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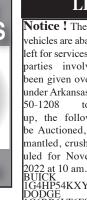
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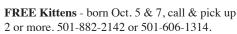






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**George Stuart Benson - Educator** 

By Dr. Ken Bridges - Professor of History, South Arkansas Community College South Arkansas Historical Preservation Society

George Stuart Benson was born on a farm in Dewey County in far western Oklahoma in 1898. His education was one of hard work on a dry, dusty farm on the Great Plains and the local public schools. As a young man, he enrolled at Oklahoma A&M College in Stillwater (which is now Oklahoma State University). After a couple of years, he transferred to Harper College just across the state line in southern Kansas. This new college would soon lead Stuart on a path to Arkansas, where he became a noted leader in education.

Harper College and Arkansas Christian College, then located in Morrillton, were two colleges run through the Church of Christ. However, both were struggling institutions. In 1924, both colleges agreed to merge with one another and share resources. The new college was rechristened Harding College after the recently deceased Church of Christ preacher and educator James A. Harding. Benson joined faculty and students on the journey from Kansas to Arkansas. Benson graduated the next spring as part of the first class of the new Harding College.

Benson soon married, and the new couple, inspired by their faith, moved to China to take up work as missionaries. The couple arrived with great hopes of alleviating the intense poverty that had overtaken China. What once had been a prosperous and advanced country had collapsed into hopelessness and despair. The Bensons hoped to bring education and Christianity to the area. However, China was bitterly divided into warring camps, increasing the sufferings of the people. Tensions mounted. In 1926, warfare exploded as communist forces erupted into revolt. Foreigners were targeted, and the Bensons barely escaped with their lives.

They went to British-occupied Hong Kong for a time and then the Philippines. They were not ready to give up and went to the coastal city of Canton to resume their missionary work in 1928. China had temporarily stabilized, and Benson founded the Canton Bible School in the city.

With his growing family, he returned to the United States in 1930 where he completed a masters degree at the University of Chicago in 1931 and a doctorate from Harding College in 1932. The family soon returned to China, but the situation had grown much worse. With the Japanese occupation of Manchuria since 1931, an expanded war in China crept ominously closer. Communist and nationalist forces openly clashed across the country. Benson saw the bloodshed worsen and his work steadily erode.

In 1936, when Harding College offered the presidency of the college to Benson, he quickly accepted. Benson was certainly in a safer environment, but now he faced a whole new set of challenges. The college's first president, John N. Armstrong, had moved the college from Morrillton to Searcy two years before to take up the site of the former Galloway Women's College. The pressures of the Great Depression had dried up donations, and few

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Week of November 21, 2022





students could afford to attend. Harding was on the edge of bankruptcy.

Benson carefully assessed the situation. The college owed \$68,000 on the property and had debts totaling \$80,000. The situation had gotten so bad that the bank repossessed the college property, but because the economy was in such desperate straits, no one would buy it and take it off the bank's hands. This gave Benson and the college time to regroup.

Benson quickly slashed the budget and reorganized the college's finances. Professors were forced to go without pay for months at a time. Benson had convinced professors to make this sacrifice in the short-term in order to save the college.

In order to raise money for the college to keep it afloat, Benson refocused his pitch to the business community. He emphasized the importance of faith in the Harding mission as well as the importance of upholding constitutional ideals and the free market system. Horrified by the communist massacres in China, Benson used concerns over communism by American businessmen to reinforce the importance of the college's programs. Donations poured in as a result. Professors were repaid, and the debts disappeared. Within three years, the college was out of debt, and the mortgage on the campus was completely

The college struggled with enrollment during World War II, but Benson kept the college alive once again. He established the National Education Program on campus, which soon spread to other colleges and high schools, as a program to teach patriotism and free enterprise.

By the 1950s, Benson was a nationally-known pundit, with a weekly column appearing in thousands of newspapers and a weekly radio program heard by millions. As the Cold War heated up and China fell to the communists, Benson became stridently anti-communist in his speeches and columns.

In the meantime, he continued to lead Harding. In one of his last acts as president, in 1963, he agreed that desegregation was the correct path and began allowing African-Americans and other minorities to attend the university. In 1965, he retired after 29 years of leading the institution, which had now boasted 15 buildings and enrolled nearly 1,500 students. The university still widely honors him to this day.

Benson continued to write and speak on various issues during his retirement. He helped establish a series of Christian schools in Africa. He died in 1991 at age 93.