

The NEW BERN

MIRROR

PUBLISHED WEEKLY
 IN THE HEART OF
 THE NORTH
 Regional Library
 400 Johnson St.
 New Bern NC 28560

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 Looking
 Glass

VOLUME 15

NEW BERN, N. C. 28560, FRIDAY, AUGUST 25, 1972

NUMBER 24

Countless New Bernians who are no longer among the living, and thousands of others who still remain on this sphere we call the earth, have had their hearts enriched with the spiritual beauty of "The Old Rugged Cross."

Its composer, the Rev. George Bennard, held evangelistic services here in the not-so-distant past, at the Tabernacle Baptist church and the Salvation Army. His presence didn't create much of a stir, and as preachers go, this inconspicuous little man could hardly be classed as outstanding in the pulpit.

Comparatively few folks in our historic first State Capital heard his sermons, and fewer still were emphatically impressed. This is a statement of fact. Maybe it should have been different, but that is the way it was.

Admittedly, Rev. Bennard was well along in years when he visited New Bern, and it might have been that his ability as a deliverer of the gospel had been more pronounced during his younger days.

One distinction he could certainly claim, right up to his obscure death at Reed City, Michigan. He had written what most Protestants for almost half a century generally agreed was the most beloved of all hymns.

Millions were enriched religiously by its melody and its lyrics. If ever words fitted music to masterful perfection, such was the case when the Youngstown, Ohio, native penned his unforgettable hymn.

Usually the hymns sung at funerals are those that were considered favorites of the departed. In some instances they are the favorites of those who are left to mourn. No other hymn, perhaps, has been used more universally in these times of bereavement than "The Old Rugged Cross."

Protestants, almost without exception, associate the hymn with their acceptance of Christ as their risen Savior. Their earliest remembrance of it came, if they were blessed with Christian parents, at their mother's knee.

Like their childhood prayer—"Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep"—And their first childhood hymn—"Jesus Loves Me, This I Know"—the moving passages of "The Old Rugged Cross" endured for a lifetime.

Rev. Bennard was a Salvation Army officer and soldier for 15 years before he wrote his masterpiece for the ages. It was composed two years after he gave up his commission as an adjutant in that highly respected cause.

Boyhood was no frolic for him. At the age of 15 he was working in coal mines to help support his widowed mother and five brothers and sisters. He joined the Salvation Army in 1886, three years later became an officer, and immediately began travelling the Midwest to conduct revival meetings.

Rev. Bennard's inspiration

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IT CAN GET HIGH—If you're a newcomer to town, and somewhat skeptical about the stories told by natives of big blows and surging tides, this photo should convince you. Snapped during a typical hurricane's prelude, quite a number of years ago, it shows venture some teen agers wading in a completely inundated area off East Front Street. The posts in the distance mark the normal Neuse river shoreline. Our costliest hurricane was lone. It did 15 million dollars damage. Don't let this scare you

into leaving our 262 year old first State Capital. New Bern, with the exception of these occasional storms, is a charming place to visit and a better place to stay for keeps. Look around you at the landmarks, and you'll see durable proof that the community learned centuries ago to brace itself against howling winds that roar out of the northeast, and whip our usually peaceful waters into full fury. Even so, keep your fingers crossed, until September has come and gone.