Students Work to Put Food on Dining Tables

During the years when JBU students were required to complete vocational work in order to graduate, the campus offered a large variety of work options. Some students worked in the printing press, the campus sawmill (which had the misfortune of repeatedly burning down), or even the laundry services. Like today, however, there were a number of students dedicated solely to satisfying the ever-hungry stomachs of the student body.

Students working in early JBU food service could fill a variety of production roles since the campus strove to be self-sufficient. For example, JBU farmers were responsible for producing the staples and vegetables that graced the dining hall tables. At one point, JBU pastures and fields extended far beyond the borders of modern Siloam Springs to the properties surrounding New Life Ranch. Corn harvests, milking in the dairy barn, canning farm produce, and refining syrup in the sorghum mill were all parts of daily student life.

The sorghum mill, located in the woods behind the John Brown high school, was an intriguing place even in the early 1930s. A visitor to the site would have immediately noticed a large stack of sorghum cane by the cane-mill. (cont. on back page)

ECHOES OF THE PAST

Have you ever tried to live in a boys’ dorm for the first week of school? It goes something like this:

The janitor seemed to be too busy to come around to sweep the halls, and if he did, he would have found such things as broken springs from old beds, pieces of mirror, window screens (shredded by a long summer’s usage), torn and tattered floor rugs, transparent (?) window shades, and a dirty towel, all interspersed with rolls of dust swept from the summer’s bypassed corners and crannies.

As if to add to the confusion some guy down the hall named Abercrombie Fafunick lost his shoes and lost no time in turning everything from broken springs to the dust on the floor upside down until he came to the bright conclusion that the shoes were on the long list of things left at home.

In the room next door, said neighbors lack sufficient closet space to hang their clothes, so they decide to build an annex to their closet. This would seem to be perfectly sane and natural desire on their part, but when said neighbors pick the hours from ten to midnight, one becomes quite convinced that, contrary to above logic, they are quite insane.

Then there is the squealing of homemade radio sets, the bang, bang, bang of picture nails through the walls, the rasp of saws and buzz of electric shavers, the shout of Hey-bop-de-re-bop from someone’s collection of noise making discs – but hark! Through all the din comes a voice, clear and sharp. “Ten o’clock, men. Don’t you think you ought to shut down for the night?” And what was the answer to Pop Steve’s foolish question? – Bang! crash! caff! screech buzz rasp! hey-bop-de-re-bop! So it goes the first week in Mo. Bldg.

An excerpt from the November 12, 1938 edition of the Threefold Advocate

Above: Students E. Paul Smith, Lothie Sanders, Jewell Taylor, and Helen Lowe work to preserve JBU crops in the school’s outdoor cannery, circa 1925. Empty cans are visible in the left background, while the foreground portrays the area where preserves were boiled as part of the preparation process. In the 1920s-1930s, the canning process took place in and around the Alumni Building, known to today’s students as the Hyde Engineering Building.
Insights

From the works of John Brown, Sr.

I recall service in a revival campaign in St. Louis [where] a very beautiful woman dressed in black and with the deep marks of suffering showing on her face, and yet radiantly happy, stood to her feet to testify. The story—a vivid story, almost as vivid today as when she stood in that service more than twenty years ago—was about this:

“I have lived in St. Louis all my life. [My] husband and I were prosperous, built a beautiful home, and had plenty for our old age. Our son became a doctor, and [while] living at home [he] was building a very successful practice here in this city. Our daughter was a musician and had her own conservatory here in our yard. If ever there was a happy family, ours was a happy family. Then my husband, the father of my children, was stricken, and after a long illness in which we spent much money, he passed away. My son was stricken, and again we fought a losing fight; my boy died. And again, my daughter was stricken, and she, too, passed away. In a comparatively short period of time I lost my husband, my only son, and my only daughter. I have no near relatives that I know anything about. In this long losing fight we spent practically our all. I have been left in my old age with everything gone.” Then with a smile as sweet as heaven, that marvelous woman said, “After all I have suffered and all I have lost, I do praise God that I am not in the asylum!” Everything gone! No, her mind was left, and actually praising God for that!

I am certain that testimony made as deep an impression upon the mind and heart of everyone in that audience as it made on my mind and heart; and I know from that day to this I have been less inclined to complain and more inclined to be thankful to my God for a marvelous ministry of grace that has been over me and around me all the days of my life.

Excerpt from “The Why of Suffering”

Milestones

September 4, 1966: J. Alvin Brown dies in Lakewood, CA. He worked closely with his brother Dr. Brown Sr. during the early years of JBU and was affectionately known as “Uncle Alvin” on campus.

October 6, 1964: The JBU Lettermen’s Club holds their third annual slave auction, auctioning off thirty-one young men. Each vowed to complete four hours of labor or an assigned task. The second highest-selling man was Arnie Mayer, bought by J. Alvin Suite 17 for $6.25. His task? Polishing 15 pairs of shoes. Fundraiser profits reached $107.85.

Above: Students stop for a photo in front of the sorghum mill in 1935. At right is the pile of unprocessed cane; in the background, the evaporator emits its usual clouds of steam.

Below: Students and faculty line up the horses in preparation for the corn harvest of 1928. Some students suggested lead mules Jack and Caesar should be given honorary degrees for their dedicated work alongside faculty and students for so many years.

There, raw sugar cane was crushed between rollers to extract a pale greenish juice. The liquid was piped underground into the “evaporator,” a screen-enclosed building, and boiled in a copper vat over a roaring furnace. Inside the building, the steam was reputedly so thick that it was difficult to see the student workers as they moved the syrup through the evaporator’s troughs. At the end of the hour-long boiling process, the now golden, fragrant syrup was poured off into five-gallon cans and stored for winter.

Working in the mill was difficult, particularly during the peak processing week. Students could pull fourteen-hour days, producing up to 100 gallons of syrup. In 1941, students refined over 650 gallons of syrup in a single week. Despite the difficulties, students were proud of their work, noting that “in the olden days,” JBU syrup was boiled in the open, subject to the assaults of grasshoppers, yellow jackets, and dirt, and had to be skimmed before it could even be eaten.

The year of the sorghum mill’s demise remains unknown. Its use probably diminished in the 1940s, when JBU’s vocational production of food subsided. JBU farming persisted to a smaller degree until the agricultural division was cut from JBU’s curriculum in 1962. Though modern work-studies labor alongside campus food services, JBU no longer produces all its food needs.