

# Wiley College's Great Debaters

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Excerpted from an article that originally appeared in the East Texas Historical Journal:

Having won a four-year college scholarship based on a series of Marshall Texas's Central High School oratorical contests sponsored by the black Elks Clubs, James Farmer Jr.'s ability as a public speaker was established by the time he entered Wiley College in September 1934. His cerebral father, Dr. J. Leonard Farmer, had been a Bible professor on the faculty since 1933. Although young James Farmer was only fourteen, he was recruited immediately by English professor and debate coach Melvin Tolson for the college's formidable debate team.

Enrolled in Tolson's English class, Farmer was confronted by the man he would later call provider of "the banquet of my years at Wiley College" to use his analytical mind to dig deeper, study harder, and read more widely than the average student. In class, Tolson would play devil's advocate, forcing students to defend their ideas against opposing views. And if Farmer failed to do so, Tolson said he would flunk him. He soon offered Farmer the real challenge. "Speaking of opposing views," Tolson said, "My varsity debaters come over to the house every Tuesday and Thursday evening to prepare for the intercollegiate debate season. You come over too. Some of them, at least one, will try to make hamburger out of you—a young upstart and Dr. Farmer's son—so fight back, my boy, fight back." Thus was Farmer introduced to a skill that would serve him well the rest of his life.

Farmer had already spent two years on the Wiley campus, walking the length of it every school day on his way from the family home on the north side of the campus to high school on the south edge. He knew Tolson by reputation, certainly, and personally because Tolson and Dr. Farmer were more than college colleagues; they were friends as well.

Although it took Tolson seventeen years after he arrived at Wiley in 1923—and the threat of dismissal—to finally finish his master's degree from Columbia University, he was already considered a formidable scholar when he suggested strongly that Farmer, who was reading Tolstoy's *War and Peace* "read the meat of knowledge, not just the broth." Tolson had graduated in 1923 from Lincoln University, Pennsylvania, where his debate partner was Horace Mann Bond, who became one of the nation's leading educators. Tolson began publishing poems while in high school and had several accepted for publication by the time Farmer enrolled in his English class. A class in debate was never offered for academic credit at Wiley. It was an extracurricular activity, and Tolson coached it in addition to teaching a full load of classes. He was also the drama coach and founded the "Log Cabin Players" for town, gown, and student theater performers. His playwriting and poetic prowess caught the attention of men like poet Langston Hughes and literary critic and magazine editor V. F. Calverton. Calverton, though white, had made a career of writing about the men and women of the Harlem Renaissance and considered Tolson's creative abilities equal to those of other writers of the time.

Tolson organized a debate team in 1924, shortly after arriving at Wiley College. The college published its first yearbook in 1925 and penned in the purple prose popular at the time a description of the team and its initial accomplishments.

"Believing that the science of argumentation is the greatest instrumentation that can be used in the cultivation of mental alertness, a small group of students under the leadership of Prof. M. B. Tolson organized the Forensic Society of Wiley College October 28, 1924. . . . The activities of the organization resulted in the formation of a New Era in Wiley and brought to her campus the first inter-

collegiate debate in her history. The Wiley team, which had been well coached by Prof. Tolson, received the trio from Bishop College. Clearness and force, combined with oratory, brought an overwhelming victory to the debaters of the 'Purple and White.'" In a 1939 departmental report, Tolson described the program's achievements in its first decade:

"Wiley College initiated intercollegiate debating among Negro institutions in the Southwest. For ten years the forensic representatives of the college went undefeated, meeting debaters from Fisk, Morehouse, Virginia Union, Lincoln, Wilberforce, and Howard universities. . . . (T)he debaters also participated in the first inter-racial debate ever held in the history of the South. It was held in Oklahoma City against the University of Oklahoma City in 1930. Since that time Wiley debaters have engaged in many such contests against Michigan University, Texas Christian University, and the University of California, Southern California and New Mexico."

Teams usually had three persons. Two would debate per round; the third person the "anchor man," according to Farmer, who usually took that role. "He was the person Tolson could use on both sides of a question. He would know all the arguments on both the negative and the affirmative."

One early debater was Henrietta Bell from Houston, one of the few women on a Wiley debate team. At the invitation of Tolson, who told her he had always wanted to "try a woman," she joined the team in 1930. Her well-kept scrapbook had photos and records of all the debates in which she participated.

Unlike today's practice where the forensic fraternity Pi Kappa Delta selects one subject per year, in the 1930s there were a number of possible topics. The two coaches would agree on a subject prior to a debate, then flip a coin to see which team would begin with the affirmative side, which with the negative. For example, in 1933 debate coaches were given four questions among which to choose. Top vote getter was "Resolved: that the nations should agree to prevent the international shipment of arms and munitions." The second most popular question and one that would also have been debated in 1934–35 concerned limiting the income of the presidents of corporations. The remaining two 1933 questions considered whether comprehensive medical services should be provided at public expense, and if the federal government should provide a policy of social planning. Debaters would have needed to be prepared on all four topics.

"Our debate squad reads hundreds of magazine articles and scores of books on government, economics, sociology, history and literature," champion debater Hobart Jarrett wrote for an article in W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Crisis*. "Then we must learn to handle our knowledge with readiness and poise growing out of mastery of the platform. . . . groping for words or an error in grammar is an unpardonable sin. Sometimes our coach will put a debater on the platform during practice and cross-examine him for an hour. The debater must escape from the most perplexing dilemmas and antinomies."

Although Pi Kappa Delta dictated policies for all colleges, it was a segregated organization, a decision made by "gentleman's agreement," according to one of the PKD founders, J. Thompson Baker of Southwest College in Kansas. Baker recounted the circumstances of that decision in a 1934 history of the organization in *The Forensic*:

"One mystery grew out of the convention [of 1920] which has never been explained. . . . The question of greatest interest was over the admission of Negroes. It was argued heatedly in committee and general meeting. So evenly were the delegates divided that it was finally agreed not to write an exclusion clause into the constitution . . . but to leave it to a gentleman's agreement that no local chapter would recommend a Negro for membership. The chairman of the committee is positive that an exclusion clause was never

adopted. . . .Imagine his surprise some time later to see a new set of membership blanks, which specified that the applicant should not be of the African race. The writer has never learned by what right or upon whose authority this clause was inserted. Observation through a number of years has now made it an accepted practice of the society. Perhaps this Ex Curia method was the best way to settle this troublesome question."

Shut out of Pi Kappa Delta, Tolson created his own Greek-named speech and debate fraternity, Alpha Phi Omega, which served historically black colleges. By the time Henrietta Bell, called by Tolson simply "Bell," joined the five-member team, Wiley College and Tolson had garnered such a formidable reputation that he was able to schedule debates with the best black colleges and universities in the nation, institutions twice or three times the size of Wiley, which had fewer than 500 students. From Chicago to Houston, Tolson's teams could fill the largest halls available to them with paying patrons. Profits from these encounters not only paid the team's expenses, important in the midst of the Great Depression, but also added to the general revenue of the struggling institution they represented.

By the spring of 1930, when his team was ready to go on tour, Tolson decided it was time to break new ground. Somehow he managed to schedule a series of non-decision debates with law students of the University of Michigan, an all-white institution. The 1930 Wildcat duly noted the coup, pointing out, "It was the first time, as far as Tolson knew, [that] colored debaters met a northern university of the Anglo-Saxon race." Bell and her partner, junior Harry Hines, met the white students at Chicago's massive 7th Street Theater, the largest black-owned hall in town, because no white-owned facility would host a racially mixed audience. Bell remembers the auditorium being so full that some of the audience had to stand. In addition to Hines and Bell, Tolson brought along Henry Heights as the anchor man alternate, in case he determined Heights to be better prepared on a subject or side than his varsity team. Heights was never used. His day in the sun would come four years later.

Michigan was not the only white team Tolson's team encountered that year. On March 21, 1930, Wiley College debated Oklahoma City University, a Methodist-affiliated college, as was Wiley. "This was the first time that white and colored students ever discussed a proposition in the South from the same platform," Tolson wrote in a column for *The Washington Tribune*. "Avery Chapel was packed with black and white citizens who came to see the signal event. When the two teams took their places on the platform, they were received with tremendous applause. The vast audience seemed to realize that history was being made." Shortly thereafter, Texas Christian University in Fort Worth invited Wiley to its campus. "Dr. True had a splendid team, and we were never received more agreeably anywhere," Tolson reflected.

By the time Farmer joined Wiley's team, Tolson was having trouble finding black colleges to debate. "[Negro] schools were afraid of debating us," reflected Benjamin Bell (no relation to Henrietta Bell) in a 1997 *American Legacy Magazine* article "Every time they did they got their pants kicked. How do you think they felt, getting spanked by a little Jim Crow School from the badlands of Texas." A member of the 1936–39 team, Bell is also the source of the widespread rumor—now immortalized in Denzel Washington's *The Great Debaters*—that Wiley College met and beat Harvard College, with Felix Frankfurter as one of the judges. The story first appeared, with Bell's attribution, in the *American Legacy* article, and local and national media picked up the Harvard myth. But no evidence suggests a debate with Harvard ever happened. Farmer, Melvin Tolson Jr., Hamilton Boswell, Hobart Jarrett, and Henrietta Bell Wells all say the debate Benjamin Bell remembers was probably a 1937 Oxford University of England, a debate that was likely

anti-climatic, since English debaters tended to entertain rather than to engage in true debate. "If dad's teams had debated Harvard, I would know it," Tolson Jr. said.

The most memorable Wiley College debate was not with Oxford (or Harvard). It was with the 1935 national champions, the Southern California Trojans, and it is the circumstances surrounding this debate that form the basis for *The Great Debaters*.

By the time the 1934 school year began, Tolson was at the top of his game as debate coach. Making his second goodwill tour, Tolson and his team of Farmer, Jarrett, and Heights scheduled a sojourn through the Southwest. Included on their extended schedule were The University of New Mexico, the University of California at Oakland, and San Francisco State Teachers College—5,000 miles in all. The big occasion came the night of April 2, 1935, before an audience of 2,200 at Southern California's Bovard Auditorium. The night before the debate Tolson would not let his team leave the dorm rooms where they were housed, according to Farmer. Tolson was afraid the team would be intimidated because the speech department of the University of Southern California was bigger than the whole of Wiley College. He need not have been concerned.

Dressed in tuxedos, both teams took the stage, with Wiley on the affirmative side. The Pi Kappa Delta-sponsored question for 1934–1935 concerned the prevention of international shipment of munitions, and that was probably the subject of the Southern California encounter. "From the time Floyd C. Covington, who presided, opened the program until its close the vast audience was held in rapt attention by the scholarly presentations of both teams," described Tolson. Farmer, a freshman at the time, was an alternate and observer. His memory of the team and that night was remarkable. Hobart Jarrett, the intellectual junior from Tulsa, Oklahoma, described by Farmer as "a polished, dignified, cultivated young man wearing rimless glasses." Height's college career had its ups and downs. "He kept getting expelled for drinking," said Farmer, of Tolson's most charismatic debater. "When Heights stood up to give his rebuttal he would say, 'When I was a boy in Wichita Falls, Texas, I noticed something about those jackrabbits. The jackrabbit never runs in a straight line; he jumps from one side to another'—and then he gave a little hop. Then he turned round slowly and looked at his opponent, and the audience roared."

Using what became known as "the mighty Tolson method," the Wileyites were victorious. Tolson spent a lot of time training his debaters in the tactics and strategy of arguments. "He drilled us on every gesture, every pause," Jarrett wrote in an article for the May 1935 issue of the NAACP magazine *The Crisis*. "Our debate squad reads hundreds of magazine articles and scores of books on government, economics, sociology, history and literature. We are taught to be prepared for anything."

In the audience that April night was Hamilton Boswell who had graduated from a Los Angeles high school. He was so impressed with the Wiley performance he decided to enroll at the obscure little college in Marshall. He, too, became one of Tolson's debate stars. Tolson viewed the interracial debates, which consistently drew larger audiences than segregated ones, as a breakthrough in the troubled race relations of the country. "When the finest intellects of black youth and white youth meet, the thinking person gets the thrill of seeing beyond the racial phenomena the identity of worthy qualities." For that all too brief hour, maintained Tolson, the mixed audience seemed to forget their differences, applauding one team as readily as it applauds another. "In the South I have seen ex-slaves shaking hands with the grandsons of the masters after the debate," he said.

Jarrett, who also took on a major role in the civil rights movement as chief negotiator with Nashville merchants following the 1960 sit-ins of Fisk students, regarded interracial debates as signal events in his college career:

"Interracial debates are a real adventure for both Negro youth and white youth. For centuries the Caucasian has believed that his superiority lies in his brainpower. Debates involve a direct clash of intellects. There was a time when white colleges thought that debating against a Negro institution was mental dissipation, but that view has passed forever. Negro teams have shown that they are as capable as their white opponents despite the library handicaps that limit research. I know several instances personally in which white coaches and debaters of white universities have admitted the superiority of certain Negro debate teams."

African American teams faced one obstacle never encountered by their white counterparts. Almost every debater during this period either observed or was threatened with lynching. Jarrett's experience occurred on the way to Memphis. "The Wiley debaters are on the road and the road leads through the tremendous circle of mobsters. But there is a mulatto in the car. Coach Tolson tells him to take the steering wheel. The darker debaters [and Tolson, who had a dark complexion] get down in the car. The night is friendly, protecting. The mulatto salutes nonchalantly the grimfaced members of the mob, allaying their suspicions. And the debaters reach Memphis and read about the mob in the morning newspapers."

Boswell told of being warned of a lynching in progress in Carthage while returning to Marshall from a debate in Beaumont. At first Tolson elected to detour around the town, but later changed his mind and decided to travel straight through town with Boswell, who was fair-skinned, driving. Benjamin Bell accompanied Tolson to Ruston, Louisiana, where Tolson was to make the commencement address for a high school graduation. In it, he excoriated the audience on the implications of the lynching, the previous day of four African Americans in a nearby town. Tolson ended the speech with, "Where were you good folks when these men were lynched?" Bell said the sheriff, chief of police, and several members of the school board, all white, were in the audience. The local black residents advised Tolson and Bell to leave as quickly as possible by a back road, advice the two men followed. Farmer, relating some of those experiences to a meeting of the National Conference of Methodist Youth at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, in 1936, told of a partisan debate over a motion to call on the U.S. Congress to pass an anti-lynching law. Southern delegates were opposed, citing the usual arguments supporting state's rights. Finally, Farmer said, he got the attention of the chairman, made an impassioned speech, and ended with his peroration, "Everyone here wants to stop lynching. The only question is how long do we have to wait. How long, oh Lord, how long? The purpose of this motion is not to damn the South and the many decent people who live there. It is not to open old wounds, but to heal those who have scabbed over while still festering underneath. The motion seeks not to whip the South or hurt its people. The motion is to stop lynching now!" Farmer said he sat down to thunderous applause and a voice vote to pass the amendment.

The phenomenal success of Tolson's teams, who rarely lost a debate whether their opponents were black or white, was attributed to that mighty Tolson system, Farmer said. Tolson himself described it in a column he wrote for *The Washington Tribune*. "That wise old bird Emerson said there's a crack in everything God made, and I was going to find the crack in the systems of other coaches." Twice a week Tolson would gather his debaters in his living room, arguing points and practicing until late in the night. Young Melvin Jr., still in grade school, would hide behind a screen in the corner of the room and listen until he fell asleep and had to be carried to bed. "Those sessions were exciting and they were as emotional as you can get. The word tactics was always coming up. 'What are you going to do? What strategy are you going to take?'" Farmer remembered. Tolson, finding the cracks in other debater's cases, was the one plotting the debating strategy, according to Farmer. The Wiley teams simply memorized his arguments and wrote them on file cards they could pull out to meet a point made by an opponent. Tolson was so good at finding holes in the logic of others his

debaters rarely had to do it on their own. "And then we had to debate Tolson in practice. He socked it to us! We socked it to him right back," Farmer said. "He'd say 'Which side do you believe in? All right, take the other side.' He did much more than polish my delivery."

Tolson said that after the debate with Southern California, he realized there was more to life than winning victories. "I had taught my boys to go after the ugly truth and let the judges and respectable audiences go hang," he wrote. "That's not so easy as you think. It endangers one's job." Tolson also taught his students that those debate skills would be useful the rest of their lives, something Farmer discovered in the late 1960s when Malcolm X's Black Power rhetoric began threatening the non-violent path to integration sought by Farmer, Martin Luther King Jr., and others. "I debated Malcolm X four times and beat him," Farmer said. "I'd think, 'Come off it Malcolm, you can't win. You didn't come up under Tolson.'"

James Farmer was only 18 when he graduated in 1938, an event he called "anticlimactic." He left Wiley when his father accepted a position teaching New Testament and Greek at Howard University in the School of Religion. Farmer said he remembered Dr. Benjamin Mays, dean of the School of Religion, arriving on the train in Marshall where his mission was to recruit the brilliant Dr. Farmer. James Farmer Jr. would study for the ministry and earn his Bachelor of Divinity degree in 1941 from Howard University. When the Farmer family left the Wiley campus, they gave the family piano to the Tolsons. Less than ten years later, Melvin Tolson was recruited to teach at Langston University in Oklahoma. By then debate was no longer a popular activity.

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