

A Balanced Account

The Late John Henry McIntosh, A 'Boost' To Area Education

Reprinted from The Spindale Sun

By W. B. Robertson

It was June 6, 1900, in the Bee Log Community of Yancey County, North Carolina, that John Henry McIntosh was born, the youngest of eight children born to Jane Phillips McIntosh and Gilbert E. McIntosh. There were no bright lights, for there was no electricity. There were no disturbances from traffic, for there were no automobiles. No flowers arrived, for there were no florists.

Twenty miles away in Burnsville, the county seat, there was a doctor, a dentist, and a telephone. But nowhere in Yancey county was there a pound of ice to be bought, or a foot of pavement to be traveled, or a supermarket in which to buy fresh meat.

Grief came to him early. In six months his father was dead. A few months later his home, so carefully built by his father's hands, was destroyed by fire. His older brother, desperately ill from typhoid fever, was rescued by neighbors; but the fever and the flames were too much for him.

Standing beside the ashes of her home, deprived of her husband and her eldest son, Jane Phillips McIntosh gathered her seven children about her and resolved that they should never be separated, they never were. They planted the rocky hillside without bitterness. They gathered nuts and berries from field and forest; and the boys roamed the uplands in search of game.

She read to her children from the Bible, and taught them to worship and to pray. Necessity simplifies all things, including family creeds. Their creed was simple, but strong: work hard; speak the truth; pay your debts; and worship God. Game was to be killed only for food. Neighbors were to be helped, but never maligned.

John Henry, the youngest, accepted his share of responsibility without complaint. He sowed and gathered and toiled, not measuring his tasks by hours, but by strength, courage, and endurance. The day began when one awoke, and ended when one was exhausted. It was a hard life; yet all life in the mountains was hard and demanding and filled with challenge. There was nothing unique about the struggle for survival, the uniqueness lay in the hunger for learning.

Education, at its best, was an uncertain thing. The county attempted to provide a minimum of seven years of schooling in each community, but it was not unusual for funds to be lacking or inadequate. There were no attendance laws, no school buses, no free texts, and no cafeterias.

Some schools operated for four months; some for six months; and some for the length of time agreed upon by the teacher and the local parents. When the money, from tax or subscription, was exhausted, the teacher regretfully packed his bags and departed. But his place of departure was also uncertain, for he often lived on a rotation basis, in the various homes of his students.

Rotation was, however, not confined to teachers alone. In an era of large families and hard times, the parents were forced to decide which children should attend school, and which should remain at home and work. John Henry cheerfully remained at home and worked while his brother, Monroe, attended Yancey Collegiate Institute located in Burnsville. YCI was a Baptist Institution, and offered about the same opportunities as those provided by today's senior high



from a private instructor. He filled each hour of the day, and much of the night, with the wonderful things that lay before him.

Five days each week he lived at the school, sleeping in the boys' dormitory, and paying for his meals by firing the furnaces, sweeping the rooms, and ringing the school bell—a task that had to be done by hand! During summer vacations John Henry accepted any job that would help to pay for another year of schooling. He cut timber, floated logs, mined coal, and made furniture. Stripped to the waist, under a blazing summer sun, he drove steel through solid rock to make the holes for the dynamite charges that turned mountain ravines and ridges into highways.

During the school term, weather and roads permitting, John Henry spent week ends at home, thanks to the transportation that Monroe had been able to purchase from his meager salary as a teacher. But twenty miles of impassable mud could not keep John Henry from school on Monday. Carrying his books and his violin, which were never far from his person, he faced the twenty miles to YCI as a shipwrecked sailor returns to his home. Often he arrived, muddy and weary, after all eating establishments had closed, no matter, a supperless night was not a novelty to him. If there was a basketball game scheduled for that particular night, John Henry conveniently failed to inform the coach of the twenty miles of hard walking and the lack of food since noon. He merely rushed into his uniform and gave his best for his team and his school.

In three years he completed the regular four-year high school courses and enrolled at ASTC in Boone. Four years later he received his degree and his teaching certificate.

schools.

Monroe soon returned to begin teaching in his home community, serving as principal of the two-teacher Bee Log elementary school that had an enrollment of 110 pupils in grades one-through-seven. John Henry eagerly returned to the classroom; and Monroe happily contributed to his brother's education, first as his teacher and later by providing the finances for his continued education in Bald Creek High School, YCI, and Appalachian State Teachers College.

At YCI John Henry McIntosh's golden dreams came true. The hard days on the rocky farm had now opened the magic door to educational opportunity. He immediately decided to enroll in all that the school had to offer! In addition to the traditional subjects, he became a varsity player in every sport the school offered; baseball, basketball, and tennis. He joined the literary society and the debating club. He sang in the glee club and took violin lessons

In 1927 he married his college sweetheart, Irene Hendricks, a petite, vivacious, brunette from Cherryville. Their home was blessed by the arrival of three lovely daughters, Christine (Mrs. Donald W. Moore) now a nurse; Nellie Grace (Mrs. Robert E. Smith) now a teacher; and Patricia Ellen (wife of Rev Andrew P. Grose) now a secretary.

Nothing was never more important to John Henry McIntosh than education, except his wife and children. In 1922 he faced his first teaching assignment: sixty-five students, seven grades, and a salary of thirty-five dollars per month. After teaching for twenty years in the schools of Yancey County, he accepted the principalship of Shiloh elementary school in Rutherford county. He remained an elementary principal for the next eighteen years, serving at: Shiloh, Avondale, Green Hill, Gilkey, and Ruth, all in Rutherford county. After eleven years as principal of the Ruth elementary school, he retired from his beloved profession in 1965.

In 1960 the McIntosh family was honored by being selected as "The Teaching Family of the Year" for Rutherford county in a program sponsored by the National Education Association, and conducted by the local chapter of the NCEA. It was a well-deserved recognition; for at the time of their retirement he had taught for thirty-eight years, his wife

for thirty-seven years, making a total of seventy-five years! Nellie Grace is still teaching.

Hundreds of students remember John Henry McIntosh as a quiet, serious, and dedicated teacher who stressed character and fair play in all things. Others recall him as a fine sportsman who shared his game with the aged and infirm who could no longer enjoy the fields and forests.

The delicious fruits and vegetables from his garden regularly found their way into the homes of his friends and neighbors, particularly if the homes were afflicted by misfortune. In many homes owners proudly point to some cherished piece of fine furniture, and recall that it was created by his skillful hands.

Mr. McIntosh was always a leader in his church and his profession, and held many positions of responsibility in each. He led with a quiet diplomacy that never subscribed to criticism or discord. On October 6, 1966, his heart and his leadership ended, quietly and peacefully.

His life could be summarized by the personal creed that he carried in his billfold at all times:

"When it comes to the last accounting, his books will balance who has added to the world love, subtracted wrong, multiplied good, and divided not man's heart from God."

John Henry McIntosh will be remembered as a man whose books were always in balance.

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