies that the assets of the corporation must be used primarily for the social and economic betterment of low-income farm families”⁽²⁵⁾.

It would thus seem from this pronouncement that the A. & I. Citrus Center was doomed to failure unless other arrangements could be worked out.

WESLACO'S INTEREST IN THE TRAINING CENTER

Had it not been for Lon C. Hill, A. L. Cramer, H. E. Butt, and Dr. J. B. Corns the project would probably have fallen through. These men did not allow time for interest in the training center to falter. They immediately began campaigns in the Valley, working through the Chambers of Commerce of various cities, to explore the possibility of obtaining a favorable site at another location ⁽²⁵⁾.

It was probably through the efforts of these men that Ed Slaughter, manager of the Weslaco Chamber of Commerce, first learned of A. & I.'s desire to obtain a central location for the establishment of its proposed training center. This was in April of 1946 ⁽⁸⁾.

Inquiries into the matter revealed that Weslaco had made no attempts to exploit the possibility of the establishment of the Citrus Center in that area. Slaughter, seeing the possibilities which lay in store, referred the matter to the Chamber's Board of Directors. The result of this was the formation of an "A. & I. Advisory Committee" which was to survey the situation and report back to the Board. After a thorough investigation, this committee recommended active efforts on the part of the Chamber of Commerce to secure the center ⁽⁸⁾.

Growing out of this recommendation, a group of sixteen Weslaco businessmen met on May 8, 1946, to discuss the project. Several sites for the establishment of the center were suggested, and a "Land Committee" composed of Paul Thompson and J. A. Clifford was created to investigate these sites and report back to the group ⁽⁸⁾.

Evidently the reports of this committee were favorably received, for on October 29, 1946, Mr. C. A. Norton, President of the Weslaco Chamber of Commerce, notified the college that the Chamber would guarantee as much as \$20,000 for the purchase of a site, provided that the center would be located near the Weslaco community. It was also stated that a committee would be named to secure an acceptable site, and if the \$20,000 donated by the Chamber proved to be insufficient, additional funds would be solicited on a Valley-wide basis ⁽⁸⁾.

This proposal was accepted by the college on November 2, 1946, and the search was immediately begun for a site which would be acceptable both to the college and to the Chamber.

A total of seventeen sites were examined during this search. Several of them were given thorough water-table and soil analysis tests. One of these was found to be acceptable and was recommended to the college on December 23, 1946. Five days later, on December 25, the Weslaco Chamber was officially notified by President E. N. Jones of the college's acceptance of the site ⁽⁸⁾.

This 80-acre site was legally known as "Farm Tracts 1031 and 1032 of Adams Tract Subd., Llano Grande Grant" and was situated on Mile 3 Road, two miles east of the heart of Weslaco and one-half mile north of U. S. Highway 83. It is also interesting to note that these tracts of land bordered on the north side of property owned by the Texas Experiment Station operated by A. & M. College ⁽⁸⁾.

Preparations were immediately begun for a campaign to raise the money for the purchase of the site. Option money to the amount of \$2,000 was provided by the Weslaco Chamber to hold the land until March 31, 1947 ⁽¹²⁾. Beginning February 24, 1947, funds were actively solicited both in Weslaco and throughout the Valley ⁽¹⁰⁾. C. L. Skagge, Weslaco banker and chairman of the general finance committee, speaking at the initiation of this campaign, stated: *"As we see it now, and as we have seen it since the project was brought to our attention, this is a golden opportunity to assure our Valley in the future of a dependable source of well-trained young men to move into the front ranks of forward-seeing, scientific agricultural development for our area."* ⁽¹⁰⁾.

In spite of this wonderful exhortation, the fund raising campaign did not meet with the initial success which was expected. By March 5, apprehension was beginning to mount, for it was reported that only \$6,191 of the \$24,000 purchase price had been obtained ⁽¹¹⁾. Twenty-one days later on March 26, the fund was still deficient by \$7,000. Skaggs speaking at this time warned

that the project was doomed to failure unless immediate action was taken. This action came in the form of a special meeting of twenty-five of Weslaco's leading citizens which was held on March 28⁽¹²⁾.

As a result of this special meeting, the \$7,000 deficiency was in some manner obtained. The campaign had been brought to a successful climax and checks were exchanged with college officials on April 1, 1947. It was also announced at this time that on August 31, 1947, the 80-acre tract would pass to full control of the college⁽¹³⁾.

OTHER OFFERS OF SITES

Weslaco's campaign to have the A. & I. Citrus Center established in that community did not occur in a vacuum. We must remember that several men representing A. & I. College had been actively working in the Valley toward the goal of obtaining a site for the location of the center. On May 8, 1946, the very day that Weslaco businessmen had appointed a "Land Committee" to investigate sites, it was reported that A. & I. had been offered 100 acres of land three miles from Harlingen and adjoining the inactivated Army Air Field. Although it was pointed out at the time that the offer had numerous advantages, it was never intimated that it would be accepted⁽⁷⁾.

On July 17, 1946, there was reported an offer which allegedly had been made by A. & M. officials on behalf of the Texas Experiment Station located at Weslaco. This experiment station, which is owned and operated by A. & M. College, had been operating at Weslaco for a number of years and was engaged in the same type of activities as those proposed for the A. & I. center. The offer which was reported at this time consisted of land to be made available for building sites and the use of facilities for field work concerned with "on the ground" training for agricultural workers⁽¹⁴⁾. The report of this offer may have been unfounded, for on July 24, President E. N. Jones released the following statement to the press: - "*We appreciate the spirit and nature of the A. & M. offer as reported in the newspapers. No communication has been received from A. & M. either before release of the report of the offer or since that time. We must, of course, withhold comment until some official word is received.*"⁽¹⁵⁾. Evidently no official word was ever received for no further mention of the offer was ever made.

There can be no doubt that these offers received serious attention by the college. However, nothing was ever decided one way or the other. These were not the only sites which were considered at this time for there is mention made of five others in a report dated July 17, 1946⁽¹⁴⁾. It should be kept in mind that one possible reason for A. & I.'s inaction on these offers was their growing interest in the Weslaco campaign which by this time was beginning to gather momentum.

THE OPENING OF THE VALLEY CENTER

Prior to the opening of the center, it was announced that the A. & I. Board of Directors had given their approval on April 14, 1947, for the purchase of six buildings located on the deactivated Army Air Force Field at Harlingen⁽¹⁶⁾. It was later reported that the estimated cost of moving the six buildings and readying the center for operation would be \$50,000. It was also disclosed that the present schedule of activities called for the opening of the center that fall⁽¹⁷⁾.

Plans for the moving of the buildings and opening of the center did not come off according to schedule. On January 23, 1948, it was reported that two of the main buildings still remained to be moved. It was also revealed that there were difficulties in finding a qualified man to serve as director of the center. However, assurances were given that it would only be a matter of time until the opening of the center ⁽¹⁸⁾.



Main administration building

The problem of finding a director for the center may have been one of the chief reasons for the delay in its opening. Dr. J. B. Corns resigned on January 31, 1947, leaving the center without a director until July 1, 1948, when Dr. P. W. Rohrbaugh assumed the post ⁽¹⁹⁾. On May 22, 1948, it was reported that all buildings had been moved to the site and that installation of utilities was proceeding ⁽⁴⁰⁾. All that remained was for the new director to arrive and take charge.



Dr. Paul Rohrbaugh
First Center Director (1948-63)

Dr. Rohrbaugh arrived precisely on July 1 at Corpus Christi after having made the trip from California by plane ⁽²⁰⁾. It would seem that A. & I. had made a good choice in this man for it was reported that he had spent eleven years with the research department of the California Fruit Growers Exchange and also had done similar work with the Citrus Experiment Station at Riverside over a four-year period ⁽¹⁹⁾. This date of Rohrbaugh's arrival may be considered as the date upon which effective operations began at the Citrus and Vegetable Training Center.

ACTIVITIES SINCE THE OPENING OF THE CENTER

One of the first programs which were initiated with the opening of the center was that of offering "grower courses" in the general fields of citriculture, soils, entomology, and horticulture. These courses, although they meet all the standards and requirements of three-hour courses taught on the main campus, were opened to all interested people. Even though they are slanted more toward practical applications, academic credit can be obtained both on the undergraduate and graduate levels. These courses have been continuous each fall and spring since 1948 ⁽²²⁾. As an indication of the measure of success of this program, it was reported in November of 1957 that nearly 900 people had completed courses at the center ⁽²⁶⁾. Other services to growers and processors such as personal consultations, soil tests, etc., have run into the hundreds ⁽²⁵⁾.

In 1952 an Advisory Committee was established to aid in the direction of the center's activities. This committee is composed of civic-minded men who are aware of the needs of the Valley area and in turn serve as their spokesman to the A. & I. Board of Directors. This arrangement has proven to be successful and there has been mutual cooperation from both sides ⁽²²⁾.



Aerial view of the Citrus Center c. 1950

The Citrus Training Center no longer operates entirely on the original 80-acre tract. A 12½ acre tract near Edinburg was donated by Wesleyan University. Lon C. Hill also donated approximately 7 acres near the community of Bay View. In September of 1959, the center first initiated research projects on the Jones and Collier Foundation which is a tract of approximately 150 acres located three miles south of the center. The exact status of this piece of land is at present uncertain for it has been in estate since the death of Mr. Jones in February of 1962. However, the college does have a 99-year lease and the legislature has passed an enabling act permitting the college to buy the land with funds other than state appropriations ⁽²²⁾.

All of the original buildings are still located at the center. The only building activity has been the construction of a brick residence for the director and erection of an implement shed to house machinery. Several farm workers are employed, and old trailer houses have been located on the center in which these people make their homes. There are currently twenty-three people employed at the center. This includes a faculty of four, two technicians, one farm superintendent, one farm foreman, nine full-time farm workers, four temporary workers, and two clerical workers. The appropriations for the operation of the center during the next fiscal year will total \$107,178 ⁽²²⁾.

In September of 1961, the Training Center had a total of 17 long range projects in progress. These projects fall into four main categories -- cultural practices of citrus, disease control in citrus, insect control in citrus and general horticulture. Time limits on these projects range from five to twenty years. The sites of these projects are either on the land belonging to the center, the Jones and Collier Foundation, or on the outlying property of an interested citrus grower who has agreed to cooperate ⁽²⁴⁾.

Although the A. & I. field station is known even today as the Citrus and Vegetable Training Center, the work with vegetables was never an integral part of the program and quite soon after the establishment of the center all work in this area was discontinued. The current activities are concerned entirely with citriculture and the sciences which relate to this field of study ⁽²¹⁾.

It is also interesting to note that even though the current college catalogue (1962-1963) specifies that all horticulture majors will be required to spend at least one semester of their senior year in

residence at the Training Center, this practice has long since been discontinued. In fact, it was reported that only two groups of students were ever in residence, and the dormitory which was established for their housing is now used primarily for storage purposes ⁽²²⁾. This turn of events seems strange, for “on the ground training” was one of the early selling points for the center.

Other than these facts, it would seem from an examination of the five-point program outline that was drafted after the meetings of December 21 and 29, 1944, that the training center has come a long way toward achieving its original aims. One aspect of the program has been outstanding. This can be summarized in the words of Ed Slaughter, Manager of the Weslaco Chamber of Commerce, who stated, “*The center has made a tremendous contribution by giving the short courses.*”⁽²³⁾.

Another outstanding achievement can be attributed to Dr. Rohrbaugh. Quite early he placed an emphasis on the library which has resulted in the accumulation of a very comprehensive reserve of research materials pertaining to agriculture and more specifically to crops of the Rio Grande Valley. All of these publications are catalogued at the main library in Kingsville and may be obtained by inter-library loan ⁽²²⁾.

The Valley Training Center is now well established and a long range research program is in effect. Despite the early difficulties which were encountered and the setbacks suffered from recent freezes in the Valley, it would appear that in the future this center will continue to make progressively greater contributions to Valley agriculture.

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