

BAXTER SEMINARY 'A SPECIAL PLACE'  
...WITH FEELING OF FAMILY

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School offered 'feeling of family'

Four weathered columns are about all that's left of Baxter Seminary.

But for many Depression-era children and others, the private boarding school in the Putnam County hills was more than just bricks and mortar.

"It was a special place," said Milford Cox, who graduated from the school in 1950. "Everyone felt close. We had some students that has been in trouble with the law and had the choice of going there or to jail."

For the first time, a gathering of former dormitory students gave them a chance to exchange addresses and share old photographs. The reunion was last weekend at Vanderbilt's Scarritt-Bennett Center.

Baxter Seminary, a college-preparatory school which was open for almost 50 years the first half of this century, was run by the Methodist Church with some help from the local school board.

"Even now, we have this feeling of family," said Anita Cunningham Mitchum, a former student whose father was dean of boys and whose mother taught freshman English.

The school known for turning misfits into scholars, earned a reputation that attracted university professors as instructors and students from all over the country and overseas, particularly Cuba.

Still, it stayed true to its purpose as a place where students could earn an education.

For those who could not afford the \$800 annual tuition, room and board – at least that's what it cost around 1950 – they could work their way through school.

Student labor helped build most of the eight classroom and dormitory buildings on the 12-acre campus. The school's dairy farm was another source of jobs.

Now a high school named after the longtime headmasters of the school, Mr. and Mrs. Harry Upperman, stands in its place. The school column posts now stand in front of the Baxter City Hall and library.

As one of six children of a poor Methodist preacher during the Great Depression, Robert H. Fesmire said he worked his way through school by milking cows on the dairy farm.

“I worked 30 hours a week,” Fesmire, 70 said. “Well you name it – I milked cows, morning and night, made concrete blocks the old-fashioned way and painted.

“Every person I knew at that school has been successful in life,” Fesmire said. “We still think of each other as family.”

Fesmire went on to earn a chemical engineering degree at Vanderbilt University in two years, fly a B-24 military plane on top secret missions during World War II, study dentistry at the University of Tennessee and establish a successful dental practice in Nashville.

“We had tremendous teachers, dedicated people, and they were strict,” Fesmire said. “I’ll tell you, you didn’t get to kiss a girl; no, nothing like that. I remember there was an attractive gal I took to church one Sunday night, and I couldn’t resist putting my arm around her waist after dark. Well, I got hit in the back with a rod by one of the teachers.”

Under the direction of the Uppermans, the school developed a reputation for strong debate teams and high academics.

Ironically, they had been sent to the floundering school by the Methodist Church to shut down 12 years after it opened.

“People said if you were an A or B student and had a degree from Baxter Seminary, you could go to any SEC school, even the Ivy League schools, without having to take an entrance exam,” said Jim Higdon, a retired U.S. Army colonel who graduated in 1950.

The school, which opened with 10 pupils in 1910, enrolled classes as large as 350 in the 1940s and 50s. Graduates from the rural school included doctors, lawyers, ministers and one Nashville judge, Philip Sadler.

After the war, it opened its doors to veterans who wanted to finish classes for a high school degree, including Cox, and opened a trade school for returning soldiers.

“I was the son of the only doctor in town, but I was going to school with kids who would have ended up as poor dirt farmers on a hillside in Putnam County if not for the seminary,” said Dr. James Millis, chief of staff at Donelson Hospital. A day student, he graduated in 1949.

Higdon said: “My mom was a widow, and we couldn’t go with her to her job in Fort Knox, KY. I worked two hours a day for the school – washing dishes and working in the print shop – to pay for half my tuition.

“There were no other high schools on that end of Putnam County so we had boarders and day students. There were all types of children there. My mom didn’t own a car, but one of the kids in my class came to school in a limo. His dad was a superintendent in North Carolina somewhere.”

School alumni attending the one-time reunion still recite the school motto – Truth, Honor, Loyalty, Service.

“Those were the best years of my life,” said 1947 graduate Louise Cooper Driggers, who was sent there with four siblings by their two guardian aunts.

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