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The Blue Ridge School Triad



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THE BLUE RIDGE SCHOOL TRIAD

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The story of Blue Ridge School is a triple-decker. One can start telling it at any level, but the better logic advises starting with the foundation. It is hard to tell this story with the historian's objectivity because the historical facts sound like romance which, in fact, they are. That remarkable venture in faith which began in Bacon Hollow, nearly three quarters of a century ago, cannot be faithfully chronicled without using overtones of appreciation of the beneficence and self-sacrifice which have pervaded the whole operation from the beginning and have never disappeared. Whether we are thinking about Blue Ridge Industrial School, 1909; The Blue Ridge School, 1940; or Blue Ridge School 1962, we are bound to realize that loving kindness is as characteristic of the spirit there as the green hills of Virginia are of its setting.

Like most great human endeavors, this one was generated by the force of a great personality. The Rev. George Pickett Mayo started his Christian ministry in the Ragged Mountains of Virginia upon his graduation from the Episcopal Theological Seminary at Alexandria in 1902. As assistant to the Rev. F. W. Neve, Archdeacon of the Blue Ridge, the Rev. Mr. Mayo became associated with Mission Home, headquarters of the archdeaconry. From this base, a small band of deaconesses and missionary teachers ministered to the spiritual and physical needs of the residents of that region. These people lived so far from the mainstream of contemporary life that they were unaware of the implications of their isolation. The young clergyman's concern for their privations, and even more for the paucity of their educational opportunities, became the immediate core and inspiration of his ministry and the theme of his selfless career.

No one can say just when the idea of establishing a school for mountain children occurred to Mr. Mayo, but in January 1907 The

Southern Churchman reported that at a meeting of the Board of the Archdeaconry, Mr. Mayo "spoke of his scheme for an industrial school in connection with his mountain work" and that he was authorized to visit any existing such schools to gain some practical information about how to begin.

It must have been shortly after he made that survey that Mr. Mayo rode his horse up to the door of a one-room schoolhouse at Scrounge-back and went inside to pay a visit to the teacher.

"Mrs. Snow," he said to his friend, "the Bishop has sent me over here to start a new church in Bacon Hollow, but I think you need a school before you need a church. We cannot win hearts to a loving God until we first educate the minds to understand Him." This first patron of Mr. Mayo's idea sent her 5-year-old daughter to the School when it opened to the first students.

Mr. B. G. Snow recalls Mr. Mayo's next step. "I was harvesting wheat on my mother's farm when he came and told me of his desire to build a school for the mountain boys and girls, and asked the possibility of buying my mother's farm. I told him that would be difficult for legal reasons, but that if he would talk to Mrs. Frances Snow, whose farm joined ours, he could probably make a deal. This he did and bought the property known as the Thomas and Frances Snow farm."

The deed to that property, drawn in 1908 and recorded in deed book 15, is the first of a series of purchases of Greene County land bought for the School. Robert A. Gibson (bishop), F. W. Neve (arch-deacon), and George P. Mayo (the Rev.) signed the deed as trustees of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Virginia and paid \$3,000 cash. The property was claimed "for the use and benefit of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States".

Into that Greene County soil Mr. Mayo himself thrust his spade and dug out the beginnings of the foundation for the first building which would house the new school. A little more than a year later, in

November 1909, Miss Bessie Turner, a gifted and beloved English teacher who had come over from Mission Home to help Mr. Mayo get started, swept the shavings out of the new building which they called Neve Hall and realized, even then, that a great work was about to begin. The summer before, the staff had been using a little cottage on the Snow property as headquarters and as the schoolroom of a little day-school which was the actual nucleus of Blue Ridge Industrial School.

Miss Turner was soon joined there by Miss Margaret Lawrence and Miss Martha B. Richards, teacher colleagues at Mission Home. Another Lawrence sister, Miss Harriet, came to visit in the neighborhood where her three sisters were missionaries, but she joined the group in another capacity by marrying the Rev. George P. Mayo in November 1909. Another sister, Deaconess Bertha Lawrence, joined the staff in 1911, and a fourth, Miss Katherine, would leave her work at Mission Home to join them in 1914. Except for the Deaconess who married Blake T. Newton, principal of Blue Ridge Industrial School from 1912 to 1914, and went with him to his new work in Lancaster County, all these women would give their lives to the Rev. George P. Mayo's dedication to Blue Ridge.

January 19, 1910, Neve Hall opened its doors to its first pupils. Statistics for this year are inconclusive, but about a dozen little girls came to board, and the day students brought the enrollment to approximately thirty. "It was hard, uphill work," Deaconess Lawrence (Mrs. Newton) has recalled. "There was little equipment and few supplies. . . and we were crowded for space." But the work was "backed by courage, the joy of service, and the faith that will indeed move mountains."

With that mandate, Mr. Mayo went everywhere to tell people about his work and to ask them to support it. He was as gifted with the eloquence of his tongue as with the generosity of his heart; he extended both tirelessly and enthusiastically in favor of his mountain children. He would knock on any door, make any contact, preach from any pulpit to ask for contributions to the furtherance of this work. During the

first few years, his most crying need was for land for the subsistence of the operation.

By the end of the first school year, Mr. Mayo had raised the money to buy seven more tracts of Greene County land. Eventually, there would be about twenty-five separate purchases, aggregating more than 800 acres, presently owned by the corporation. In 1967, Mr. Bernard Chamberlain made a fine documentation of all these properties for the preparation of a deed of trust for the corporation now known as Blue Ridge School, Inc. The opening paragraph of Mr. Chamberlain's abstract contains useful summations of the sequential events in the School's history:

In 1913, Blue Ridge Industrial School had been incorporated and had started operation as a school for mountain children, with the Reverend George P. Mayo generally in charge. The three trustees of the several tracts, namely Bishop Robert A. Gibson, Archdeacon F. W. Neve, and the Reverend George P. Mayo, decided that these tracts then being used by the School should be the property of B.R.I.S. Accordingly, they instituted a chancery suit in the Circuit Court of Greene County, alleging that certain properties conveyed to them as trustees of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Virginia were, in fact, conveyed to them as trustees of the Whittle Memorial Church, and that by proper resolution, the congregation of Whittle Memorial Church had directed them to transfer the said several tracts of land to Blue Ridge Industrial School, Inc. By order dated October 17, 1913, Judge John W. Fishburne of the said court approved the petition and authorized the transfer.

A list of the first eight properties follows, and then there is appended a complete listing of all the properties, their acreage, price, and purchase date in each case. All this cost money, of course, and Dr. Mayo went out single-handedly to raise it.

He dug his second most significant spadeful of the soil of the future by going to New York to call upon George Gordon Battle, a young lawyer

from North Carolina. Mr. Battle presented Mr. Mayo and his appeal to Mrs. Battle, the former Martha Bagby of Richmond, who had doubtless been made acquainted early in her life with the plight of the people in isolated rural communities of Virginia by her father, a noted "horse-and-buggy" doctor. That introduction was the impetus for Mrs. Battle's hearty support of Blue Ridge School. Her drive and initiative stimulated many of her New York friends in the work which eventually became a whole organization -- the Blue Ridge New York Auxiliary -- when this dynamic woman could no longer command it herself.

Even after the School looked flourishing from the standpoint of student response to this unique opportunity for them, Mr. Mayo kept looking for financial support. Although the School was, so to speak, sponsored by the Episcopal Church, it never received more than sporadic donations and the Church's blessing. It had always had its own charter and board of trustees nominated by the Diocese. Obviously, mountain children could never be expected to pay what it cost the School to educate them, so subsidization was a constancy, both for the work and for the capital improvement of it and the property.

Anyone in those days who knew what the word "charisma" meant would have known that Mr. Mayo was its personification. Ahead of his time, he went about proclaiming the message of educating the whole person by training the hand, the head, and the heart. His students became inured to his regular reminders that one learns by doing, that by working along with their teachers and benefactors, they were helping to defray the expenses of their education, fitting themselves for their chosen vocations, and realizing that honorable industry and pure manners raise human beings above any stigma of patronage. "If you do not learn anything else here but how to be a good citizen," he told his student body, "I feel that my life will not have been in vain."

In that atmosphere the vigorous and youthful minister, his pretty

and helpful wife, and their three children began to make a life along with the students. The farm, the dairy, the cannery, and the nearby orchards provided most of their food and a good many of their instructional materials. The Clothing Bureau brought in a tiny income and enabled the mountain families to have store-bought, albeit, second-hand clothing of good quality. A few new buildings went up as donations came in. Richmond Hall, the Rectory, Crawford House, Mayo Hall, an infirmary, and a few outbuildings were in operation by 1917. When Richmond Hall burned in 1918, Mr. Mayo dauntlessly overcame the general dismay by proclaiming, "We'll build another!"

Pride in its first graduating class lifted the School's spirits that year. Evalyn Morris, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Austin Morris; and Bannie Morris, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Morris received their diplomas. But Mr. Mayo was also struggling with the back-wash of a world war, worries of a flu epidemic, and anxieties about his own future.

In 1921, he felt it wise to accept a call to the Rectorship of Monumental Church in Richmond, as much for the benefit of his family as for broadening his own horizons and finding new wells to tap for Blue Ridge. Although he lived away from the School until 1926 while the faithful teachers kept things going, he never really left it and he eagerly returned. His five-year absence had amplified his zeal for the welfare of Blue Ridge. The first fruit of his renewed efforts was the Gibson Memorial Chapel. Ralph Adams Cram, the noted New England architect, donated the plans, and local artisans, with the help of the schoolboys and their instructors, built a chapel of native rock, all its furnishings being fashioned on the campus. The Madonna window in the sanctuary was given by students, alumni, and everyone who worked on the building. Its cornerstone was laid in 1929, and it was consecrated in 1932.

"The Shop Beside the Stream" was another triumph of the 1930 decade. Under the direction of Miss May Bingham and Miss Alice Hancock, the

girl students received superior instruction in handicrafts which were displayed and sold publicly. Woven articles and hooked rugs were their specialities, but they also learned knitting, crocheting, sewing, and other kinds of needlework. They were taught the technique of caning seats by using heavy rope which was woven in caning designs and then shellacked. The boys made small chairs and stools in their wood-working shops and the girls finished them off. Materials were anything they could find; church and welfare societies sometimes sent scraps, and bargain counters sometimes yielded remnants. One of the hooked rugs was sent to Mrs. Hoover for use in the White House.

These educational industries were part of Dr. Mayo's original concept of the School's value to the students' vocational future. In time, however, the word "industrial" came to be associated with correctional institutions -- which Blue Ridge has never been -- so the staff decided to drop it. The decision is evident from the masthead of the School newspaper, The Mountain Echo, although it was not until 1941 that the State Corporation Commission officially made the change on the School's charter. At the same time, the name of the School post office which had been "Bris" since Dr. Mayo became postmaster in 1929, was changed to St. George. The post office was closed in 1961.

Social changes were beginning to affect the original concept of the School. Better roads were bringing school buses within easy access of mountain children, many of whom began to attend public school. Their places were gradually taken by children whose homes had been broken and by heterogeneous groups of rootless persons who were sent to Blue Ridge as a haven by welfare organizations. Although Dr. Mayo had always maintained that "there are no bad children", he began to face difficulties and dilemmas never anticipated in his original plan. In order to deal with some of these new problems, it was decided to eliminate the high school department for boys, but even that move did not forestall all the troublesome situations which Blue Ridge was not equipped to deal with.

A new administration was in order for Blue Ridge when Dr. Mayo retired in 1945. He remained as treasurer during the next session while the Rev. Stanley D. Ashton served as superintendent. In the summer of 1946, the Rev. Dewey C. Loving, a graduate of Blue Ridge Industrial School which he had attended as a mountain boy, started his thirteen-year tenure as superintendent. The Rev. Dennis Whittle came with him as chaplain and Mr. Ralph Kelly became principal.

Mr. Loving was not unlike Dr. Mayo in his intense dedication and zest for the work and as a man who had felt a spiritual call to do it. It fell to his lot to guide the School through a trying period of transition and re-examination, for this was quite a different Blue Ridge from the one he had attended and where he had been strongly motivated by Mr. Mayo and Miss Bessie Turner. His administration was a vigorous and fruitful one.

When it became obvious that the School should re-evaluate its assets, services, and potential, the Board requested that it be included in the 1948 survey by the Child Welfare League of America. That report was a valuable assistance to the Board ten years later, in the School's fiftieth year, when it appointed a special committee of its own choosing to make a survey with which to answer crucial questions about the future utilization of the institution. Altogether, a very different picture of the School was emerging from its 1910, 1920, 1930 appearance. In spite of its remoteness, Bacon Hollow was being affected by sophisticated new ideas and attitudes filtering in from outside. Even before Dr. Mayo's death in 1954, all his teacher associates had retired from the scene.

The New York Auxiliary was one of the few constants in this changing society. Having formally organized itself as Mrs. Battle's successor in 1943, the Auxiliary had been establishing a building fund with which it contributed to much of the new capital improvement of the campus, notably the water supply and the gymnasium. In 1953, the Auxiliary staged a tenth anniversary festival at the School with Mrs. Battle as

the honored guest with the great rock house adjacent the Chapel as the birthday present. Completely refurbished as a multi-purpose facility, the Auxiliary named it the Martha Bagby Battle House and presented it to the School. In her presentation address, Mrs. J. Winston Fowlkes enumerated the improvements to the property which the Auxiliary had made, including a \$17,000 rectory which would free Battle House for more extensive use. Altogether Mrs. Fowlkes estimated that the Auxiliary had given the School nearly \$100,000 toward its operating expenses.

The year before, the Daughters of the American Revolution, another long-time patron of Blue Ridge School, had also dedicated its gift of a building, a fine new boys' dormitory. The School had for many years been on the Society's approved list and had received both scholarships and awards for the students from that source.

Mr. Loving resigned as superintendent in 1959 in order to follow the path opening before him in pastoral work. Willets Ansel, who had served as principal during Mr. Loving's last year, succeeded him. The Rev. Maurice Browne continued to assist the superintendent as chaplain. In the early fall of 1959, Mr. Ansel announced in The Mountain Echo that "We are looking forward to Blue Ridge's 51st year of service to children."

It had hardly started, however, before a five-minute cyclone tore it apart. Gracie, the hurricane which suddenly developed a cyclonic quirk, swept through the campus on September 30, leaving devastation and tragedy in its wake. Mr. Robert Morris was killed and all the buildings were seriously damaged. Operation of the School was crippled for many weeks because of the tons of debris. Again, it was the New York Auxiliary which came to the rescue.

Mrs. Will R. Gregg, a member of the Board of Trustees, was at her home in Orange when she learned of the condition of the stricken school. Single-handedly, she launched a clean-up campaign of volunteers from surrounding counties who worked throughout one long day and into the night of November 9 to get the School back on its feet. More than sixty

persons gave their personal services and lent their own heavy and light equipment for the operation. It was a mammoth and heart-warming demonstration of good neighborliness and brotherly love. But the organization of it was such a vast undertaking that Mrs. Gregg herself almost faltered at the size of it. She took her anxieties and trepidations to Mr. D. G. Wilfong, district forester at Charlottesville, who, with Mr. Richard Sanford of Orange, was handling the logistics. "Suppose it should fail, suppose people don't show up as they have promised?" she worried. "It's the Lord's work, Mrs. Gregg, and it can't fail," Mr. Wilfong assured her. He judged correctly.

There was still one more big job to be done, one that had surfaced from the Board's study. A new course had to be charted for Blue Ridge School. This decision would be the means of placing the School in what Mrs. Gregg felicitously termed "its third vanguard position". To reach that status, professional guidance would be required.

A committee of outstanding professional educators was retained by the Board to direct its decision. Dr. Ernest V. Hollis and Dr. S. V. Martorana of the United States Office of Education, and Dr. William H. McFarlane of the Virginia Council of Higher Education were asked to study the School in depth and to recommend a course of action for the future. Using all available data, history, assets, opinions, and a plan for the physical development of the site by Mr. Edwin F. Heers of the School maintenance department, the committee addressed the problem.

A thoughtful report, not altogether encouraging, emerged from this study. It suggested two basic alternatives: to abandon the site and sell the property, or to establish a completely new school specializing in "low pressure" academic secondary education for boys. The latter idea was a new departure from educational trends and was being advanced as uniquely requisite to the demands of a high-pressure world.

The educators who proposed this plan realized that they were presenting the Board with a new dilemma. The Board of Blue Ridge School could

not command the financial resources necessary to implement a completely new school. And perhaps it did not have the stamina with which to face such a drastically new beginning and the five lean years which must ensue before the new idea caught on. Nevertheless, after a period of soul-searching, the Board decided to take the plunge and start a school which would have to be entirely self-supporting and could not cater to economically underprivileged students except through scholarships. The new enterprise would have to be undertaken on faith.

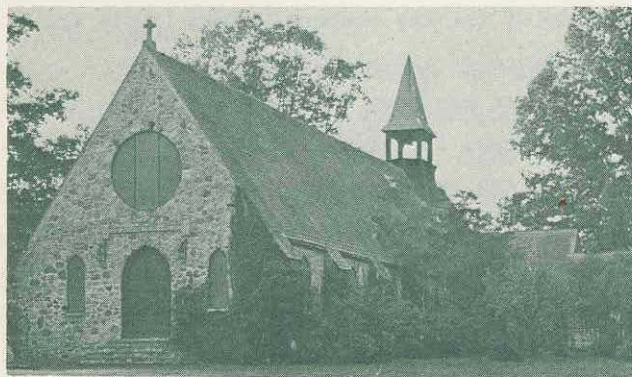
The justification of that faith was realized almost immediately. The Perry Foundation of Charlottesville, which had been established by Mr. Hunter Perry, came forward with a matching funds offer with which to start the new school. It then became the task of Mrs. Gregg to win over the interest and support of the New York Auxiliary for a school which was no longer a "charity". This she did, so convincingly that the Auxiliary liquidated its building fund and turned over the money as the matching funds for the Perry Foundation's grant. So Blue Ridge School closed its doors temporarily for the 1961-62 school year while it sought its new headmaster, as Mr. Ansel had decided to withdraw in order to pursue his graduate studies.

Robert A. Wilson was appointed to that post and at once took charge of getting the plant renovated and re-adapted to its new commitment. Blue Ridge School opened in September 1962 with a limited enrollment of 66 boys and seven faculty members and a new academic emphasis: a modern boarding secondary school for boys of medium academic ability and motivation. Mr. Wilson resigned in December, 1962.

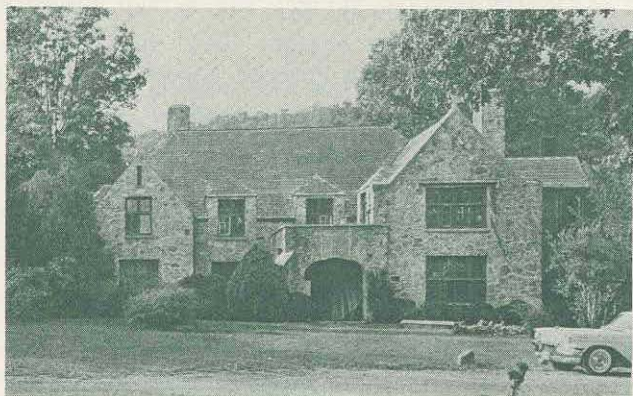
Hatcher C. Williams, formerly Assistant Headmaster of Christchurch School, accepted the appointment as Headmaster which was offered him by the Board of Trustees of which the Rev. Dudley Boogher was chairman. The campus of Blue Ridge School had, in 1962, become the site of the summer school which Mr. Williams had operated in Corolla, North Carolina, until the sale of that property had displaced it there. He opened the

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1963-64 session of Blue Ridge School with a capacity enrollment and a full high school course. The first graduates of this new school received their diplomas in 1964, thus achieving its "third vanguard position". The 1979-80 session is Mr. Williams' 17th as headmaster of the School where boys of average academic ability are believed to be worth caring about. The New York Auxiliary gave its 75th benefit to raise money for Blue Ridge this year. Not one year has passed since Mr. Mayo sought Mr. Battle's help for the School that the New York Auxiliary has failed to remember its original commitment to his work.



Gibson Memorial Chapel at Blue Ridge School



Martha Bagby Battle House at Blue Ridge School