

1908 Walkout Did Not Deter Bethea

Two hundred and two freshman entered Clemson for the fall semester of 1906. The college was still in its infancy, as were the aeroplane and the automobile. Herbert Festus Bethea of Latta was one of the new "rats" arriving on campus.

Bethea's parents died in his "early youth" and he was raised thereafter by his uncle and aunt, Mr. and Mrs. Laurin Bethea. He came to Clemson as an agriculture major and participated in the YMCA, Agronomy Club, Turkey Club and Senior Dance Club.

Bethea's Clemson bears little resemblance to the institution we know today. It was all white, all male and all military. Students were accountable for more than just academics; as cadets they were subject to military discipline as well. On April Fool's Day 1908, as Bethea's class approached the conclusion of its sophomore year, a disturbance occurred on campus. According to professor Walter Merritt Riggs who would later serve as president of the college:

It was a beautiful day...nor was there a cloud upon the sky of the college. All was going well. But that morning at breakfast some light-headed leader (he was a good friend of mine and a good football player) raised a cry in the mess hall to cut classes and go to Pendleton, and under his foolish leadership 306 men disobeying the personal orders of the Commandant, marched away.

Eighty-five of the 306, who came to be known as the "Pendleton Guards," were members of Bethea's Class of 1910. All would be expelled, but according to historian Jerry Reel, "Most eventually were readmitted and received their degrees."

It's unclear whether Bethea participated in the walkout, neither the first nor last in the college's history, but when 1910's commencement finally arrived, he was one of just seventy-six remaining class members to graduate.

During the spring of 1918, around the time of his twenty-ninth birthday, Herbert Festus Bethea enlisted in the United States Army. He was assigned to the Military Police Corps at Camp Jackson near Columbia.

In February of the following year, Bethea fell ill and was hospitalized. Initially, Bethea's illness did not



seem serious, but after three weeks, his condition became critical. On March 3, 1919, Bethea, by then a sergeant, succumbed to a bilateral kidney infection.

The State newspaper reported that Bethea was "laid to rest in the Latta Cemetery in the presence of one of the largest assemblies ever seen in Latta."

In addition to his uncle and aunt, Bethea was survived by three sisters and his brother, then serving in the military as a lieutenant.

To learn more about the numerous "walkouts" during Clemson's early years, see *The High Seminary* by Jerome V. Reel:

http://www.clemson.edu/cedp/press/pubs/ths-v1/i-584_CU_TheHighSeminary.pdf