celebrating 75 Years

Part 1: 1933 - 1945

The story has been told again and again: Monmouth was founded in 1933 to provide opportunity for higher education to area high school graduates who, in those Depression-era days, could not afford to go away to college.

This neat synopsis, although entirely accurate, fails to capture the desperation of Monmouth’s early days or the remarkable growth and astonishing transformation from a federally funded two-year institution, holding classes only in the evening in Long Branch High School, to a nationally ranked University offering 28 undergraduate and 20 graduate degree programs 75 years later.

In 1933 the unemployment rate peaked at almost 25 percent from an estimated annual rate of 3.3 percent during the years from 1923-29. Just one day after being sworn into office, President F.D. Roosevelt declared a “bank holiday,” forcing the closure of all banks and financial transactions for four days. Roosevelt also prohibited the “hoarding” of gold, export of gold, and all foreign exchange transactions.

Hoarding regulations meant that virtually all privately owned gold certificates, bars, and coins were slated for mandatory seizure by the government. Temporary bank closings and the lack of physical currency in circulation caused scrip to become widely used as a substitute for government-issued currency, and to provide a way for trade to continue.

Prohibition was just weeks away from repeal when Monmouth Junior College officially opened its doors on November 20, 1933. Dr. Edward G. Schlaefer, speaking of the junior college said, “the Depression has done cruel and hard things to instructors and students alike ... the junior college is designed for one year only, a sort of stop gap, with the idea that the country will be nearer normal at the end of that time.”

Little did Schlaefer know when he signed aboard as dean of the junior college that he would remain the guiding hand at Monmouth until 1962, serving as dean, director, president and finally chancellor of Monmouth College.

Instructional salaries and building fees were paid by the federal government. Local civic and educational organizations contributed $1,000 to the enterprise, and the first books were purchased in New York using Long Branch scrip.

Although its genesis was rampant unemployment, Monmouth Junior College was also part of a wider “junior college movement” whose roots stretched back to the dawn of the twentieth century.
The drive to extend education past the secondary level, and to use tax money to fund the process, resulted in the founding of the American Association of Junior Colleges in 1920. Junior colleges proved popular for practical reasons. As urbanization and industrialization increased in America, students needed to adapt to non-agriculture-related occupations. A variety of junior colleges developed to meet the need, generally in three categories: private, state-supported, and municipal. Each school had its own philosophy and objectives. Some prepared students for transfer to a four-year liberal arts college. Others provided technical and vocational training to aid students in getting better jobs. Regardless of their affiliation and orientation, junior colleges usually served only the immediate population of the town in which they were located.

Dr. Schlaefer’s daughter, Nancy Bruch ’58, says that “as a junior college, Monmouth distinguished itself from the community college by emphasizing academics and offering the first two years of regular college work, the Core Courses of freshman English, languages, literature, intensive science and math courses, accounting, etc.”

Bruch also recalls that, “not everyone understood what ‘junior’ meant. One day, a woman appeared who wanted to enroll her six-year-old son. Another woman came in with her teen-aged son who must have been quite a sight; he had had nothing to eat his whole life but milk. Dad [Dr. Schlaefers] said he had beautiful teeth, but that his skin was all dry and cracked.”

From the start Monmouth Junior College was a little different. Born out of desperation, Monmouth was one of six schools that were part of the federally supported Emergency Junior College Experiment. Union Junior College, now Union County College, was the first of the newly chartered schools in New Jersey.

The program of study at Union Junior College was the template upon which Monmouth Junior College was based. Like Monmouth, Union County struggled with classes held in a nearby high school after hours, and the abrupt

To The Pioneers

The first issue of the student newspaper, the not yet named Outlook, debuted December 22, 1933, just a month after the official opening of Monmouth Junior College. The opening lines of the premiere issue ring with eerie prescience 75 years later:

“We are pioneering in a twofold sense. We entered the Monmouth Junior College with nothing but our ability to spur us on. We had no heritages; we had no tradition. It is for us to create a new and splendid inheritance. It is for us to build up this institution. But we are pioneers in a greater cause. We are part of a national movement. We are part of the material of a long cherished dream. It is in our hands to help vitalize this dream. Upon us rests the responsibility of the future of public junior college education. Therefore, we must remember that in striving for our personal success and that of our college, we are striving for the success of this national movement and the generations that are to follow.”
Building an Identity

When Monmouth Junior College opened in the fall of 1933, the school was starting from scratch. The new dean of the college, Edward Schlaefer, initially expected the school to last just a year as a stop-gap measure.Sharing a high school facility after-hours, and with no tradition to build upon, the highly motivated students set about building tradition at a remarkable pace.

The first seal of Monmouth Junior College appears on the masthead of The Outlook beginning in the spring of 1936. In a 1999 interview, James Perkins claims credit for the design. The interview with Perkins was done by June West as part of Remembering The 20th Century: An Oral History of Monmouth County project conducted under the auspices of the Monmouth County Library Headquarters.

Perkins, who died in 2002, was a resident of the Tower Lodge Senior Citizen Home in Wall, NJ when he described the early symbol to his interviewer.

Ms. West: And so you went to Monmouth Junior College.
Mr. Perkins: I drew the first school shield.
Ms. West: You made a what?
Mr. Perkins: The emblem for the school.
Ms. West: You made what?
Mr. Perkins: The first one, not this one now. It was like a fan with a torch and so forth.

A May 1936 article heralding a graduation when sophomores and faculty would, for the first time, wear gowns to graduation indicates the seal held official status. “The initial order of 35 class pins and keys has been sent,” the article continues. “The pins will bear the seal of the college in a slightly modified form.” Although he does not mention it in his interview, Mr. Perkins, who then went by his middle name, Byron, also appears to have contributed to the first version of the Alma Mater developed for Monmouth. A cover story in the March 23, 1936, issue of The Outlook reads, “Byron Perkins, designer of the school seal, has written the lyrics for the school song. Mr. Dilsner has written the music to ‘Our Alma Mater M.J.C.,’ mimeographed copies of the song have already been made and the choir in its last rehearsal practiced it.”

The lyrics to the forgotten tune follow:

Our Alma Mater M.J.C.
All voices raise to shout the praise of our alma mater M.J.C.
Which proudly stands near the sun bleached sands
On the shores of New Jersey.
And as the waves roll on always
May the glory of her name be
On every tongue both old and young
Our Alma Mater M.J.C.

Perkins’ design for the school seal appears to have held official status until March 1939 when a new official emblem was unveiled. The winning design, by Outlook editor Arthur Smock, beat out entries from Nicholas Soviero, Allen Osborn, Herman Shapiro, George Shoemaker, and Raymond Woolley.

The emblem was available for immediate purchase as a car window sticker in the official school colors of orange and black, with other forms available to eager students in the near future, the article said. Like Perkins’ earlier design, the new seal incorporated a torch; like the design that was to follow, it incorporated three statements of purpose: Scholarship, Leadership, and Citizenship.

The more familiar “old” seal, proclaiming Truth, Service, and Leadership does not appear in a yearbook until 1950, although Smock’s 1939 design appears as a central element again in the 1951 yearbook. The round seal and a definitive location, Long Branch, took shape at around the half-way mark of the twentieth century.

withdrawal of federal funding in 1936.

Seventy-five years later, the contrast between the two institutions is instructive: Union is a county college with an open admissions policy, limited to awarding associates degrees while Monmouth University, as a private institution, is now included in the 2008 edition of The Princeton Review’s Best 366 Colleges, and boasts skyrocketing rankings in Master’s North category of the U.S. News & World Report roster of America’s Best Colleges.

Close Calls

The transformation from public to private was not without obstacles and adversity. Indeed, the survival of Monmouth Junior College was anything but certain. Although the college operated for two years under Emergency Relief Administration (ERA) funds, policy changes forced a shift to private funding.

An article from the Long Branch Re-
Part 1: 1933 - 1945

Like the Spartans at the Battle of Thermopylae these 300 students made the crucial difference between the extinction and long-term survival of the institution. Thanks to those early efforts, the decision was made to charge tuition and make Monmouth Junior College independent of direct federal assistance.

The Long Branch Board of Education supported the junior college in this step and assumed sponsorship of the institution. The college suffered many growing pains during this period but it managed to survive primarily because of Dean Schlaefer’s determination.

Bruch also remembers, “A vital source of support for many years, if not from the beginning, was an annual grant from the Monmouth County Board of Chosen Freeholders, long headed by Joseph Irwin,” adding that because of this Irwin was given the honor of handing out the diplomas.

“As there was no tuition during the first two years of federal support,” Bruch said, “the student body was quite large. It dried up frighteningly in 1935, when the government support was withdrawn and students had to pay tuition. Edward G. Schlaefer (EGS) remembered standing in the doorway of the building with Helen A. McQueen (HAM), his new secretary (he’d married the first one, Bernice Wright, the year before), watching the few students trickle in, and saying, ‘Someday, we’ll have a good laugh about this.’

And, many years later, “Well, we never had that laugh, but we’re still here.” In those years, office notes were often headed, “To EGS from HAM.”

In October, 1940, Monmouth Junior College was awarded full accreditation by the New Jersey State Board of Education. With accreditation came automatic transfer rights for students. A Bulletin of Information for the 1939-40 academic year reads, “A student who has maintained a satisfactory record…and who is qualified in other respects will be admitted to Rutgers University and granted advanced standing at the time of his admission.”

Despite the gender-specific language Monmouth was, from the start, a blend of men and women, black and white. The college operated from 4 o’clock in the afternoon until 10 at night, and enrollment continued to grow.

To meet the requirements for accreditation additional facilities were required. The library facilities were enlarged when the Long Branch Board of Education permitted the placing of library shelves in the study hall of the high school to accommodate the growth of the library. The Board also permitted the addition of science equipment to the

Dr. Edward G. Schlaefer

Recounting the history of Monmouth Junior College is impossible without paying tribute to the efforts of Edward G. Schlaefer who gave so many years of service to establish and nurture the University that Monmouth has become. At the time of his death in 1964, Dr. Schlaefer was mourned by Joseph Clayton, deputy commissioner of the State Department of Education as “one of the finest educators I have known. I think his work will never be forgotten in this area or the leadership he gave in developing Monmouth College.”

A bronze plaque beneath Schlaefer’s bust in Wilson Hall quotes his observations just five weeks into his tenure as director of Monmouth Junior College in 1933: “We shall grow here. We shall explore all fields of the intellect. In discussion, study and in play we shall learn of the world, of work and of ourselves. These truths shall make us freer. We shall do better the good things we like to do and new arts of life shall be opened to us.”
Nothing shapes an institution in quite the same way that athletics do. There is something primal about teams of “us” versus “them,” even when competing for bloodless victory in the most innocuous circumstances. Whether victorious or defeated, team sports helped shape the identity of Monmouth Junior College.

On January 12, 1934, Monmouth played a basketball game against Middlesex Junior College, located in New Brunswick. As the game ended, Monmouth pulled a stunning upset over Middlesex, defeating them 26-14. The game, covered in the January 18 issue of The Outlook, was not only Monmouth’s first basketball game, but the first athletic event that Monmouth had participated in against another school.

Coverage of intramural games in The Outlook marked the beginning of sports coverage at Monmouth. Women’s basketball and intramural programs would follow men’s basketball later in the school’s first decade.

Records are sketchy, but the formation of a school Athletic Association was announced in the December 6 issue of the 1934 Outlook. The association would organize and plan athletic events for the school’s teams and coordinate intramural events.

Progress was reported in the November 9, 1936, edition of The Outlook, noting that Monmouth was participating in meetings in order to join the Inter-Junior College League teams.

As the 1930’s drew to a close, the school realized that its athletic programs needed a name to rally around. Monmouth needed a mascot, or emblem that would assist in the job of shouldering the Monmouth pride.

The school held a contest to determine what the name of the team should be. The winning name came from the designer of the second college emblem, Outlook editor Arthur Smock. The “Nighthawks,” who were named in honor of the night-only schedule of the junior college, made their debut in 1939.

As the 1940’s arrived, tectonic shifts in global politics brought changes that would shake the foundations of the still-fragile educational experiment underway at Monmouth. With the Nighthawks basketball team in full swing, and a newly formed baseball team, women’s and men’s tennis teams getting started – all of the sports teams vanished suddenly.

World War II arrived and the local community and students from Monmouth Junior College responded. To make students available where they were needed, Monmouth Junior College dropped its competitive sports programs in favor of supporting the war effort. A three-year period of athletic inactivity ensued, lasting until 1945, when The Outlook announced in mid-December that the Nighthawks would hit the court and take to the fields once more.

Monmouth’s return to athletic competition had problems stemming from a prolonged absence of competition. A fresh batch of inexperienced players meant the school had a rough start getting back into competitive play. As a result, many of the games that Monmouth played during the 1945 season came up as losses. As the school approached the end of the ill-fated decade, some teams regained strength and stability.

Even the most ardent fan of Monmouth athletics could scarcely imagine the changes in store for the school as the 40s gave way to the 50s and new benchmarks for competitive college sports at Monmouth made a quantum leap forward.

In a brief history of The Outlook from 1933-1989, Kevin Dickerson ’97, noted that “every single edition of the The Outlook starting from the beginning of 1940...
A Ballad of MJC
(from 1949 yearbook)

By many a waving evergreen tree
The good old college stands;
The Dean a mighty man is he
And bound by loyal bands
To all upon his faculty
And to all college fans.
...
Thus has it been for many a year...
For fifteen years and more...
Since a group of men with vision keen
Launched forth upon
the Jersey shore
A project which, in promise fair,
Quite justified the hype it bore.
The first three years were financed by
Funds from the national coffers;
Then plans were changed,
and fees were
Charged
To meet the cost of subject-offers.
Great gain ensued, for now the school
Can freely choose
whate’er it proffers.
October nineteen-forty soon
Rolled around in order due.
A date auspicious in our tale;
The State Department true
Approved the status of our school
And gave it life anew.
Dire war came next and called to all...
And all gave of their best.
Then MJC opened wide her doors
And cordial welcome pressed
On those whose service of their flag
Required a classroom test.
We won the war. Yet still the work
Of training youth went on;
The veterans came crowding back
Most avid books to con.
And skills to learn, and credits mass,
To build life work upon.

on through the February 26 edition of
1946, had at least one front page story
that was war-related. The front page of
the January 15, 1943, edition even had
[an] advertisement that read,
Shave Hit-
ler – Save America – Buy War Stamps.”

Speaking of the junior college
during World War II, Dr. Sch-
laefer said, “There were hardly
any male students and very few
female students, but we carried on, and
somehow came out with no injuries.”
Schlaefer’s daughter Nancy re-
members, “The school was small, the
number of students attending gradu-
ation ceremonies rather small, and the
1000-seat auditorium cavernous. Bodies
were needed. Every year from infancy
on, our whole family went, often roping
in Grandma, as well as the occasional
aunt.”

“One evening in 1944,” she continues,
“we drove past the high school building
where classes were in full swing, at least
for the few students who were not fighting
overseas. The building was all lit
up and occasionally an instructor could
be seen at the blackboard. But this was
not a drive across town for an idle gawk.
‘How does it look?’ Dad asked. ‘Can you
see any students?’”

Earlier, he had asked the instructors
and students to place themselves as near
the windows as comfortable, so that the
college looked like a thriving concern
for, having survived the withdrawal of
federal support a few years before and
gradually built up a modest student
population, the college was once again
threatened, this time by the drawing off
of people to fight the war.”

Under the familiar heading,
Mon-
mouth Moves Forward, the 1949 yearbook
of MJC, celebrating the second gradu-
ating class awarded Associate in Arts
degrees, reflects on 16 years of history
and observed that “by reason of its prox-
imity to military camps during the
recent war, Monmouth Junior College
rendered special educational services to
employees of military laboratories and of
offices. Pilots were trained under the CPT
[Civilian Pilot Training], and programs
were inaugurated for the instruction of
members of the Enlisted Reserve Corps
and the Cadet Nurse Corps.”
Other junior colleges weren’t so lucky. In 1934 Morris and Passaic Counties had opened two-year colleges which did not survive. Caught between inadequate local funding and no financial support from the county or state, and America’s entry into World War II, Middlesex Junior College also closed its doors before the end of the spring semester of 1942. By 1944 the only emergency junior colleges left operating in New Jersey were in Monmouth and Union counties.

"Like the cavalry coming over the hill," remembers Bruch, "came the summer of 1945, the end of the war, thousands of returning veterans, and the G.I. Bill of Rights. The college obtained lists of returning county personnel, printed up hundreds of brochures, pamphlets, and letters, Dad’s secretary, Helen Wardell, typed hundreds of envelopes, and, one Saturday morning, Dad, Mom, Helen, Bob, and I collected at our dining room table."

Down the center of it were different-shaped stacks of pamphlets and materials. We set up an assembly line that first organized the materials into individual mailings, then stuffed the envelopes, then sealed them. I think it took just several hours. Seems to have paid off because, although the college’s enrollment continued to vary over the years, there were no more deep concerns about its viability."

When the G.I. bulge arrived, every corner in the Long Branch High School had to be used to accommodate the 720 who enrolled. To give perspective to the growth, the enrollment of 720 was more than double the initial enrollment of 299 when the tuition-free school opened in 1933.

During its early years, Monmouth came within a whisker of being closed on several occasions – due to a lack of federal funding in 1935 and again in 1941 due to a wartime shortage of students. The post-war stability was a new state of affairs that promised more change for the school. Burgeoning enrollment meant greater tensions between the blossoming junior college, now more than a decade old, and its host venue, the Long Branch High School.

Look for more history of Monmouth in the next issue of the Monmouth University Magazine. MU

Donate to the Archives

From Monmouth Junior College to Monmouth College to Monmouth University, the Scholarship Ball Committee is actively seeking your interesting, unusual, or special items and artifacts. Please check your attic for materials you would like to donate or loan for display as part of the exhibit that will be prepared as part of the 2008 Scholarship Ball.

Donations of class notebooks, publications, office files, photographs, newspapers, pennants, buttons, manuscripts, diaries, and anything related to the history of Monmouth will help preserve our historical legacy. Already slated for display at the exhibit are freshman "dinks" from the 1960’s, original signs from the Monmouth Junior College administration building in the 1950’s, and publications dating to the 1940’s.

Contact the Alumni office at (732) 571-3489, or alumni@monmouth.edu for more information about donating artifacts to the Scholarship Ball, or to discuss a loan of material.