Integration Sentiment Building Since 1947

BY GRIFFIN SMITH

Integration of Rice, if approved by the courts, would put the University in accord with campus beliefs that have been building steadily over the past fifteen years.

The history of student attitudes toward integration of the school has been a tortuous one; during Rice’s early years, in fact, the subject was virtually taboo.

The only item of record before the 1930’s deals with a false document read to the Pre-Law club. The document, purportedly a Faculty-Administration appeal “in the name of Equality” for support of a new policy of accepting Negro applications, drew “gasps of indignation” at the student’s meeting when it was read. A Thresher story vividly recounts the scene:

“DOWN WITH THE Black Apes,” Shouts the Southern majority. “Negroes at Rice? Hell, no! I’ll be damned if I’ll go to school with a Negro — even if they are clean!”

When one “Northerner” argued that integration was a “normal thing to do in this free land of equality,” the room became “a seething mass of perspiring faces and wild tempers.” Those who defended integration were “almost hoisted out of their seats” and a 3-1 majority in favor of segregation was recorded before the scheme was revealed as a fraud.

In January, 1932, the first club was formed on campus to study “racial hatred.” However, its leaders approached the subject cautiously, never mentioning integration and proposing only to “look every question squarely in the face and recognize its merits after careful consideration.”

As late as 1935 The Thresher could still run a front-page feature on South America headlined “Dogs Are Much More Costly Than Niggers In Panama.” It went on to point out that “niggers are so plentiful that the loss of a few does not matter, while dogs, however, are scarce.” The article drew no adverse comment. Meanwhile, the Rice Dramatics Club knocked under a demand by the United Daughters of the Confederacy that they cancel their planned performance of “Uncle Tom’s Cabin.”

BUT THE SAME atmosphere which produced misunderstanding and vitriolic hatred had a surprisingly sympathetic and human side. An indication of this came in 1937, when an illiterate Negro handyman and athletic trainer, Jack Shelton, died. Hundreds of students came to the funeral of “Nigger Jack,” and the editorial columns of The Thresher paid tribute to him as one of the most beloved figures on the campus.

During and after World War II, the ability of these two moods to exist side-by-side broke down. Criticism of segregation appeared, gently at first. In 1943 a Negro visitor to campus condemned it as discrimination. “We know you,” he warned, “because you don’t care what we think of you and don’t try to conceal your thoughts from us. But you don’t know us because we Negroes have to hide our feelings.”

Still, there was no suggestion that Rice itself be integrated, or any firm expression of sentiment from Rice students. The rule which prohibited Negroes on campus after 5 p.m. remained in effect, and the strongest opposition to the traditional social structure (up to that time) was simply the argument that fully equal facilities should be provided for both races.

The real opening of the debate on integration of Rice came with several letters in 1947 by students “opposed to racial discrimination in any form.” One suggested that since there were no Negro graduate facilities in Texas for scientific study, “why should not Negroes be admitted here?”

The November, 1947, issue of the R.I. magazine carried a feature entitled, “Should Negroes Be Admitted to Rice?”

By 1948 The Thresher was advocating, against strong criticism, the policy that “all students who apply for admission to the Institute should be judged equally and solely upon scholastic qualifications and capability.” These views provoked at least one curious letter from an alumnus, while the topic became a blazing issue on campus. There were attempts to impeach the editor, Brady Tyson.

At one point, proposals were made that a petition favoring integration be circulated, but The Thresher opposed it, advocating the “slow and tedious road” of discussion instead of “action.” Tyson, the titular leader of the pro-integration sentiment, wrote:

“THROUGH OPEN-MINDED and sincere discussion of differences it will be possible to eventually eliminate the fog of bias, fear, suspicion, and hate which has so long condemned the American Negro to his subservient position.”

But a letter from President W. V. Houston (see box) took the position that because of Rice’s charter, any discussion of integration was “entirely academic.” This squelched the issue for a year and a half.
INTEGRATION—

(Continued from Page 7) Rightness of qualified Negroes entering Rice shall recur again and again until at long last the principles of a certain dusty teacher from Galilee, of democracy itself—yea, of just plain common sense and decency—shall triumph.”

MOST STUDENTS, however, seemed satisfied with Houston’s view. Still Thresher Editor Bill Hobby was predicting in 1951 that Rice would soon admit qualified Negroes because of “the trend of judicial and public opinion,” despite this “temporary victory for those who would maintain segregation.”

The postwar debates had established integration as a legitimate issue: something it had never been in the first thirty-five years of Rice’s history. Because of the apparent barrier to its realization, the question receded from the level of a crusade to a background issue in the 1950’s. But in the process, it quietly gathered increasing support from the students. Polls of the student body taken in 1953, 1957, and 1962 reflect the gradual acceptance of the idea of integration at Rice. (see box).

Shifting Sentiment 1953 1957 1962

For Integration 57% 61% 65%
Against 44% 38% 35%

Next year may see the realization of an idea which has metamorphosed from the joke of a Pre-Law meeting to the dream of a few idealists to the conviction of a large majority of the University’s 80-per-cent Southern student body.