

## **Thurman Willett: Founding Father**

**By Nancy Vessell**

For nearly two decades, Thurman Willett shaped and nurtured the idea of a public, two-year technical school to give high school graduates new skills to get good jobs.

The idea first sprouted in his mind in 1942, when Willett, a young school administrator in southeast Missouri, was sitting in an auditorium watching a class of high school seniors walk across the stage to receive their diplomas. He realized that not one in the class was going on to college.

He fretted over the waste of talent, knowing that some, if given the opportunity to learn a skill, could substantially improve their chance for success. That's when the idea of a public technical school was born.

He had trouble getting the novel idea off the ground until Congress passed the National Defense Education Act in 1958 to fund technical education programs. As superintendent of the Linn R-2 School District, Willett acquired a \$7,500 grant to start Linn Technical Junior College's first program in electronics in September 1961.

"There would be no Linn State Technical College without Thurman Willett. He was the genesis," long-time teacher and administrator James Symmonds said.

Willett was the first in his family to earn a college degree. He grew up in the southeast Missouri town of Perkins, where his parents owned a general store. He graduated from what is now Southeast Missouri State University in Cape Girardeau and earned a master's degree from the University of Missouri-Columbia.

Willett became superintendent at Linn R-2 Schools in 1955. After launching Linn Tech, he personally recruited many of the students. Although the financially strapped college lacked many amenities, he made sure it had up-to-date equipment to teach necessary skills.

Prior to his passing in 2005, Ralph "Duke" Livingston, the school's first director, stated that everyday Mr. Willett would count the nickels in the Coke machine. "That was part of the school budget," said Livingston.

Symmonds recalled that some paydays arrived without paychecks. "But, no one left. There was a feeling of evangelization, and that was due to Thurman Willett."

His wife, Hazel Willett, said he was a great admirer of President Harry Truman because "he was down-to-earth and became president against great odds."

"Trumanesque" describes Willett, Symmonds said. "He was blunt-speaking and a no-nonsense person, but tempered with the dream of what he could do for the college."

A local newspaper editorial gave Willett credit for single-handedly starting the college, calling it "an audacious move."

Bold moves are often controversial, and in 1975 Willett left the school district. He later was school superintendent in Lewis County, then retired back to Linn, where he and Mrs. Willett had raised three sons. Thurman Willett died in 1991, leaving a legacy in technical education.

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