

A Particular History of Clemson Football ~

Recently, I gave my grandson Eason a memento given to me by my grandfather Thomas (Tom) Turner many years ago. An original (only one I've ever seen), very small, maybe an inch and a half by three-quarters perfectly shaped football and pair of high-top football shoes (with cleats) attached to a little two-inch long, triangular shaped flag, with the name Clemson on it. I'm not sure, but I believe the football and shoes may be made of leather, though they are rock hard now (see photo). This memento is very old, as my Grandfather Turner graduated from Clemson in 1899.

As I understand, at the beginning, a group of football-playing (Clemson) students gathered to discuss the possibility of forming a football association and hiring a head coach in 1896.

Maybe I should start this story a bit earlier. Clemson Agricultural College of South Carolina came about in 1889, after the state legislature accepted the bequest of Fort Hill Plantation and an endowment from Thomas Green Clemson IV to establish an agricultural and mechanical college. Clemson had inherited the Fort Hill estate from his wife, Anna Maria Calhoun, the daughter of antebellum South Carolina statesman John C. Calhoun, after her passing in 1875. Thomas Clemson was an agricultural chemist whose research had been published in noted journals such as the American Farmer, the American Journal of Sciences and Arts, and the Journal of the Franklin Institute, among others. He valued public schooling as a tool for economic prosperity and believed that South Carolina did not offer enough support for agricultural education. Benjamin R. Tillman, the soon-to-be governor of South Carolina and later a U.S. senator, was instrumental in bringing Clemson's vision of a college to fruition. A rising agricultural and political reformer, Tillman shared the view that the state government had failed (white) farmers in the area of practical education. USC, then known as South Carolina College, offered agricultural studies, but Tillman felt that the institution catered to elites, turning out too many lawyers and academics. To address the problem, Tillman and his Farmers' Association lobbied the General Assembly to create Clemson College.

Like many start-up colleges at this time, athletics were not a priority for Clemson. Instead, building the campus infrastructure, transferring agricultural programs from Columbia to Clemson, and recruiting students and faculty surfaced as the main activities of the institution. However, athletics did find actual space on campus and recognition as an important part of the overall educational experience.

Engineering professor Walter M. Griggs explained that in 1896: “The campus was covered with underbrush. There were no well-defined paths and very poor roads. There was only one barracks and only three other principal buildings – the Main Building, the Chemical Laboratory, and the Mechanical Hall. The Agricultural Laboratories and classrooms were all in the main building. The post office was a little one-room wooden house to the right of the road as you pass the Mechanical Hall . . . On the grass sward (an expanse of short grass) in front of this little post office, football had its beginnings.”

While Clemson Agricultural College was taking shape, organized sport was becoming important nationally for institutions of higher education in their pursuit of a campus identity as well as their development of school spirit, useful for retaining current students, attracting future enrollees, and connecting with alumni. The most popular of the early sports at Clemson were football and baseball, along with track and field . . . and tennis (explain this one later). The aforementioned open field – measuring fifty feet wide by two hundred feet long – near the front of the campus’s Main Building (later, Tillman Hall) served as the central recreation and competition area.

Early support of recreation and organized sport was strong at Clemson. The tenth annual report of the college’s board of trustees, published in 1899, indicated that over one-quarter of the students enthusiastically played football, which they enjoyed for the gentlemanly spirit of competition. They also appreciated the ability of sport, in general, to produce better personal discipline. The administration at Clemson likewise appeared to value organized and recreational sport. They stressed that “athletics have become almost an integral part of modern college work . . . An education which neglects the training of the body is defective.” Furthermore, the administration pointed out that only “richer and stronger colleges give systematic attention to the subject of athletics.”

I mentioned earlier the students’ discussion of starting a football team and a head coach. In so doing, the students recruited Walter Riggs from the faculty to coach the team, on a volunteer basis, as Riggs was “one of only two people on campus to have seen a game prior to 1896.”

Before the annual football contest between Clemson and USC began in earnest in 1909, “Big Thursday” was the peak day of State Fair Week, culminating with the State Ball on Thursday evening. By the middle of the 20th century,

Thursday of fair week was a state holiday centered-around the football game. The last Clemson/Carolina “Big Thursday” game was in 1959.

Probably I should mention at this point, to cut the suspense, and relieve all your pent-up tensions that I’m writing a story about my grandfather’s playing football at Clemson’s Death Valley. No, my grandfather didn’t play football at Clemson.

Grandstands incorporated into playing grounds were rare, and those that did exist were usually temporary structures. Therefore, most spectators followed the line of scrimmage by walking along the sidelines, frequently disrupting those who had attempted to stake out a spot for sitting and watching the game.

My grandfather Turner told me of one Big Thursday game: a Carolina team player was running all alone along the sideline, heading for a touchdown, with no Clemson player close enough to stop him, when a spectator stepped out from the sidelines and tackled the Carolina player, knocking him flat. You can imagine the uproar caused; with both teams and both spectator sides on the field.

Speaking of Death Valley, the first reference of Clemson Memorial Stadium as “Death Valley” occurred in 1945, shortly after Presbyterian College’s football team suffered a second consecutive loss to Clemson College – later, Clemson University – in the opening game of a season. Specifically, Presbyterian head football coach Lonnie S. McMillan and his players said that the game was like going “to Death Valley” since Clemson had held them to zero points in both of those losses. Shortly after McMillan retired as coach in 1953, his successor, Bill Crutchfield, continued to propagate the name, annually telling the press that “I’m taking my boys to Death Valley.”

Points and wins were hard to obtain for most teams playing at Clemson. In the forty-one games played at Memorial Stadium from 1942, when it opened, through 1953, Clemson produced a record of twenty-nine wins, eleven losses, and one tie, scoring an average of twenty-eight points per contest, while giving up only ten. Attracted to McMillan’s comparison, media, Clemson players and fans, and many opposing teams also started referring to the stadium as Death Valley, during the 1950’s. Newspaper articles of that decade regularly referenced both Clemson’s outstanding players and its spirited crowd. Clemson head football coach Frank J. Howard adopted the moniker in 1958, suggesting that “Clemson’s stadium has long been known to many as ‘Death Valley.’ It has been the scene where some of the highest spirited teams have literally ceased to be when the final siren sounds.”

Initially an all-male, all-white military school, Clemson Agricultural College opened in July 1893 with 446 students. Clemson became a coeducational, civilian institution in 1955. My first year at Clemson in 1957, there were five girls and about thirty-three hundred boys attending. In 1963, with the admission of Harvey Gantt, Clemson became the first traditionally white institution in South Carolina to desegregate since Reconstruction. With academic offerings and research pursuits, the institution became Clemson University in 1964.

The year 1958 was notable because Memorial Stadium expanded to seat roughly thirty-eight thousand spectators. The \$310,000 expansion included two new ticket booths, additional restrooms and concession stands, and a box for Clemson's president to host ninety-four VIPs on the north stands. On the south stands, a new multi-deck press box emerged for another \$115,000. That structure provided space not only for fifty-six members of the press and twelve wire services but also for TV and radio broadcasters as well as photographers, and its design would support potential future expansion efforts – Clemson already was planning for temporary seating that would increase the stadium's capacity to between forty-five and fifty thousand for important contests.

Several factors had motivated Clemson's enlargement of Memorial Stadium in 1958. The college's board of trustees felt that a larger stadium was necessary in order to capitalize on growing interest in the football program after Clemson joined the Atlantic Coast Conference in 1953 as a charter member. School representatives pointed out in 1957 that "Clemson has been the only team to be involved in every major football game in the state where there was a sellout." The biggest game was the annual matchup against the University of South Carolina (USC), which always had been played in Columbia during State Fair week. Yet, as a result of developing businesses and tourism in the northern part of South Carolina, an improving network of roads across the state, and increasing enrollment at Clemson, support was building in the General Assembly for alternating the location of the popular Clemson-USC rivalry game. The prospect of hosting big games on campus was a strong impetus for stadium enhancement at Clemson, as was the need for boosting revenue to address the rising costs associated with running a major athletic department. Moreover, Clemson wanted to match the recent expansion and renovation plans at Carolina Stadium in Columbia, which saw not only an increase in the capacity to thirty-four thousand but also improvements and additions to the press box, the restrooms, and the concession stands. In 1957, the assembly authorized Clemson to borrow up to \$300,000 on a bond that would finance the work on Memorial Stadium.

Clemson officials were confident in their ability to pay off the bond quickly. References to Death Valley, the success of past football teams, and comparisons with other collegiate football facilities invigorated the campaign for Memorial Stadium in the form of ticket sales and donations. The demand was high for football tickets, and the administration viewed implementation of a \$.25 surcharge on sales as a smart financing approach. In addition, Clemson enjoyed the backing of its athletic foundation – known as I Pay Ten a Year, or IPTAY, established in 1934. IPTAY, which desired Clemson to be seen as both “one of the most up-to-date” institutions in the Southeast and one of the region’s best football programs, marshaled financial support as private gifts.

A great little story to tell about my grandfather Turner: “When he was a young blade, he saw some new teachers (girls) playing tennis and went over and asked them to teach him to play. Later they told someone in their hometown of Denmark, S.C., “. . . that Tom Turner learned to play Tennis faster than anyone we ever saw!” The person laughed, “What do you mean learned? He’s the State Collegiate Champion!”

My grandfather Tom Turner went to Clemson and there played tennis, becoming the State Champion. He graduated *in mechanical course of study* in 1899, the third graduating class from *The Clemson~Agricultural College of South Carolina*. Out of college, he began working for an electric power company up north (Iowa or Indiana, I believe), when his managers recommended he go back to school (at their expense) and get a degree in electrical engineering . . . and he did. Then, after working with them a few more years, he returned to his home in Denmark, S.C. and farmed the remainder of his life. He quite possibly could have been the most ‘engineering educated’ farmer in the state.

Eason is starting his first year at Clemson this fall, and I thought he would enjoy having a bit of Clemson football history to take with him. I am very proud of this young man.

Keith Gourdin, 2024

