How Did Ricks College Survive the Economic Troubles of the Early 1930s?

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In the early 1930s, Ricks College was dropped from the LDS Church Educational System and faced with either the threat of being shut down or being sold to the state. It survived the trial of time and exists today as a Church school under the name BYU-Idaho. After a deep look into the evidence, it is not so much the why it survived as the how that is so intriguing. How did Ricks College survive the economic troubles of the 1930s? It survived the seven-year disconnection from the Church Educational System by the forward-moving attitude and the endurance of the local citizens, the faculty, and the students. They never gave up on the college, and they lived as if it would continue one way or another. Through the history of these hard times there is a great deal of evidence that the faculty, the citizens, and the students are the reason the college survived.

The history of Ricks College began with the founding of Church academies throughout Arizona, Utah, and Idaho. Ricks College was one of those and was founded in 1888 as a high school that slowly developed into a college over a forty-two year period. At this time there were many schools operating throughout the Intermountain West and many stakes applying to be incorporated into the Church’s academy system. Merrill D. Beal, a Ricks College teacher, commented on the purpose of Ricks being built in southern Idaho: “Ricks College was organized as a bulwark against religious and political persecution.” It was built for the purpose of providing an education in a time when the Idaho state government was in a state of persecution against the LDS Church and would not provide the educational needs of the LDS people.

The Church’s academy system grew greatly in the early 1900s. Its growth rate was too fast, so the Church began to evaluate the system in the early 1920s. They found that if it were to continue to grow they would eventually not have the finances to support
all the schools. The Church education system evaluated the system and decided to eliminate the less-developed schools, mostly high schools, and to continue with a few of the college-level schools. Several of the academies were faced with the resolution to close down or, in some cases, give the school to the state to be operated. It was not directly the financial trouble of the Great Depression that guided the Church into this position of elimination in the 1920s and early 1930s. The Church had been looking into downsizing long before the Great Depression hit, but when it did hit; the elimination process appears to have increased from the original plan. Many colleges were eliminated but the administration of Ricks College was told it was safe. Eventually the number of colleges that were maintained under the Church education system was narrowed until Ricks College was to be eliminated too after the school year of 1930 to 1931. It stood in flux for a six-year period belonging to neither the LDS Church nor the state of Idaho. However, among the many that were eliminated, it survived. After six years of running on its own, on 1 April 1937, *The Rexburg Standard Journal* declared that it would become a college in the Church education system again.

Throughout the 1930s the community supported Ricks College through the struggle. Rumors circulated the Snake River Valley, a couple of times during the 1920s, that Ricks College would be closed. Before the rumor became true they put together support groups to defend the college. One of those groups was the B.Y.C. club. They were the alumni of the former Brigham Young College, which was an academy that was located in Logan, Utah before it was shut down in the late 1920s, that were living throughout the Snake River Valley. At their banquet, held on 16 March 1930, they resolved “to adopt the Ricks College to foster and transfer [our] spirit and loyalty to the
building up and permanent maintenance of the church school.”*7 They and the Ricks
College Board of Associates took their resolve and went to Utah to discuss the rumors
with the President of the Church. The First Presidency assured them that the “rumors
circulated to the effect that Ricks College would close were unauthorized, that they
would continue the Church schools as long as sufficient money was available and that in
case more of the schools were closed Ricks College would be among the last.”*8 The
citizens rested for a short time until it was officially known to the college, by way of
Pres. Manwaring in the school year of 1930-31, that the school would be closed. John W.
Hart, a community member, stake president, and President of the District Board of
Education, fought hard for Ricks, but was told, “The school must definitely be turned
over to the state of Idaho…” or be shut down.*9 When the word was official they
immediately moved to save the school by asking the state to take it.

The community went to work promptly to get the state to take the college as a
state college. The Church gave Ricks one more year of funds to transfer the college to
the state. The District Board of Education, which was led by stake presidents and
community members from many of the surrounding towns, headed the effort to turn over
the school to the state. John W. Hart fought particularly hard. Pres. Manwaring said of
his fight, “John W. Hart made a heroic fight to save the school, but passed on before the
victory was won.”*10 He died on 9 April 1936 of a heart attack and never was able to see
the school with its roots firm, even though he was one that fought hard for the school in it
time of trial and spent a great deal of his time in Boise working with the legislature.*11
Twice the bill was passed in the House and twice the Senate denied them, despite the
changes made to the school. It was such a debated issue in southeast Idaho that when it
came time for elections, the candidates thought it important enough to voice their support of the bill. They never passed the bill, but during this difficult time they pressed hard to help make the transition to a state school so that their beloved “Ricksie”, as they sometimes called it, would not be lost.

Upon the first defeat by the Senate, the Church’s General Education Board told the school that it would be closed in June. President Hart went to Salt Lake City again to plead that the people of Idaho might run the school for two more years until they had the opportunity to bring the bill before the legislature again. The church have them the opportunity to keep it up themselves and a $10,000 gift, which was less than one-fourth of the original appropriation funds, and ended all connection of the college with the church. The district board worked with what they had and met diligently to prepare for the transition. Professor Beal said, “Frequent committee meetings formed a keystone to Ricks’ success.” Even the students caught on to the value of the district school board’s help. In the Rixida yearbook, after a hard two years without yearbooks, the students set aside a page to thank the school board for all the work they had done. This was unusual because the students rarely addressed the serious topics in either the yearbook or the school newspaper.

Another way in which the community helped in the maintenance of the college was in support of the students. The United States and the world were suffering hardship with the height of the Great Depression between the years 1930 and 1941. At this time, money was sparse and it was a difficult time to earn the money for school. President Manwaring said regarding the year 1932-33, “Because of the Depression and the scarcity of money, the fees were lowered from $25 per term to $20.” The college could hardly
afford to lower the fees with the loss of the Church funds, but did it anyway to keep the students coming. The students were also encouraged to seek work with the local people.\textsuperscript{17} The community was also supportive of the school in keeping up their sports teams in these hard times. On one occasion, the football team held a banquet and each community member bought his plate and a plate for one of the players.\textsuperscript{18} The community provided a support the school could not have survived without.

The college could not have survived without the support and hard work of the faculty. The faculty was the glue that held the school together even when it was said that the school was destined to failure. President Manwaring said:

\begin{quote}
The school did not seem to belong to anyone, or to have a place in the educational circles. The church did not want it, the state would not have it, and the district board did not know what to do with it. The president and faculty just went ahead and ran it the best they could with their very limited budget, and the trying conditions of the financial depression.\textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

They were left to run the school on their own and to prepare to be accredited as a junior college in order to make the school more appealing to the state. This was a trying time because there was so much to be done, so little money, and so much to be discouraged about. Despite this terribly trying time and the many opportunities to become distressed and give up, they kept up their spirits and remained faithful to the school.\textsuperscript{20} There were a few teachers who gave up and left. A couple of teachers left on sabbatical and never returned. However, for the most part, the faculty remained steadfast and faithful to the cause of the school, even when their own salaries were cut by one-third.\textsuperscript{21}

In order to move forward, the teachers built the programs and prepared for a future they could not see at the time. From the beginning, they knew that in order to gain accreditation, they would have to redo and rebuild the academic structure, so that is what
they did. They added classes and reformed the graduation requirements. After much work, they finally gained accreditation in April 1936. The *Rexburg Standard* said, “Ricks for the future will have no fear that their credits will be questioned or cut because of accreditation.” This was good for the students to know but also for the state to see. It gave the school a much more prestigious and professional look than it had before. This work was done year to year when they didn’t know if they were going to be continuing for the next.

Most incredible was the faculties’ ability to do so much with so little. At any given time there were only approximately fifteen teachers on campus. They would give a large portion of their time to building up the school. The conditions that existed at the time would be unheard of today. One such example was Clyde Packer. He was the physical education teacher, the football coach, basketball coach and the track coach. He did it all on his own: the training, the planning of away games, and all the course preparation. He also produced great results. His football team won the football championships in the league in 1933 and 1934. This was not just an athletic phenomena, it was school wide. The extracurricular activities were phenomenal at this time; the drama department continued to produce a play each semester, the debate team continued to win debates all over the Intermountain West, and the choir kept singing. Nothing stopped; in fact, the programs continued to improve.

The administrator who led them all was President Manwaring. His contribution was unparalleled. He had taken a leave of absence the year before he was asked to be the president and had no intentions of coming back. In 1930, he was asked to come back because President Romney was on leave for a year. With a slight fear that the college
might not make it, he took the job anyway. He took the job reluctantly but never regretted it. Times were troubling and it wasn’t always easy. He kept the faculty, students, and community moving while Pres. Hart kept the legislature going. Throughout the tough years from 1931-1937 he wrote many articles in *The Rexburg Standard* and the *Rixida* yearbook and made speeches to the public that kept them uplifted and in favor of the Ricks College cause. In the *Rixida*, he addresses the students and their many types of education and finishes by saying, “For the future, let all Ricks patrons hope that the same ideals of habit forming, and spiritual guidance shall ever be a part of the education training of the young people who may yet pass through these halls of learning.” This is just one example, but he is one of the most quoted men of the area of the time. His speeches and writings would be considered comparable to President Roosevelt’s fireside speeches. It was a way that they both kept the people calm and helped them to make it through the most difficult times. No matter what the funds, either $45,000 or $10,000, he continued to build the school, its programs and the people. Many buildings and improvement plans were made, and during the economically distressing times, they were carried out.

The most impressive element about the faculty at the school at that time was their positive attitude. There was little evidence of their getting down with discouragement. Ordinarily, one would expect to find it in such disparaging times, but it was so sparse that there is hardly any evidence of it today. Beal stated about the 1931 transition time, “Actually, conditions then were not all that bad.” This was the attitude that prevailed throughout. A slight mention of the problem was common, but answers to problems were even more common. From what is presented in the evidence, they were more worried
about maintaining the college than they were about who was to fund it. They didn’t let that disappointment get in their way.

The students were the most important aspect of the survival of the school. It could not have survived without their support. When they were first told that the church was dropping the school, the student enrollment lowered. In the 1930 school year the enrollment was only at 140 students, but it moved up to 286 in the 1931 school year. Throughout the tougher years, it stayed basically level. There were times when it would drop below, but the enrollment stayed surprisingly high considering the tough times at the college and the Depression surrounding them. It was surprising to see high enrollment in such conditions. This alone is a credit to the students. The students were so dedicated and worked hard both to earn the money and to spend the time getting their education when they did not know if the school would be open in the coming years or if they would be able to transfer the credits they did earn. Students worked during school while some took semesters off to earn money. At one point, there was not outside work for the students because of the restraints of the Depression. At that point, the school and the students accepted N.Y.A. work from the government.26 They are the ones that showed the truest leap of faith.

It was surprising to find that the students even had a clue that there was a problem. This was a problem in research, at first, because all the yearbooks looked just like the years before and the years following the 1930s. There are very few pieces of evidence showing that there was problem, except for the two years that were not published because of the lack of finances which they do not mention at all. It is the same for the newspaper, The Purple Flash, where there is no written evidence of the struggle.
The paper is filled with comedy, a little news of the world, but mostly the gossip around campus about boys and girls and their everyday silly lives. This was a prevalent theme for the students no matter where it is written. Surprising? No. This was necessary for the students to make it through such hard times. In order for the school to make it through such years, they had to carry on as normal. No one was better at doing that than the students.

The students made many sacrifices during this period. In those years, the students were asked to do more with a lot less. In the 1931-32 school year, the school dances were limited from once a week to once a month, while being a little more formal.27 Also in that year and the next, the school was unable to publish the Rixida year book.28 These were two social sacrifices they gave in order to maintain the school longer. Another sacrifice of their time was helping to fix up the school. In order to look like a school that was ready to become a part of the state, it had to be presentable like it was ready for the state. The students, along with the faculty, planted trees and gardens and other fix-up items. This was a sacrifice of their time and energy. However, the most important sacrifice was that of their will. They showed no evidence of whining or excessive worry about the future of the college. In order to find any evidence, one would have to go to such a general statement as only presented once, one year by Pres. Manwaring telling of his observations in 1931-32 school year logs. He observed, “During the whole school year there was a depressing feeling for fear that the school would become just another state institution or be close[d],” while just down the rest of the paragraph, he says, “There was a fine school spirit, and the class work and school activities were carried forward
well.” In their extracurricular activities they excelled. In everything, they brought the school spirit up with them.

Through it all, they maintained a strong devotion to the school. Each year, through the hard times, they expressed their thanks and gratitude for being allowed to stay one more year at Ricks. Even in their fight song, it is evident that this was an issue continually upon their minds. This is what the chorus read:

We’ll never let old Ricksie fall, for we love her best of all. To fight for the right with all our might our motto true is right, right, right. We’ll follow Ricksie on to fame. Do every honor to her name; We’ll strive for the same in every game; we’ll never let old Ricksie fall.

It was a song that sounded their faith in the future and their unfailing support of Ricks College. They were an important part in the survival of Ricks College, and they and their posterity were the reason it needed to stay open.

When considering this as a topic, many negative events and facts were intended to be the information and evidence presented. The fact is there were many opportunities for the people to have had a difficult time and there was enough justification that they could complain about their situation; it was a difficult one, but they did not. At times, it was difficult to find juice on the information of the trials and the hardships they went through because of the fact that they did not see the things they were going through so much as trial, but another necessary step in the progress of the college. It was just a part of what they had to do to make it through. That does not mean it was easy and that there were not signs of discouragement. It would be near impossible to not face discouragement with times such as these. The way they handled it all and the finesse with which they pushed through is so awe-inspiring.
Finally, on 30 March 1937, Pres. Manwaring was given the word by the General Board of Education that Ricks College again would be picked up and maintained as a Church school. There was probably much relief, but there was not a great sign of it. They expressed gratitude and pressed forward to the next year and the new challenges. The school was fairly run down after such a long time with so little money. There was still a great deal more work to do to maintain good old Ricksie.

They made it, they maintained it, and now we enjoy the blessings of it. Today the legacy of their hard work is evident all over the campus. Buildings that were built later on were named after them.
Ranging from the student center (the Manwaring Center), the Gym and auditorium (the Hart Building), to the dorms (Edna Ricks Hall, the buildings are mostly named after the brave men and women of this era. Pres. Manwaring once said of the students to graduate from Ricks, “From a vantage point [they] shall then be able to richly enjoy life’s choicest blessings, and definitely contribute to the general welfare and happiness of other man and nations.”

This is not only true of the students, but all involved in the maintenance of this school, including the community and the faculty.

Ricks College is alive and well today as BYU-Idaho. This can only be because of those who
maintained it at that time. It was not because of the hardships they faced that Ricks is still around today. It is because of the forward moving attitude and the endurance of the local citizens, the faculty, and the students. That is how Ricks College made it through the economic troubles of the 1930s and that is why it is alive and well today.
End Notes


6 “Church to Maintain Rick’s College as Church School,” *The Rexburg Journal*, 1 April 1930.


9 Hyrum Manwaring, p. 4, Special Collections, David O. McKay Library, Brigham Young University Idaho, Rexburg.

10 Hyrum Manwaring, p. 8, Special Collections, David O. McKay Library, Brigham Young University Idaho, Rexburg.


12 Hyrum Manwaring, p. 25, Special Collections, David O. McKay Library, Brigham Young University Idaho, Rexburg.

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16 Hyrum Manwaring, p. 19, Special Collections, David O. McKay Library, Brigham Young University Idaho, Rexburg.


18 Ricks College Faculty Minutes, 13 November 1934, Special Collections, David O. McKay Library, Brigham Young University Idaho, Rexburg.

19 Hyrum Manwaring, p. 32, Special Collections, David O. McKay Library, Brigham Young University Idaho, Rexburg.
20 Hyrum Manwaring, p. 14, 26, 29, 30, 33, Special Collections, David O. McKay Library, Brigham Young University Idaho, Rexburg.

21 Hyrum Manwaring, p. 29, Special Collections, David O. McKay Library, Brigham Young University Idaho, Rexburg.


26 Hyrum Manwaring, p. 26, Special Collections, David O. McKay Library, Brigham Young University Idaho, Rexburg.

27 Hyrum Manwaring, p. 14, Special Collections, David O. McKay Library, Brigham Young University Idaho, Rexburg.

28 Hyrum Manwaring, p. 14, 27, Special Collections, David O. McKay Library, Brigham Young University Idaho, Rexburg.

29 Hyrum Manwaring, p. 14, Special Collections, David O. McKay Library, Brigham Young University Idaho, Rexburg.


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