

The Director

Jim Chamblee led Chowan's music department through countless changes

With the baton barely dry in his hand, Jim Chamblee began his career at the tiny two-year college in 1959, nursed it through growing pains to its heyday as a two-year school, witnessed the student crunch of the late 70s and 80s and redesigned the program into a four-year major.

"When I first came in the fall of '59... the department consisted of... me," he remembers. "My wife taught piano part-time but all the other courses were taught by me. We had three music majors, whom I inherited from the previous faculty, the student body was about three hundred and I think we had about thirty on the faculty."

Born in Raleigh, the son of a Baptist preacher, Chamblee began singing at an early age both in grammar school and in the church choir that his mother directed. Dismissing any kudos with modesty, Chamblee is reluctant to tell that in addition to participating in choral groups at Burlington's Williams High School, he also served as President of the student body, co-captain of the football team, member of the basketball & baseball teams, sports editor of the school annual and member of the state-champion affirmative debating team.

Originally enrolling at UNC-Chapel Hill to study physics on a scholarship, Chamblee recognized music as his calling and switched his major as a sophomore. After receiving his A.B. in Music-Voice he completed his M.A. in Music Education at the Teacher's College of Columbia University in New York before teaching at Gardner-Webb for one year.

In 1963, he took a three-year leave from Chowan to complete his Ph.D. at UNC. One of Chamblee's personal high points came during the summer of 1966. Talking his way into joining a month-long European tour with the UNC Men's Glee Club, with whom he had sung as an undergraduate, Chamblee learned the tenor part and signed on as assistant director.

"We toured a good deal of the European continent including England and Wales, but the biggest thrill came after we passed through the 'iron curtain' to Leipzig, East Germany. There we visited St. Thomas Church, where Bach was directing music when he died. We got to go into the church, which was essentially as it was when Bach was there, and sang in the choir loft. I think that was probably as good a thrill as a musician could have."

The balance of the tour was not uneventful. Crossing and recrossing the Communist border many times, including an uneasy east-to-west trip through "Checkpoint Charlie," Chamblee recalled how often nerves were shattered. Winning prize money during an international competition in Wales allowed the group to avoid using personal funds for traveling expenses as tour funds became exhausted. On their way back to North Carolina, the group appeared on the televised Ed Sullivan Show along with the famous 60s singing group, The Dave Clark Five.

Chamblee recalls, with some sadness in his voice, that he often lost touch with students after Chowan. "Most of the time I just had students for two years and then they were gone."

"I do recall one male vocalist in particular though, who joined the army after Chowan and began singing with a group of enlisted men called, 'The Singing Sergeants.' He went on to musical evangelism and later attended seminary."

He reminisces about an outstanding student. Donna Elks, from Lasker, was the best natural talent I ever had," Chamblee says. "She had some with me as a high school student but had no intention of attending college. During fall registration she appeared and wasn't sure of what she wanted to do, so we registered her. She went from me to Elon College, finished her degree and became a fine teacher."

One of Chamblee's favorite engagements involved leading a touring choir to sing in the Baptist Pavilion of the World's Fair in Knoxville.

Recalls many experiences during three decades as head of Chowan's music department

Completed European tour with UNC Men's Glee Club



Jim Chamblee, retiring chair of the Department of Fine Arts, (right) is seen in a familiar pose as he conducts a rehearsal for the Chowan College choir.

"We took the only available May date, which was after graduation, and arranged a choir tour for that week. We sang our way out and back. It worked out so well, that we started doing it [spring tours] from then on. The churches, where we sang, put us up for the night, fed us and sometimes offered us donations toward traveling expenses."

With a smile, Chamblee recalled a performance at the Baptist State Convention in Raleigh. "It was in Memorial Auditorium in Raleigh, which is this huge place. We came out on stage to sing and the acoustics in there were such that when you were on stage you really could not hear the person next to you. We had a group of about twenty singers and were singing in mixed quartets arranged by soprano, alto, tenor, base, so you weren't standing next to a person singing your part. So when we started singing the first note—we were singing a cappella—I could see a little bit of a panic because they couldn't hear each other. But, they kept going, regrouped, really listened and it sounded good."

"We almost got arrested once," he chuckled. Visiting the empty chapel at Duke University while on tour one Saturday morning, the group wandered to the front, got a little pitch and sang a short Latin motet. I don't think the receptionist was too pleased since we hadn't asked permission. But the students wanted to do it, and I said 'Why not?'"

Outside Chowan, Chamblee "blew off steam" by playing tuba in the Potecasi Philharmonic, a local quartet that performs regularly in the area. Chamblee hopes to join another similar group when he retires to Smithfield, N.C.

"I'm hoping to find some kind of adjunct work around Smithfield," Chamblee notes. "I'm not

ready for a full retirement." Tired of commuting, Chamblee looks forward to joining his wife. A former counselor in Chowan's Upward Bound program, Carla Chamblee has served as a counselor at Johnston Community College for the last five years.

It is doubtful that too many Chowan professors adopt a student as their own child, but the Chamblees did just that. Carla Chamblee's counseling introduced her to a young student from South Carolina. "Denice came to Chowan from an orphanage in South Carolina, where she had lived from about the age of three, to learn the printing trade. We came to the conclusion that she didn't need to be living in a dorm and we had plenty of room since some of our children had left. She became our daughter. When she turned twenty-one, we completed an adult adoption."

Parents to Karen, Kyle, Duane, Denice and Philip, the Chamblees also have five grandchildren.

"Jim has been well respected and very much appreciated in the college and community and we will miss his special gifts," says Carole Nicholson, assistant professor of music.

Following the spring band and choir concert, during a reception honoring Chamblee, faculty and friends of the fine arts department announced the establishment of the endowed James Monroe Chamblee Special Recognition in Music Award. The annual award will be given to a music student who has shown outstanding achievement in music scholarship or musical performance and who has made a significant contribution to the music department and college through such scholarship or performance.



Members and friends of the "Class of '97" enjoy themselves at the Senior Banquet and Candlelighting Ceremony held May 7 in the President's Dining Room.