

FOUNDING  
*the* FUTURE

A HISTORY OF  
TRUMAN STATE UNIVERSITY

DAVID C. NICHOLS

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## *Chapter 1*

# THE EARLY YEARS

Perhaps the most distinguishing characteristic of a university is its multifaceted nature as a sometimes unwieldy mixture of people, experiences, ideas, and philosophies. In its most ideal sense, it is a place where knowledge lives and grows, nurtured by the experiences of the past. Students and faculty can access and share accumulated wisdom and learning, and make intelligent contributions of their own in a fertile, exciting environment. It is a place where young people can become adults; where social, philosophical, and cultural values and experiences are tried on for size; where people change and traditions meet head-on and often clash with new ideas. It is a place where life-long relationships are formed and where students are offered the opportunity to choose from a broad palette of activities ranging from athletics to the arts. It provides a setting for students to exercise their social and leadership skills by participating in a variety of campus organizations.

The university is also a business: a complex community consisting of many interrelated elements. Great ideas grow and flourish in learning environments that are enhanced by well-educated, intellectually active faculty members intent on expanding their own levels of learning and discovery. Facilities directly related to learning—classrooms, laboratories, libraries, concert halls, theaters, museums, and sporting complexes—require sophisticated administrative, management, and business systems to ensure that essential physical and financial resources are maintained. Residence life systems, food services, and medical and counseling support systems are also components essential to a thriving campus community. The university's intellectual life is continually influenced, balanced, and tempered by such seemingly extrinsic concerns as

campus planning, financial management, and other long-range planning issues. Of course, at the center of this community within a community is the student.

This is the story of an institution that has evolved from a regional teacher training school through a myriad of institutional changes, marked by five name changes, to become Truman State University, a nationally recognized and selective liberal arts institution with a student body from forty states and fifty countries.<sup>1</sup> As Truman approaches its 150th anniversary, the institution continues to evolve, crafting innovative responses to changes in educational philosophy and trends, shifts in economies and job markets, and the expanding globalization of a culturally diverse society.

Although each president has played a specific role in the institution's history, several emerged as the primary molders and shapers of the school's core educational mission. These leaders recognized the need for change to accommodate changing needs, orchestrated strategies, and implemented innovations—many times in the face of strong political opposition (both internal and external). In fact, the institution that evolved into Truman State University was founded in the midst of political opposition. In Missouri, the Geyer Act was passed in 1939, laying the foundation for public elementary school districts, academies, colleges, and a state university. The process of building elementary schools throughout the state was gradual, however, and succeeded only after many political battles were fought and the interest of the general populace in public education was sufficiently aroused to create a demand for public schools. Concomitant to this development was the need for institutions dedicated to the training of teachers. These institutions were called normal schools. The normal school at Kirksville, which was started as a private institution by Joseph Baldwin in 1867, became Missouri's first statewide coeducational publicly supported teacher-training institution in 1870.<sup>2</sup>

The U.S. commissioner of education reported that by 1870, the year in which Missouri adopted the state normal school system, there were seventy-six institutions throughout the country of various sorts, both public and private, whose missions were devoted to the preparation of teachers for public schools. Only five states (Arkansas, Nevada, New Hampshire, Oregon, and Texas) did not have such institutions within their borders.<sup>3</sup>

Joseph Baldwin was active in the movement to establish state-supported normal schools throughout Missouri and persuaded the state legislature to locate a normal school in Kirksville. During his tenure as president of the institution, his efforts were continually frustrated by persistent attempts by various legislators to abolish the state's normal schools. But the school survived, and John R. Kirk, president from 1899 to 1925, was central to its transformation from an institution whose mission and academic practices had declined to a teacher-training school dedicated to



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