

This month it is our privilege to pay tribute to one of North Carolina's outstanding men -- the late William D. Burns, of Lawndale, North Carolina. Mr. Burns was a leader in his chosen profession, as principal of Piedmont High School -- at a time when Piedmont was one of the leading schools of the State -- Mr. Burns' family make their home in Cleveland County -- Mrs. Burns and daughter, Mrs. William Parker in Shelby. Lieut. William Burns is at the present time serving overseas with the U.S. Army and Robert Burns in Lawndale. The Hoover Rail Staff salutes the memory of this beloved Educator, William David Burns. Mr. Horace Grigg, a former pupil of Mr. Burns, and who has been serving Cleveland County as Superintendent of Public Education for many years has written the following condensed sketch of his former wise and faithful mentor.

Among the many excellent services being rendered by the Hoover Rail, is the attempt to send to the service men and women of Lawndale something of the life and spirit of the home community. The message in this brief article is from the past, but is none the less definitely a part of the life and spirit of the Lawndale of today. "Pie" Osborne requested me to tell you something about the life of W.D. Burns. Here is that something.

About 1899 or 1900 the quiet village of Cleveland Mills, near Lawndale, was favored with a visit by a young college graduate seeking a position as teacher in the private school which had already been established by a "Professor" Dove. Surely the time, the place and the man were well met, for W. D. Burns was duly elected. And thus was begun one of the great teaching careers of North Carolina.

"Professor" was born in Onslow County, in eastern Carolina, a section from which he drew many of the interesting narratives with which he garnished his "pearls of wisdom" in his frequent chapel talks. After an uncertain elementary educational training, he studied at Wake Forest College where he graduated with both an A.B. and an L.L.B. degree.

Shortly after 1900, the school at Cleveland Mills was transferred to Lawndale, and set up as the Piedmont High School. Backed by loyal friends, especially Maj. H.F. Schenck, this school rapidly became one of the leading high schools of the state, being ranked at one time as the second largest non-denominational school of its type.

Piedmont, under the leadership and personal magnetism of "Professor" Burns, became a sort of educational mill, attracting boys and girls from the two Carolinas -- and beyond -- and sending them forth to college and to positions in life -- a veritable army of professional men and women, community leaders, and upstanding citizens. Outstanding ministers, lawyers of state-wide repute, nationally known business men, at least two present state officials, one college president, and a host of others are tangible evidence of the greatness of Piedmont and the great spirit of the man who gave to the institution its strength.

In 1910, fire razed the main building at Piedmont, destroying the girls' dormitory, the dining hall, and most of the classrooms. Many thought that the school had received a mortal blow, but they had not reckoned with the spirit of W.D. Burns, nor with that of the friends of Piedmont. From the ashes of the old, a new, bigger, and greater Piedmont grew, with more and better buildings, more pupils, and more teachers.

The advent of the public high school in North Carolina reduced somewhat the need for the academy or boarding high school. Accordingly, about 1920 Piedmont became a semi-public high school, and in 1926 entirely a public high school. The number of boarding pupils having been greatly decreased, the school became one of the large consolidated schools of Cleveland County.

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