

Secrets of the Blue Ridge

by Phil James

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Ben Hurt—He Knows Our Names

"I would go to class and the students would be crying. I would be crying, too. I didn't want to go away..."

Friday the 26th of September, 1941—the new school year was only a few weeks old, but on that day 22-year-old Ben Hurt had to inform his classes at Greenwood High School that he had been drafted into the U.S. Army. The tears he struggled to hold back were not for the hardships he was about to face. Instead, his heart was breaking over the loss of a job which he loved; and his students, likewise, for the loss of a beloved teacher and mentor.

Benjamin Franklin Hurt's path to

Greenwood in western Albemarle County had been accomplished with diligence and a steady work ethic. The youngest of five siblings, he was the only one to continue on to college.

"My Daddy and my Mother both had good minds," he recalled. "Dad didn't have much of a formal education, but he was always mindful. If he had heard some word that day, he would say, 'Ben, can you spell "consequential"?', and things like that. He would keep me going like that."

James Hurt was adept at a variety of trades, and he supervised the maintenance workers at Longwood College in Farmville,



Benjamin F. Hurt, Greenwood High School, 1953—the closing out of one era and the beginning of another. [Photo courtesy of Ben F. Hurt]



Greenwood High School, 1953—its final year with high school classes. [Photo courtesy of Ben F. Hurt]

where his modest house stood close by the college campus. Ethel Hurt stayed busy keeping their home in good order and watching after her family's needs.

"Latin was my best class in school," said Ben. "But Mother said, 'Your brothers and sisters have had so much trouble with Latin. I don't think you ought to take it.' I replied, 'Mother, I'll give it all I've got.' The first year I had a 98 grade and the second year of Latin I had a 99. I just loved it and I wanted to understand it."

Following graduation with honors from Farmville High School in 1936, Ben continued to live at home while he attended Hampden-Sydney College, five miles away.

"There were three cars of Farmville students that would go to Hampden-Sydney. I worked three afternoons a week back in Farmville: at the A&P grocery store or at Davidson's clothing store. Tuesday, Friday and Saturday afternoons. I sold shirts, trousers, suits."

Upon his college graduation in 1940, Hurt was first hired to teach by Paul Cale, then the principal at Greenwood. Like many of the unmarried teachers employed there, he obtained room and board at the nearby McCue home. His teaching responsibilities at Greenwood School included classes in Latin, math and science, and coaching the boys teams in baseball, basketball and track. During his spare time he

also sponsored the school's boys' club and chorus.

As war drums pounded ever louder around the globe in 1941, high school teacher Ben Hurt entered basic training at Ft. Knox, Kentucky. Assigned to the First Armored Division, his typing skills landed him the job of company clerk.

"I stayed as a company clerk all the way through Africa. I would have to carry a typewriter along with my other stuff to write an account for the day. We were in a command car and led the first day of invasion into Oran. We went around this small village, and troops on either side started shooting at us. We had to jump from the car and crawl a long distance to find friendly troops. I would see somebody and yell to them in French because it was northern Africa. They were surprised because I could speak it that way. After three days, some of our troops came in that hadn't been separated. They looked over at me and said, 'Ben, we heard that you were already killed in action!'"

Promoted to Sergeant Major when his Battalion entered Italy, he survived fierce engagements without serious injury. Discharged in August of '45, civilian Benjamin F. Hurt returned to his Greenwood teaching post that fall.

When Paul Cale took the job of assistant superintendent of

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Maria and Ben Hurt have remained hand-in-hand through 62 years of marriage. [Photo by Phil James]

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Albemarle County Schools in 1946, Hurt began the work of principal at Greenwood. Cale was known to promote the three “Bs” to his teachers and administrators: “Be firm. Be fair. Be friendly.” Ben Hurt’s natural tendencies toward these administrative qualities earned him the respect of students and teachers alike.

In 1948, Ben and Maria Addleman of Cumberland County were married and moved to Crozet, where Maria taught home economics and several English and chemistry classes at Crozet High School. Their marriage has since been blessed with a son, daughter-in-law and two grandchildren.

During the summer seasons, Ben continued his own schooling, earning his Master of Education degree from the University of Virginia in 1951.

Albemarle County consolidated all but one of its scattered secondary white schools into the new Albemarle High School in fall 1953. Hurt joined the AHS staff as assistant principal for one year before taking the reins as principal for the next 30 years, retiring in 1984. During those years of leadership and personal involvement, he garnered the respect and admiration of thousands.

Retirement allowed time for him to indulge with friends in regular games of golf. On one of those occasions at Charlottesville’s Pen Park course, their threesome was asked by visitor Vincent Furnier if he could join them for the

round.

“He introduced himself, and that was all he had to say,” Hurt recalled. “He had long hair, but pulled up together. Very quiet. We didn’t know who he was.” It was later when they learned that the silent stranger was rock-and-roll icon (and golf enthusiast) Alice Cooper, best known for his 1970s hit “School’s Out.” Reminded recently of that chance encounter, Mr. Hurt nodded and replied with a smile, “Oh, yes. Alice.”

Forty-four years’ worth of former students and teachers alike continually marvel at his unique talent for remembering the names of most of his students along with their year of graduation—endearing him all the more, whether at class reunions or chance encounters on the street.

In addition to his monumental work in the public schools, Mr. Hurt has been a faithful servant through the years in his church as well as various civic groups. He has been an active member of the

Crozet Lions Club since 1946, and he continues to add to his amazing 39 years of perfect attendance.

In 1991, Ben Hurt was inducted into the Virginia High School Hall of Fame. In 1992, he was honored along with former County Executive Guy Agnor with the naming of Agnor-Hurt Elementary School. The year 2000 saw him bestowed with the Samuel Miller Award. In 2008, the center entrance to AHS from Hydraulic Road was named Benjamin Hurt Drive.

A dedication posted in the 1953 yearbook for Greenwood High School undoubtedly speaks for



The boyhood home of Ben Hurt, c.1940, was adjacent to Longwood College in Farmville. [Photo courtesy of Ben F. Hurt]



Ethel and James Hurt of Farmville—beloved parents of Benjamin F. Hurt, celebrated educator of Albemarle County. [Photo courtesy of Ben F. Hurt]

many who have been privileged to know him over the years: “to a man whose moments are lived not for himself but for others.”

October 27, many proved that they also remember Ben Hurt’s name, as close to 400 cards and notes flooded the Hurt family mailbox on the occasion of his 92nd birthday.

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Phil James invites contact from those who would share recollections and old photographs of life along the Blue Ridge Mountains of Albemarle County, Virginia. You may respond to him through his website www.SecretsoftheBlueRidge.com or at P.O. Box 88, White Hall, VA 22987. Secrets of the Blue Ridge © 2003–2010 Phil James



Albemarle High School—showing its original design layout in the shape of an “A”. [Photo courtesy of Ben F. Hurt]