

## **Yancey Collegiate Institute and Other Miracles on Baptist Hill**

J. Todd Bailey, July 24, 2011

(Dedication of YCI Administrative Building as Yancey County Public Library)

Today you are on sacred ground at the summit of what was once known as Baptist Hill. For the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Parkway Playhouse my father gave a talk titled "Miracle on Baptist Hill." I would like to extend that theme in this talk on Yancey Collegiate Institute (YCI to the initiated) and other miracles in these environs. YCI and Baptist Hill have been important in my family, in fact I owe my life to YCI (more on that later), so I hope you will indulge some personal perspective.

My father was born two years after YCI closed and once bridled when a man asked across a crowded restaurant, "Dick, you went to YCI didn't you?" I mention this in case you need proof that I am speaking of history and not from recollection. I am indebted to several sources, all available in this library, especially Ed Hunter's 1952 masters thesis on YCI.

The historical events I want to discuss occurred at and following the turn of the century. For the young whippersnappers out there, I don't mean surviving Y2K, but refer to the time when the nineteenth century faded into the twentieth. There are curious parallels between today and days a century or more ago. We struggle to adapt in an economy in which information technology is replacing manufacturing and a digital age where the pace of change is bewildering. Over a century ago our parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, and for some of you the ancestors of generations even greater removed, were challenged to make a living at a time when life on a self-sustaining farm (very often one of mere subsistence) was yielding to commercial agriculture, manufacturing, and the choice of a wide variety of professions including education and law. With the possible exceptions of the telegraph, the steam engine, the Singer sewing machine, and the McCormick Reaper, technology had changed little since pioneer families settled in Yancey County shortly after the Revolutionary War. The advent of the automobile and the promise of electricity, telephones, and indoor plumbing must have seemed as dramatic as the new tools and technologies of today. Until then a simple education providing the fundamentals of arithmetic and the ability to read and write had been sufficient and one-room school houses open for only a few weeks each year had provided a primary education.

One fundamental change at the end of the century, comparatively late to other areas in the nation, was the recognition of a need for secondary education a level higher than that provided in the one-room public school houses. The government did not provide and churches initially stepped in to fill the void. The mainstream denominations competed to perpetuate their faiths and improve the morals of a populace viewed largely as drunken, debauched, and criminal. Realizing that salvation was aided by education, missionaries pursued twin goals and church schools sprang up where public schools did not exist at the secondary as well as primary levels.

An old joke finds a commonality in the main protestant denominations, observing that the only difference between a Baptist and a Methodist is that a Methodist wears shoes, and the only difference between a Methodist and a Presbyterian is that a Presbyterian can read. You may think this offends Baptists, but we have been putting up with pretentious airs from other denominations for a long time.

To give credit, the Methodists were the first local leaders in the secondary school movement. In 1852 Steven Adams had established a Methodist high school, the Burnsville Academy, near the top of what is now Academy Street. Except for interruption during the late unpleasantness, it functioned well until almost the end of the century. Burnsville Academy was the only local source for secondary education until very late in that century when the Presbyterians entered the fray. They had courted Nettie McCormick, widow of Cyrus McCormick of reaper fame, and she donated generously to educate the deprived mountain folk and turn them into fine Presbyterians. The Stanley McCormick School opened in 1899. It was a modern efficient high school with a number of buildings on Church and Robertson Streets and for a few years it offered the best high school education in the area.

Stanley was the son of Cyrus and Nettie McCormick. I had assumed the school was named in his memory and only learned in recent years that he out lived the school bearing his name. Stanley McCormick was a young man of means, was graduated from Princeton, and did well until some psychotic episode turned him into a depraved sex fiend who sexually assaulted women. He spent the remainder of his life institutionalized under constant male guard. I'm not making this up; T. Coraghessan Boyle's novel *Riven Rock* is based on his life and makes for interesting reading. So the next time the Presbyterians get a little too uppity, remind them that their school honored the name of a sex fiend.

Whether or not they wore shoes or could read, the Baptists had taken notice. The county's leading denomination was in danger of losing its youth to the predestined, and through the Yancey Baptist Association the Baptists spent much time in the 1890s raising money and planning for their own school. At one meeting when it was questioned whether the endeavor could be afforded, the respected minister Samuel Tipton cried, "folks, we've got to do something, or these hellish Presbyterians are going to take the county!" (Perhaps he had heard of Stanley).

The Baptists succeeded and Yancey Collegiate Institute opened its doors here in 1901.

Yancey County only has two state highway historical markers. One is atop Mount Mitchell and the other on town square commemorates YCI. I once complained we needed more only to be told even YCI probably wouldn't make it under contemporary criteria. But Michael Hill and the committee on historical markers notwithstanding, I am able to assure you that history has been made here before, during, and after the time this knoll was known as Baptist Hill.

My grandparents moved into a house down on the corner of School Circle and McIntosh Street during the great depression and its proximity to this property and its activities always made life exciting. Earlier the house had belonged to James L. Hyatt who served many years in the state senate. In 1897 Senator Hyatt, who

lived at the bottom of this hill, introduced Senate Bill 676 which was the first act to provide for woman's suffrage in North Carolina. The bill might as well have been numbered 666 for it was referred to the Committee on Insane Asylums.

While it was a number of years before progressive political thought gave women the vote, the Baptist school in Yancey County was immediately successful. The first building was a pebble-dash administrative building on this site also containing the classrooms. Initially the school catered mostly to boys who lived nearby or the few who could afford to board locally. In 1905 construction began on two dormitories. The girls' dorm was named "Watson Home" to honor E. F. Watson, a local lawyer who was one of the school's greatest local supporters. In 1907 the Annie Armstrong annex was added on to the Watson Home. Baptists don't have to be told who Annie Armstrong was. The Watson home stood due south of here and was torn down during the depression when a public works program built the rock building that was initially a public high school and today houses the public school administration.

In 1908 a second boys' dorm named the Bennett Home was constructed on the corner of Green Mountain Drive and School Circle where Herman and Charlotte Coe later built their house. And in 1914 the Brown home for boys was built across the street. It was named to honor Dr. A. E. Brown, superintendent of the Mountain School Program of the Southern Baptist Convention and it still stands. While money was always solicited to support YCI, just as Stanley McCormick was built with Presbyterian money aided by Nettie McCormick, the principal support for YCI was from the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention.

The curriculum grew with the school and included classes typical for the day. YCI was one of the first two schools in the South to offer "current events" and one of the first to offer a study of newspapers and periodicals. Latin was required every year and at one point there was a fifth year of classes considered equivalent to the freshman year of college. The curriculum greatly favored college prep over vocational courses. In 1922 the school was awarded membership in the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools (SACS). Enrollment also grew with the school and jumped to 150 in 1907, rising to 286 by 1909. The school was almost always enrolled to capacity and the high water mark was in 1921 when enrollment reached capacity at 350 and applicants were turned away. Students came not only from other counties, but also from seven other states. By 1912 eighty-one percent of YCI graduates had entered college and as late as 1923 the same percentage figure stood.

My grandfather went to Stanley McCormick, but after he opened his law practice in 1912, he became a loyal supporter of YCI and served as a trustee. He died in 1940 and almost forty years later I met an older man who still remembered him principally for his perpetual politicking and constant solicitation of funds on behalf of YCI. My grandmother was from Siler City and went to Meredith before arriving at Mountain View Institute in Wilkes County to teach piano. There she caught the eye of the Wilkes County Sheriff who paid court so heavily that to escape his amorous advances she quit her job and found one at YCI. A letter of recommendation

states that she left Wilkes County “over our protest.” Here she vamped my grandfather and they were married. Years later I remember going with my grandmother to covered-dish lunch reunions of YCI students and staff. Their recollections were fond and the significance of YCI was evident even if I didn’t fully understand it. I can’t describe the reverence with which those old-timers intoned the name YCI. You might think I owe much to that randy Wilkes County Sheriff, but all he did was frighten grandma away from Wilkes County and I am grateful for the existence of YCI and her attraction to it, otherwise I wouldn’t be here.

What used to be called courting was a large part of student life and many matches were made at YCI. Other elements included the bi-weekly newspaper “The Y. C. I. Student.” There was a school song, a school yearbook, “The Hoot Owl,” and it could take over fifteen minutes to consider the school motto, “Do What You Do” (a topic for another day). Given the distance and difficulty in travel to other schools in that day, athletics were largely intramural, although there were competitions with students at the Stanley McCormick school. Surprisingly, it took some years for the Yancey Baptist Association to make church attendance mandatory and instill compulsory daily chapel programs. There were literary societies and debating teams as well as Lyceum programs, but Mr. Hunter reports that commencement programs were the most popular and that people would travel long distances to hear addresses by outstanding people. Comparisons of today with yesteryear aren’t always flattering and yesterday I became sorry you were going to be hearing me when I read a book review about a book called *Retromania* whose author concludes that those who are obsessed by the past are bound to be boring. Although vilified in more recent years, the 1902 address was by North Carolina’s great educational governor, Charles B. Aycock. Locke Craig, later governor and protector of Mount Mitchell, was one speaker and in 1909 Jeter C. Pritchard, former Senator and then federal court judge made the literary address. Speaking of “literary,” if you’ve been wondering how I was going to work in mention of Thomas Wolfe, I note that he immortalized Jeter Pritchard in *Look Homeward, Angel* as Cash Jeter, the “paunch bellied federal court judge.” Another speaker was William Louis Poteat, later president of Wake Forest College.

It would take too long to emphasize the tangible and intangible benefits YCI made to Yancey County, benefits that extended to the state and have contributed to this nation. And it would take too long to tell of the distinguished citizens whose careers were launched here. Let me merely document with reputation evidence. A letter from a faculty member at the University of North Carolina (Chapel Hill) reads:

Some years ago Dean Stacy and I were working on the records of the students here, and I came across a card bearing the name of the Yancey Collegiate Institute, with the names and records of students from the Institute in the freshman class that year. The thing which attracted my attention was that every one of the students made a good mark on every one of their studies—a thing that rarely happens from any school. I drew Mr. Stacy’s attention to it, and asked him whether the Institute was at Yanceyville. His reply was that it was at Burnsville, in the mountains, and that its record that year was the most consistent of any school furnishing boys to the freshman class.

And Professor H. A. Jones wrote,

The boys who come from Yancey Collegiate Institute to Wake Forest have given evidence of training superior to that of any other High School in the state. Your boys are the best. They are on the right side of moral questions. If you have any more like them send them down.

The women also achieved. Bill and Jim Anglin's older sister Grace Hoyle taught in Catawba County and was the last high school teacher in the state certified to teach every subject.

The school thrived despite constant financial pressure. A fire of undetermined origin destroyed the original administration building on November 11, 1918. Replacing it with this building strained resources. It was superior in workmanship and efficiency and modern with steam heat and electric lights. In the winter of 1921-22 a fire originated in the library and because of the lack of firefighting equipment, the building was largely gutted. Although it was cold and a snow was on the ground, suspicions arose against two students who had previously served terms in an Asheville reform school. They were tried and acquitted for lack of evidence. From the walls, foundation, and main floor that were left, this building was rebuilt with new partitions, roof, and windows. Remind me to tell you later how my father and Loy McCurry almost burnt it down again in the 1940s.

Eventually the public schools caught up and competition from public high schools which were closer to student homes and less expensive, as well as the ever burdensome debt, caused the end of YCI just as they had for Stanley McCormick a few years earlier. In his thesis Mr. Hunter argues persuasively that YCI operated excellently every year of its quarter-century existence.

The campus was sold to the County Board of Education in 1926. YCI continued to operate the school for the 1925-26 school-year and the county board then took possession and operated a high school until East Yancey was built and Burnsville Elementary until that school moved to Windom. Although stewardship continues ably and this project has been supported by Republican and Democratic boards of commissioners, the conveyance of much of the campus to Yancey County at the insistence of the Superintendent in 1999 was an abrogation of duty. While the conveyance is of questionable legality, one benefit is that the deed so gummed up the title as to virtually insure these properties will never leave public use.

In any event, when you ask what makes Yancey better than say, Madison, Mitchell, or even Avery Counties, the answer is "education." We value literacy like a Presbyterian. Methodists and Presbyterians can claim support through Burnsville Academy and Stanley McCormick, as well as other schools, but as a civic virtue, liberal learning in Yancey County is historically rooted in YCI.

Many benefits beyond mere use of buildings are traceable to YCI and history continued to be made on Baptist Hill. In 1952 Mr. Hunter noted that the present school system had "one small elementary school for Negroes." You will remember that the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v Board of Education* ordered that school integration proceed "with all deliberate speed." Deliberate speed was slow in Yancey County as in

much of the nation. When I began first grade in this building the school had only been integrated for a few years. Yancey County had tried to resist demands for integration by building a new separate school that was never used. Civil rights strategists wanted to begin litigation to bring integration in North Carolina in the western district court and they strategically chose plaintiffs from Yancey County where the state of race relations and the social and political climates would cause less resistance than in other counties. While the county did resist, the resistance was peaceful and the county did not have the financial resources to put up much of a fight in court. The result was an order by Judge Wilson Warlick in 1961 directing that the first integration of public schools in North Carolina be in Yancey County.

This is an historic building on historic property. It is much loved for its generations of involvement in Yancey County education. Others on the program will credit the persons who worked so hard to bring about the renovations that give new life to this building. I do note that Theresa Coletta's mother was a YCI student and she has here honored her well even if she cut a hole in the middle of it, a feature I'll get used to. The Yancey County Library has insured the survival of this building but YCI can be said to have set that in motion. You see, Frank Huskins, whose distinguished career of firsts ended with his service as a justice on the state Supreme Court (and who merits commemoration in a highway historical marker), and his cousin Grady Bailey were YCI students. As adult citizens in Burnsville they helped create the Yancey County Library as a governmental service and would be amazed to know that from its humble beginnings the library has grown and today resurrects the YCI Administrative Building for new life as a once-again modern facility. F. Scott Fitzgerald famously wrote "there are no second acts in American life." But this building is like a cat and today roughly starts its fourth life. Beyond mere functionality, this building stands as an important symbol of the value of education and civic commitment. And if the themes of salvation, resurrection, and new life please the Baptists, that's okay too.