

# Origins of a Motto

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Texans may be more familiar with Texas A&M's Aggie Code of Honor or the University of Texas' Latin motto, *Disciplina praesidium civitatis*, but fewer Texans know the words that have guided the students of Sam Houston State University (SHSU), an institution whose roots are thirty years older than either of the larger universities.



Fig. 1: SHSU Mall Area

Campus pedestrians see our motto's inscription daily but its provenance is likely unknown. Prominently displayed on the Mall between the Lowman Student Center and the Lee Drain Building lies our motto, "The Measure of a Life is its Service" (see fig.1). Perhaps our motto's lesser prominence in comparison to other Texas universities lies not in the actions of our student body or faculty but to the passage of time and, perhaps to the loyalties to a disabled dog.

SHSU was established in 1879 as Sam Houston Normal Institute (SHNI), a teacher's college. The school quickly found that its existing facilities were not enough to accommodate the rising enrollment at SHNI. Construction on a new main building was begun in 1889 and finished a year later; that building would become known as Old Main. One hundred and fifty-seven feet long, ninety-two feet wide, and two stories tall, Old Main had classrooms, offices and the first Peabody Library on the first floor. Upstairs were four classrooms and the ninety-six by seventy-one foot Sam Houston Memorial Auditorium. With a large M.P. Moller pipe organ as its focal point and church styled benches, the Sam Houston Memorial Auditorium became the main assembly area for recitals and college-wide presentations.<sup>1</sup> Henry Carr Pritchett was the first president of SHNI; prior to Pritchett's appointment, SHNI had principals, not presidents. Preceding his appointment as president, Pritchett taught mathematics and psychology at SHNI from 1881 to 1890. Pritchett resigned from SHNI to accept a gubernatorial appointment as Texas State Superintendent of Public Instruction, but after only a year as the superintendent, Pritchett returned to SHNI to assume the new office of president that replaced the old principal position.<sup>2</sup> During Pritchett's seventeen-year tenure as president of SHNI, he helped improve the curriculum for Texas teachers and successfully lobbied for legislative approval for the advancement of both secondary and higher education in Texas. Taking the advice of local secondary education administrators, Pritchett revised the university's curriculum to be more in line with the needs

<sup>1</sup> "Building SHSU," Building SHSU, accessed April 2, 2018, [http://buildingshsu.com/m/main\\_building/](http://buildingshsu.com/m/main_building/).

<sup>2</sup> Jack W. Humphries, *Old Main: A Glimpse of History in Glass* (Huntsville, Texas: Sam Houston State University 1977), 3.

of Texas' schools. Working with the State Superintendent of Public Schools, Pritchett helped gain Congressional approval for the raising of property taxes by 150% with the sole beneficiary being Texas schools. Pritchett's tenure was also a

time of expansion for SHNI. The university acquired the Sam Houston homestead under his leadership, and the Peabody Memorial Library was constructed under his guidance in 1901. Never losing his teaching roots, President Pritchett advised every student at the end of each term to gauge their mastery of the curriculum and ascertain their behavior outside of the school. Unfortunately, in 1908 he underwent surgery to help remediate a life-long pain that he had never disclosed. The day after the surgery, Pritchett passed away in Galveston, Texas.<sup>3</sup>

Shocked from the news of the beloved president's passing, Pritchett's successor, Harry F. Estill, charged the faculty to submit quotes that would both reflect the late president's ideals and be a fitting memorial for a stained glass window commissioned in Pritchett's honor (see Fig. 2). Professor of literature, Augusta Lawrence, suggested a quote from a short story by Mary Raymond Shipman Andrews entitled, *The Militants*. "The Measure of a Life is its Service"

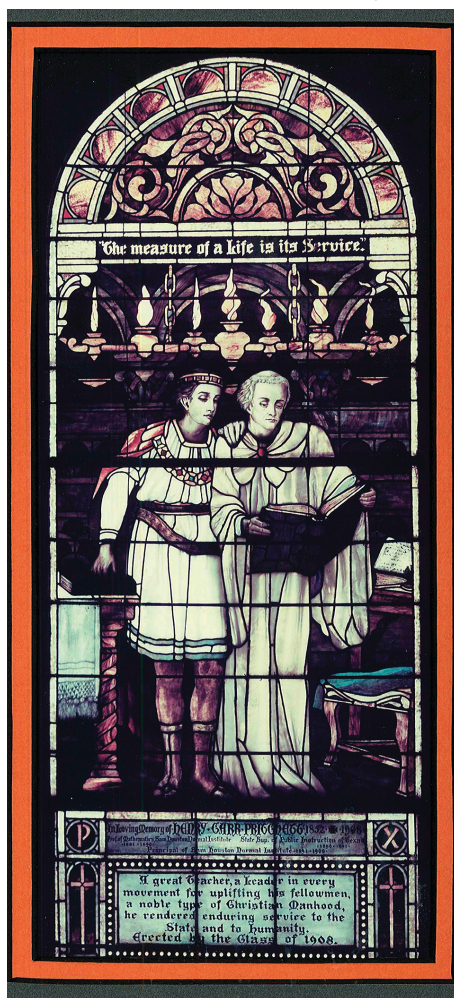


Fig. 2: The Pritchett window

was inscribed on the Pritchett memorial window and became the *de facto* motto of SHNI. The Pritchett window was fittingly placed in the Sam Houston Memorial Auditorium in Old Main.<sup>4</sup>

The auditorium's centerpiece of art was a window that honored Sam Houston and those who served in the Texas Revolution against Mexico. Additional windows were

<sup>3</sup> Ty Cashion, *Sam Houston State University: an Institutional Memory, 1879-2004* (Huntsville: Texas Review Press, 2004), 27-38.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Culp, email message to Terrie Gonzalez, January 3, 2003.

installed in honor of various SHNI faculty and administrations, paid for through student donations. SHNI's past principals Bernard Mallon, Hildreth Smith, and Joseph Baldwin all were memorialized with windows within the auditorium, with then Superintendent Pritchett unveiling the Houston and Mallon windows.<sup>5</sup> A window honoring Pritchett's life and his service was donated by the class of 1908.<sup>6</sup> The concept for the Pritchett window was taken from his tenure as a professor and features a young version of Emperor Charlemagne with his tutor, Alcuin.<sup>7</sup> Alcuin was an English monk hired by Charlemagne to instruct the emperor and his court. Insisting that the base of learning must include the mastery of the liberal arts, Alcuin taught grammar, logic, and rhetoric. Building upon these subjects, Alcuin instructed the court on mathematics (then considered a liberal art), music, and astronomy. Students who mastered these subjects then moved on to the study of philosophy and theology. Thrilled with the education Alcuin provided, Charlemagne decreed that all clergymen must be educated; soon thereafter, the royal decree was extended to include male children of the realm. Alcuin and Charlemagne's insistence on education is considered the basis for modern education, which makes the window choice all the more fitting for the first president of SHNI.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the window's beauty, several inconsistencies mark the artwork. When Charlemagne met Alcuin, the emperor was thirty-nine years old and Alcuin was forty-six. Yet the difference in age between the two men depicted on the window is much more notable. Charlemagne is portrayed as a young man, possibly in his late teens, while Alcuin's advanced age seems correct.<sup>9</sup> The second irregularity on the window revolves around religion. Depicted on the bottom left and right are the Greek letters,  $\text{P}$  and  $\text{X}$  respectively. In Greek, these letters are usually superimposed on one another to form the *Chi-Rho* symbol  $\text{✠}$ . This symbol was a monogram for the name Christ using the first two letters of the name in Greek, *Christos*, and has been a major symbol of the Christian Churches since Constantine. The letters,  $\text{P}$  and  $\text{X}$  are never used independently in regards to Christianity, which, in this case, they most certainly are since they are located above two crosses. If the two symbols were to be used independently the correct order should be  $\text{X P}$ , not  $\text{P X}$  which would allude to a misspelling of the name Christ, *Rchistos*.<sup>10</sup> Regardless of the inaccuracies, shortly after the dedication of the window a visiting speaker happened to read the window and casually remarked that the quote would make a great school motto. From that

<sup>5</sup> Humphries, *Old Main: A Glimpse of History in Glass*, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Westen McCoy, *Pritchett Window*, n.d. Photograph, SHSU Alumni Association Collection, SHSU Archives.

<sup>7</sup> Mary S. Estill, *Vision Realized: A History of Sam Houston State University* (Huntsville, Texas: Texas Review Press 1970), 70.

<sup>8</sup> John H. Lienhard, "Engines of Ingenuity No. 797 Alcuin and Charlemagne," accessed April 2, 2018, <https://www.uh.edu/engines/epi797.htm>.

<sup>9</sup> Leinhard, "Engines of Ingenuity No. 797 Alcuin and Charlemagne."

<sup>10</sup> Stephen H. Rapp Jr. (Professor of Eurasian and World History, SHSU), in discussion with the author, October 2017.

point on, “the measure...” would inspire service to all who attended SHNI.<sup>11</sup>

In the 1950s and 1960s the school’s motto fell out of use in part because of the student body’s focus on a stray, disabled dog left by a World War II veteran who died in Huntsville. Affectionately named Tripod, the dog had free reign over what was now called Sam Houston State Teachers College (SHSTC). Despite not having use of one of its rear legs, the dog conducted himself in what people described as a very “regal manner” and projected a sense of arrogance. When Tripod died, the whole student body and faculty were present at his funeral. The ROTC honored Tripod with a three-gun salute, one for each working leg! Tripod is buried on the northwest side of Old Main and his grave is marked with a headstone (see fig. 4). A SHSTC business major and future SHSU president, James Gaertner, still remembers the day Tripod allowed him to pet him. According to Gaertner, this was an unusual honor, since Tripod was particular with his affections and was most often aloof to those who tried to pet him.<sup>12</sup>



Fig. 3: Tripod’s grave on the north lawn.

Gaertner completed a BBA in 1965 from what was now called Sam Houston State College (SHSC). In 1970 he completed his MBA from SHSU. Leaving Huntsville, he went to Texas A&M, where he completed his Ph.D.<sup>13</sup> Gaertner took several positions at the University of Texas at San Antonio and the University of Notre Dame, but never lost his love for SHSU. While working at Notre Dame, Gaertner remembers reading a copy of the *Chicago Tribune* dated February 13, 1982, that carried a story on a fire that destroyed the building known as Old Main in Huntsville, Texas; Gaertner was devastated knowing Old Main was gone, but also because it burned on his birthday.<sup>14</sup> Gaertner returned to SHSU in 2001, this time as the university’s president. Exposed to the rich traditions of the Texas Aggies and the Fighting Irish, Gaertner viewed SHSU as a “special old university” and sought to establish traditions for the school that promoted its rich history. Among his many accomplishments are the revival of the holiday Tree of Light ceremony and “March to the Grave,” on Sam Houston’s birthday, a procession from the ruins of Old Main to Houston’s gravesite. He instituted the SHSU Ring Ceremony and started the practice of tailgating before SHSU football games. To help promote these new traditions, Gaertner resurrected the forgotten SHSU motto to help instill a sense of tradition.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Estill, *A Vision Realized a History of Sam Houston State University*, 70.

<sup>12</sup> James F. Gaertner, interview by John Quezada, Gaertner Performing Arts Center, November 10, 2017.

<sup>13</sup> “Distinguished Alumni: James F. Gaertner,” Sam Houston State University, accessed April 2, 2018, <http://www.shsu.edu/dept/office-of-alumni-relations/awards/distinguished/2011/Gaertner/James/>.

<sup>14</sup> James F. Gaertner, interview by John Quezada.

<sup>15</sup> James F. Gaertner, interview by John Quezada.

“The Measure of a Life is its Service” had never officially been chosen as the university’s motto; however, seeking to revive the unofficial motto, Gaertner decided to place the motto where everyone at SHSU could not help but see it. Looking to replace two old buildings located between the Lowman Student Center and Lee Drain building, Gaertner began the SHSU Mall Extension Project in 2006. Demolition of the Frels and Wilson buildings commenced, and the SHSU mall was created to allow the students a place to congregate and traverse freely between the buildings. Prominently displayed at the center of the new mall are the words, “The Measure of a Life is its Service” (see fig. 5). For the first time since the fire destroyed the stained glass in 1982, these words were again displayed to inspire the students of SHSU.<sup>16</sup>

Since Gaertner’s reinstatement of the school’s motto, the SHSU student body and alumni strive to live up to the words contained in the university’s maxim in their academic and personal lives. Its words not only serve as a guide to building a life devoted to others, but also invokes a sense of tradition and history that the university has developed over the course of its 139 years. ■

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<sup>16</sup> Linda Wollard, “The Mall Area Grows Up,” *The Houstonian*, November 7, 2006.