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Information
by S. Ray Granade
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Quiet reigned throughout OBU's dimmed Mabee Auditorium as the man sat on the stage's top step, head in hands. The large screen, emblazoned with a single word provided by an overhead projector, emitted most of the room's light and drew attention all out of proportion to its message and brightness. It was, to offer a variation of Franklin D. Roosevelt's words about Pearl Harbor, a moment that would live in infamy. Saved by an alert faculty member, the overhead transparency lived in obscurity in Riley-Hickingbotham Library's Special Collections until thrown out by an archivist on a cleaning frenzy who knew not its significance (nor seemingly cared). Now the experience lives only in the decreasing number of memories of that day's participants.

When Ouachita Baptist University Academic Vice-President Dr. Carl Goodson retired in 1982, a nation-wide search brought to campus a physicist who had made his name at Wake Forest in North Carolina, served briefly in administration at Stetson University, and came to Arkadelphia at least in part because of a late-night conversation with History and English Chairmen Drs. Everett Slavens and Herman Sandford who urged him to accept the school's call. Dr. Thomas J. "Tom" Turner had been willing to come in part because his damaged physics credentials had precipitated his move into administration. It did not help that he followed, in Carl Goodson, someone universally recognized for personal and professional integrity.

Turner's Stetson tenure rested in part on his status as a practicing scientist who championed Baptist religion. While at Wake Forest, he received credit when Ben Fisher established a lecture series through the Southern Baptist Convention's Education Commission (which he at the time headed). The H.I. Hester Lectures took place annually at meetings of the Association of Southern Baptist Colleges and Schools and featured eminent scholars wrestling with the question of what "Christian scholarship" really means and how it applies to faculty in Southern Baptist schools. OBU likewise had an endowed lecture series, the Birkett Williams Lecture Series. In his first year, Tom took to that venue to explain (some said justify) what had brought him into questionable repute. Using projected visual aids, he spoke in that public forum about his research, showing the results of his research and saying "You know what we call that? Good data!" Then he revealed that other scientists had not been able to replicate his findings—a revelation that led one off-campus listener to later remark "I didn't know that he was just going to air his dirty linen!" Addressing the matter publicly did not consign it to the ash-heap of history.

When Tom came, OBU occupied the cusp of computerization. PCs had appeared, and the physicist saw computers as "information machines." He felt that education, particularly higher education, must maximize its status as an information gatherer, generator, and provider. By focusing on computerizing campus teaching, he believed himself focusing on information. It was in that vein that he attempted to sell the idea.

OBU gathered its faculty for a start-of-school convocation to share summer news and gear up for the fall semester. It was mainly an opportunity for administrators, especially the Vice-President for Academic Affairs (to give him his official title) to provide faculty some inspiration and marching orders. The Mabee Fine Arts Auditorium had become a desirable place for such meetings because of its ample and plush seating as well as its acoustics. Wooden walls curved out and then in again as if embracing the seats. The floor sloped gently downward toward a stage which arced into the space and offered access across its face by carpeted steps. So faculty and staff had gathered in this space made for singers and orators to hear Turner prepare them for a new year.

Housekeeping over with, Tom ascended the golden carpeted steps to turn on the overhead projector. On the blank transparency, the left-handed physics professor turned academic vice-president printed one word with his green felt-tip marker. It was the word he had made the centerpiece of his impetus to recharge campus. He stepped a bit away and looked at it on the screen as if drawing in all its nuances and building strength from what he had drawn in. Then he turned to the assembled pool of highly (some said overly) educated women and men and launched into his North Carolina-drawled observations.

No interruptions marred his presentation until, as he paused once, the familiar voice of blind History professor Everett Slavens sounded from the dimmed audience with a matter-of-factly said "That's not how you spell it." The pause extended as Tom seemingly considered what he'd heard. Then he slowly turned to look again at the screen. Nothing had changed. "It's misspelled" the voice reiterated. Quizzically Tom turned back to the audience. "Well, how DO you spell it?" he queried. "It's an 'N'—INFORMATION. You have an 'M,' making it IMFORMATION" another voice observed. At that point Tom sank down to cradle his head in his hands. No one laughed. But the meeting quickly ended and the crowd dispersed. There was no coming back from that one.