

CHANGING THE NAME OF A COLLEGE

From Southwestern At Memphis to Rhodes College

by James H. Daughdrill, Jr., President 1973-1999

What's in a name? -- familiarity, memories, identity. And when that name is your family's name, your church's name, or your alma mater's name, it has even more significance -- values, association, legacy. "Alma Mater" means "Nurturing Mother." Enough said. Your college's name is important to you.

One college, founded in 1848 in Clarksville, TN, was originally named Montgomery Masonic College. It was later changed to Stewart College, then to Southwestern Presbyterian University (because it offered a Master's Degree in Theology). Woodrow Wilson's father, Dr. Joseph Wilson, was head of Southwestern's Theology School.

In 1925 the college moved from Clarksville, Tennessee to Memphis Tennessee, and kept the name Southwestern. In 1935, at the request of Memphis Mayor E.H. "Boss" Crump, the name was changed to Southwestern At Memphis to give the city more publicity.

For most people who were neither a graduate of the college nor a Memphian, “Southwestern At Memphis” never struck them as a great name for a college.

For starters, it doesn’t say that it is a college. Southwestern At Memphis could be the name of a storage warehouse or a printing company. How can a name be memorable if you have to keep asking questions to find out what it is?

Second, it is misleading. The college is not in the southwest. It is east of the Mississippi.

Third, the words “at Memphis” raise a logical question, “Where is the main campus?” The University of Texas at El Paso is part of the state’s university system, but the “main” campus is in Austin (The University of Texas).

Fourth, colleges with compass names like Southern, Northeastern, Southwest, and Southeastern are not memorable. They sound regional and ho-hum.

Fifth, the name Southwestern At Memphis invites confusion with other colleges. Prospective students in Atlanta got us confused with Southwest Georgia. In New Orleans, we were confused with

Southwestern Louisiana. Even newcomers to Memphis had to learn the difference between Southwest Community College and Southwestern At Memphis. Moreover, there was virtually complete confusion with colleges like Southwestern University, which IS in the Southwest (Georgetown, TX), and Southwestern College in Kansas. When our Director of Admissions, once an Olympic gold-medalist, was the subject of a program on national television, they identified him as “The Director of Admissions at Southwestern University.” We got calls from Southwestern University thanking us for the free national publicity!

Sixth, even our athletic scores, if they were printed at all, were confusing. When newspapers published scores in their sports pages, you would sometimes see “SAM 27-Davidson 27,” or “Sewanee 27-SWnTN 27.” Many sports editors simply omitted our scores because they couldn’t figure-out how to list our long name in such a small space.

Seventh, our alumni who lived in other states, rarely mentioned their alma mater because nobody had ever heard of it. Silence is not golden in building a reputation.

We didn't want to be confused with others colleges. We didn't need to give them free national publicity. We didn't need for you to raise questions to find out who we were and what we did. We didn't want our name to be omitted or rarely mentioned.

If we were to have the publicity, recognition, and reputation that we deserved, the name of the college needed to be clear, positive, and memorable.

Southwestern At Memphis was not recognized for the many accomplishments of our faculty and staff. What publicity we received went in one ear and out the other. It was discouraging.

In October, 1983, when I was confined to bed with back pains, I had time to think about this problem, and decided that it was time to do something about it. I set a goal of changing the name within the arbitrary time of three years.

My first step was to talk individually with our Board Chairman, members of the faculty, staff, and Trustees about the problem. Most agreed that not having a clear, memorable name for the College was a problem.

Encouraged by this, I contacted a friend, Dr. Harriett Sheridan, Dean of Arts and Sciences at

Brown University in Providence, RI. I had begun the practice of inviting each year a national leader of higher education to visit Southwestern for two or three days, to meet with faculty, students, and to interview anyone they wanted to about the College. Then, they would make recommendations to me as to what they would do if they were President. It was a wonderful return on a small honorarium expense.

Harriet Sheridan had preceded me as Chairman of the American Association of Colleges and Universities. When I called her to invite her to visit Southwestern, I explained the format, and I ended with, "Harriet, in addition to other recommendations you make, if you can do it with integrity, it would be helpful if you recommend that we change the name of the college." She responded immediately, "Indeed, I CAN make that recommendation, and I'll tell you why. Before coming to Brown, for many years I was Dean at Carleton College, and I had never even heard of Southwestern At Memphis, even though we were similar colleges."

On her visit to Southwestern, and in her speech to the faculty, she was utterly charming, full of good sense, and made thoughtful recommendations.

Many members of the faculty agreed that the name ought to be changed, but there was no consensus regarding what the name should be.

I sent a copy of her recommendations to the faculty, staff and trustees. Most seemed to agree that it would be nice to have a better name, but they couldn't agree on a name.

Next, I sent a memo to them suggesting several names from the history of the college: Stewart, Palmer, Diehl, Bellingrath, Rhodes, and Southwestern At Memphis. Three of them had been outstanding presidents of the college, and one (Walter D. Bellingrath) was a generous benefactor.

Many members of the faculty thought that Rhodes would be the best name for the College because Peyton Nall Rhodes was the only one on the list who had been a faculty member. His name seemed to elevate academic ideals, and avoid being a "Daddy Warbucks College."

Peyton Rhodes was a University of Virginia graduate in Physics, who had taught at Woodbury Forest School in Virginia before coming to Southwestern to teach Physics. He was later named Chairman of the Physics Department, then chosen by President Charles Diehl as his Vice

President. Dr. Diehl recommended Dr. Rhodes to be his successor as president of Southwestern At Memphis in 1950. Dr. Rhodes served with distinction as president for 15 years, from 1950 to 1965.

Although no vote was taken when I circulated these six names for reactions, discussion and consideration, it was apparent that students wanted no change, faculty favored Rhodes, and Trustees were divided.

Within a few weeks, faculty had persuaded many students and Trustees that the preferred name should be Rhodes, but students still thought the name Southwestern At Memphis should not be changed.

Since one's college name is important, our alumni were the ones who might react most strongly against a name change.

Our long time and beloved Alumni Secretary was Goodbar Morgan. He was a Southwestern graduate and had headed The Office of Alumni Affairs for many years. Goodbar was very influential with alumni. I invited Goodbar to have lunch and we discussed the possibility of a name change to Rhodes College. He thought that many

alumni would oppose the move, but he himself favored it, and had many good things to say about Peyton Rhodes. That was the first time I thought there was be a good possibility of getting the name changed.

Goodbar and I invited the President of the Alumni Association, Freeman Marr, to discuss the question over lunch. Surprisingly, Freeman's reaction was the same as Goodbar Morgan's.

Those most opposed to the name change were local alumni. It's no wonder. To them Southwestern had always been the name of the college since it moved to Memphis. They saw the campus frequently, they weren't reluctant to tell others about their alma mater, and they didn't confuse it with other colleges. They were closer to the college physically, and closer to the college emotionally than out-of-state alums.

To point out the confusion that the name Southwestern At Memphis caused, we printed three or four pages of colleges with compass names like Southeastern, Southwestern University, Southwest Georgia, etc. When readers of the newspaper read the list, they seemed overwhelmed, and even local alumni realized for the first time how confusing the name was. We began to get

letters from out-of-state alumni, most of them favoring a change.

We wrote to all alumni, asking them for their questions and reactions. Their replies were put into two big boxes -- one was "In Favor Of" and the other was "Opposed." The "In Favor Ofs" were the majority, but not a huge majority, approximately 65% as I recall.

During these weeks we had a research firm conduct a telephone marketing study in five cities: Boston, Denver, Dallas, Atlanta and St. Louis. Their question was simple, "Picture a small, co-educational, highly selective liberal arts college, with beautiful, Gothic buildings of stone, leaded glass windows, and slate roofs. Which of these names do you think best describes that college: Bellingrath, Stewart, Palmer, Diehl, Rhodes or Southwestern?"

The results were amazingly similar. People in Boston, St. Louis, Atlanta, and Denver all favored Rhodes. Only those in Dallas favored Southwestern, perhaps because they ARE in the Southwest.

The next step was to hire a law firm that specialized in names, to find out if there would be

legal problems in changing the name to Rhodes College. They came up with a long printout that would rival the federal budget. The names went all the way from the Rhode Island School of Design, to Rhodes Fireplace Shop in a Montana town, from Rhodes Travel Agency to Rhodes Purdue Furniture Stores, and on, and on, and on.

We carefully studied the list, and there seemed to be only one that might be problematic. There was a Rhodes College in some small town out on Long Island, NY.

When I was next in New York, I rented a car, and, with a feeling of dread, I rode out on Long Island to see what kind of school it might be. I was excited to see that it was a little place on the second floor above some modest shops. It was a run down secretarial school. There would be no conflict between our schools!

I worried if naming the College for Peyton Rhodes would seem like a cheap shot riding on the heels of the Rhodes Scholarship Program. Also there is a Rhodes University in South Africa.

So I called Dr. David Alexander, who was the North American Secretary of the Rhodes Trust. He had preceded me as president of Southwestern at

Memphis, and was then president of Pomona College in Claremont, CA. He knew Dr. Peyton Rhodes as well or better than I did, so he could provide great insight. David said there would be no conflict whatsoever with the Rhodes Scholarship Trust. He cited similar names of colleges like Trinity that had no conflicts. "Furthermore, Peyton is a wonderful educator and human being, and would be a worthy person for whom to name the College."

Now I come to the most difficult step in renaming the college -- Dr. Peyton Rhodes himself. When I first told him we would like to name the college for him, his reaction was swift and certain, "If you try that, I will get my lawyer, Shep Tate, to block it."

This made it all the more desirable to name the college for him, because we wouldn't want to name it for an egotist who wanted it.

I set about trying to get help in wearing down his resistance. I called one member of the faculty each day for three months, and asked them to tell Dr. Rhodes, if they saw him on campus, that we wanted to name the college for him.

After that time, I invited Peyton Rhodes to my office. "Peyton, you have known for some time that

we want to name the college for you. Tell me, why you are against that? After a few generalities, he focused in on the real reason. "I am not worthy like Dr. Charles Diehl. You and I know that. His family knows that."

I said, "Peyton, Dr. Diehl is certainly worthy. Both of us admire him and what he did while president of the college from 1917-1950. However, there are limitations that the name has as the name of a college. People at Sewanee would call us "No Diehl," "Big Diehl," "Fair Diehl," "Square Diehl," and on and on. Also, there is a Thiel College in Pennsylvania, and people are not sure how to pronounce it ("theel," "teel," "thile").

"Some names are fine as family names, like Daughdrill or Lipschutz, but they just don't make good names for a College."

Peyton still protested, "I couldn't face Dr. Diehl's family if I approved naming the College for me."

"May I talk to them, and let you know what they say?"

He softened, and I did, too.

Within a week I paid a personal visit to Charles E. Diehl, Dr. Diehl's son. I reviewed the whole process, going step by step with him. His slight smile let me know that he was ahead of me and my question. "What do you think about naming the College for Peyton Rhodes?" Charlie smiled, unhesitating, "I think that is a splendid idea. Fah-thuh would approve of it. As you know, Fah-thuh chose Peyton to be his successor."

The following week, I visited Mary Diehl Pond, Dr. Diehl's daughter, in Washington DC. She had the same reaction, and expressed it with enthusiasm, not just resignation.

When I got home I invited Peyton to my office. "Both Charlie and Mary approve enthusiastically," Peyton's head bent forward. He was quiet for a full minute. "Well, Mr. President, I still think you are making a mistake, but I will not oppose it."

I took the idea to the Board Retreat in Point Clear, AL. To a person, including faculty and staff members of the Board, all approved it. In fact, one Faculty representative to the Board moved that we change the name to Rhodes College right then and there. I jumped up, "I think we need to wait and avoid doing something in a small group while we're away from campus. We still have a few more things

to do like consulting with student leaders, especially the seniors." The motion failed for lack of a second, but everyone knew it was unanimous. Trustee Ann Wilson of Nashville, wife of the Chairman of the Board of Vanderbilt University, was granted the privilege of making the motion to change the name to Rhodes College at the next Board meeting.

Next, I asked the officers of the Senior Class if they wanted to be the last class to graduate from Southwestern At Memphis, or the first class to graduate from Rhodes College. By a narrow margin, 51% to 49%, they decided to be the last class to graduate from Southwestern.

We offered to provide their diploma with either name, or to give them two diplomas, one with each name.

We offered to provide ALL graduates with a Rhodes College Diploma if they would like one.

We had to change the College Charter, bylaws, seal, stationary, signage, and all printed material with the new name.

We were afraid that the name change might cause confusion among prospective students, so we set

aside a fund to protect against a drop-off in admissions, or in gifts from those who had opposed the name change. Happily, however, both gifts to the College, and applications for admission increased!

Peyton Rhodes had said, "I still think you are making a mistake, but I will not oppose it." And he didn't. After the name change announcement was made, he received so many letters from alumni, colleagues, family, Memphians, and friends that we assigned a full-time secretary to him for a few weeks to answer the letters and telephone calls. His great smile and handsome shock of white hair let everyone know how much he enjoyed it.

His picture was in the Chronicle of Higher Education, and he received letters from many educators. We talked many times in my office about his memories of the people he heard from.

Homecoming 1984 was set for a great celebration. Peyton Rhodes and I rode in a great open-top phaeton carriage around the track during halftime at the Homecoming Football Game. Peyton waved slowly, lovingly, appreciatively to the excited crowd.

