

'TRUTH, HONOR, LOYALTY, SERVICE'

BAXTER SEMINARY

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'Cumberland Tales'

by Michael Whitehead

Taking a drive down State Highway 56W, the town of Baxter is but just a shadow of its former glory. Driving through Baxter today, the buildings that once held restaurants, banks, hardware stores, doctor offices, wholesale businesses, game halls, grocery stores, merchant good stores, automobile garages are now either an empty shell of a building, or have disappeared into history, with only a foundation left as a tombstone that reminds visitors of its once proud past. There was a time when the empty buildings were the foundation of what made the town function. Restaurants such as John Gentry was a staple on Main Street, feeding men going to work, or families having dinner. Baxter had two grocery stores on Main Street – Campbell's Grocery and Robert Elmore's Grocery.

For families living in Boma, Gentry, Silver Point, Double Springs, and Buffalo Valley, education was the responsibility of the children's parents. Some had little interest in sending their children to school, believing they could learn all they needed at home. Others wanted the opportunity to educate their children, but could not spare them from the farm work that was so vital to their survival. Education beyond the home was largely limited to elementary schools, such as Silver Point School, Carr's Chapel School, Hopewell School, Boma School, Herren's Chapel and Baxter Elementary. Many considered schooling beyond the eighth grade a luxury.

For those students who wanted to continue their education to the high school level, the only option in Western Putnam County was Baxter Seminary. Methodist minister H. C. Colman moved to Baxter in 1909 to assume the duties of principal of the elementary school, and recognized the need for something more. He envisioned a complex he called "Baxter Institute," and solicited funds to make his dream a reality.



Coleman convinced Professor C. W. Cole to move to Putnam County and assist him in creating an institution of higher learning. With the support of Baxter's leading citizens, work began in earnest. While waiting for construction to get underway, they secured use of the Odd Fellows Hall and "enrolled about 50 in the high school work the first term and many more after Christmas."

Rev. J. D. Harris, district superintendent of the Baxter District of the Methodist Church, suggested merging the Baxter Institute with the Methodist school at Red Boiling Springs to Baxter and the following year, Baxter Institute became Baxter Seminary with Dr. S. E. Ryan as its first president. Ryan was followed by Rev. Patron R. Broyles, but it was the third and last president of Baxter Seminary who left a lasting mark on the institution – Dr. Harry L. Upperman, who served until 1957.

The education model taught within the halls of Baxter Seminary differed from other secondary schools in the area because of the emphasis on practical real world skills. While the school provided excellent instruction across academic disciplines, it recognized the needs of the community it served. Dr. Upperman, who guided the school through the depths of the Great Depression, wanted his students to be well-rounded but with the added advantage of marketable skills that would provide steady employment.

Baxter Seminary had an expansive campus. It included Pfeiffer Hall, which housed administrative offices of the principal and his staff, the school chapel and three floors of classrooms. Ivey Hall and Ward Hall provided housing for co-eds. Chemistry, biology, and physics were taught in Merner Science Building. For students interested in building trades, engineering and the like, they received hands-on instruction in the John W. Lowe Building. There students learned the basics of carpentry, plumbing, painting, wood finishing, concrete work, masonry, brick laying, cabinet making, electrical work construction and repair work, machine wood work, and home mechanics. Students in the school learned by practical experience.

Students in trade classes constructed sidewalks, driveways, gates, fountains, and a large portion of the school's furniture.

Albert Brogdon, a reporter for the Carthage Courier, boasted "Farmers throughout the entire Upper Cumberland section are reaping the benefit of experience in farm methods and soil conservation practices as taught at Baxter Seminary. The school owns a 600 to 800-acre farm which is operated largely by students of the agricultural department. The teaching of agriculture is individualized and localized to meet home farming conditions of the students. Much of the school's food supply is annually produced on the farm."

Additionally Baxter Seminary, with its close ties to the Methodist Church, exposed students in the Upper Cumberland to the larger world. Guest speakers visited the school from such exotic places as Western Europe, El Salvador, Aruba, Puerto Rico, and beyond. Dr. Upperman taught through example and expected his students to respect other cultures and not be afraid to interact with people who were foreign.

Driving through the city of Baxter today, one sees few reminders of Baxter Seminary and what made it grand, but a sharp eye can still detect remnants that recall the glory of Baxter Seminary. The former campus has long been forgotten by many that now live within the communities that Baxter Seminary once served. Near the corner of 1st Avenue and Buffalo Valley Road is a parcel of land partially occupied by a softball field across from the elementary school. Near softball field and Cornerstone Middle School, a long abandoned concrete walk was once the pathway to the Baxter Seminary, which once lay directly in front of the current Baxter Elementary School.

As one walks along the broken pathway another hint is revealed of the past that has long been forgotten. Abandoned flower beds that formerly spelled Baxter on one side and Seminary on the other, lay in ruin. This was one of the very first sights seen by visitors and students alike when they arrived on campus.

The campus was such a wonderful attraction that Dr. Upperman allowed visitors to tour the grounds, for the campus was like a public park.

Two architectural features that remain on the campus, which have stood the test of time are the concrete "U" structure and a small bridge spanning a small creek that connected Dr. Upperman's house on campus and Pfeiffer Hall.

The former halls of Baxter Seminary are all now silent. Never will there be children laughing, crying, and studying for exams, or smoking behind buildings. Never more shall a student say he attends Baxter Seminary or is about to graduate from Baxter Seminary; those days have passed. But the soul of Baxter Seminary lives on in the memories and stories of the once great institute. Dr. Harry Upperman, with his time, patience, knowledge and dedication took a fledgling school and developed it into a world class campus with over eight buildings and a family of alumni spread around the world. Those who graduated from Baxter Seminary were taught to strive for truth, honor, loyalty and service.

"Cumberland Tales" created by Calvin Dickinson and Michael Birdwell, and sponsored by the Cookeville History Museum, welcomes any tale of this region's history. For more information, contact Calvin Dickinson at cdickinson@tentech.edu and Michael Birdwell at birdie@ntech.edu

*Read more Cumberland Tales at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>