

Reverend Herbert W. Brown

by: Jim Casada

Note: this is a combined pair of articles by Jim Casada which appeared in the Smoky Mountain Times in July, 2020.

The nature of Christian ministry readily translates to an impact on the lives of others, and over the generations countless preachers have had meaningful, lasting impacts on the lives of folks resident in Swain County. In terms of widespread influence, lasting importance, and his legacy as a whole, an individual who stands in the forefront of this profession is William Herbert Brown.

Born in 1901 in the Asheville area, Rev. Brown became the minister of Bryson City's First Baptist Church in 1944. He had previously been the pastor of a church in Arlington, Virginia.

Brown's background prior to his conversion, Christian educational studies, and entry into the ministry involved travel along a decidedly rocky road. Some of those sordid adolescent experiences he eventually shared in a telling, deeply emotional letter to one of his grandsons. His troubled youth involved a father plagued by alcohol and inner demons, an unsettled home life, and a great deal of teenage waywardness.

Among many transgressions, he was caught cheating on an exam in the eighth grade and had to repeat the year in school, ended up in court on one occasion after sneaking off with and wrecking the family's Model T car, broke the hip of his pony in a fit of anger, and skipped school to get drunk.

All of this shameful behavior changed, in dramatic and lasting fashion, when he began attending a church-affiliated school in the Asheville area, found salvation, and devoted his life to Christian service. Much of that service took place in Swain County or had its geographical roots locally. However, Brown's influence eventually extended far beyond the local level.

That was thanks to a wide-ranging variety of ministerial efforts. Always keenly interested in children (he and his wife, Nell Brevard Brown, had four of their own), he was the founder of the Southern Bible Testimony, Inc. That effort had many aspects, including Bible conferences which brought noted evangelical voices to speak locally, tent meetings, and predictably given his focus on youth, a Christian camp for young people.

The latter initiative, Camp Living Water, is still going strong in the same area of west Deep Creek where the tent revivals and fellowship gatherings first began well upwards of a half century ago. In some ways, Camp Living Water, which has impacted countless children over the years, must be reckoned Brown's single most important legacy. Today it holds summer camps, offers retreats for youngsters and adults throughout the year, and continues apace in pursuing Brown's sense of mission.

Rev. Brown was a man of unwavering faith and strong principles. Although I do not know the full details, after several years at First Baptist Church he found himself at odds with a majority of the church's board of deacons. Much of the matter revolved around his creation of Southern Bible Testimony and the speakers he brought to the community (they primarily spoke at the old

courthouse, not the church). Brown presents his account of the unfolding developments in a little book, "Spiritual Flambeau: A Story of Religious Conflict in the Great Smokies." Interestingly, hidden away in the heart of the book is the story of the conversion of the famous mountain sportsman, Mark Cathey, and the background to the epitaph to be found on his tombstone (Brown wrote the epitaph).

Brown's forced departure from First Baptist Church led to his footsteps marching strongly down a new path, and actions of the church's board of deacons not long thereafter worsened an already tense situation. His successor in the pulpit, together with the church deacons, refused to allow Brown to preach a funeral service for a woman who had been a longtime member of the congregation. They did this despite the fact it had been her request and that of the family. That denial of use of the sanctuary led to major problems.

I'm aware of these on an intensely personal level because my family was one of many who left the congregation. In our case it was for Bryson City Presbyterian Church, but many of those formerly in the First Baptist congregation, along with other followers of Brown, banded together to form Hillside Baptist Church.

Among those individuals were a number of influential and well-respected locals— Berlin and Lillian Thomasson; John and Nell Marchbanks; Claude and Viola Patterson; Fred and Edna Shuler; W. C. Morgan, owner of the local Nehi Bottling Company; Willard Stallcup (his barber shop was sometimes used in early years as a meeting place); and others.

The Thomassons owned land where Hillside Baptist would eventually be constructed, and both it and the Smoky Mountain Bible Conference/Camp Living Water grounds would soon be fully owned and paid for by the small but growing group.

In the aftermath of his unfortunate dismissal from the pastorate at First Baptist Church, Rev. W. Herbert Brown persisted in his ministry with staunch determination and considerable success. His ouster notwithstanding, I think most folks, and certainly those who knew him well, thought very highly of the man. Certainly that was the case with my parents, even though they weren't a part of his new flock, and on a personal level my exposure to him on the local golf course (he was an avid and reasonably skilled golfer) was of a distinctly positive nature. Similarly, my brother, Don, has fond recollections of memorizing Bible verses and involvement with Camp Living Water.

Brown clearly was a firm believer in the ancient Greek and Roman philosophy of being a "whole" man—someone involved not only in intellectual matters but also physical health and well being. The Romans used the phrase "mens sana in corpora sano" (sound mind, sound body) and it was something he certainly practiced. I love family recollections of how Brown often hiked to the peak of Sharp Top to meditate and pray, and one of his faithful followers who was a great friend of mine, Frank Young, loved to talk about his interactions with Rev. Brown.

One suspects that while on Sharp Top, looking out over the Tuckasee River valley, he often read from his Bible. A member of the Bible Conference Board once recalled dated notations in that Bible indicating Brown had read it in its entirety multiple times, with one of those being done while on his knees in an attitude of prayer. Certainly the serenity and scenic loveliness of the Sharp Top vista would have been perfectly suited for deep religious thinking.

One of Brown's daughters, Bernice Swaim, has moving memories of a celebratory camping/hiking trip he and others, including a son-in-law, grandchildren, and Frank Young, made into the Shining Rock Wilderness Area to celebrate Brown's 84th birthday. They picked ripe blueberries from the wilds and enjoyed them at breakfast, and Young, as fine a fly fisherman as it has ever been my privilege to know and observe, made sure that there were plenty of wild trout for the pan.

That had to be an arduous undertaking for an octogenarian, but physical fitness and ability clearly were family attributes. One of Brown's children, Brevard, likely [was as fine an athlete as ever wore a Swain High uniform](#). What was sometimes described as an "all-rounder," he excelled in basketball and baseball in high school and was a multi-sport star as a college athlete, adding track and tennis to his repertoire. The fact that he is not in the Swain County High School Athletic Hall of Fame is inexplicable to me (and [he has been nominated](#)). Perhaps the fact that his senior year was spent in another school because the family moved is a partial explanation, but his athletic excellence is undeniable.

Rev. Brown's influence remains manifest in many ways even today. Camp Living Water continues to thrive, and any time I drive by there in the summer and see lots of youngsters enjoying themselves, or notice all the ongoing improvements which have been made to the buildings and grounds over the years, I think of the man whose vision this was and the manner in which he convinced others to share that vision. One personal connected with Camp Living Water will perhaps serve as a bit of a window to Brown's dream and its impact.

Decades ago I saw a tiny classified ad in this newspaper offering two fly rods for sale. They were briefly described (both were quality bamboo rods from famed companies) and a phone number given for contact. I called the number and talked to a nice lady for perhaps a minute as I indicated an interest in getting a price for and possibly purchasing the rods. At that point the woman chuckled and said: "You don't know who you are talking to, do you? It's Maisie Young (Frank's wife). Let me get Frank." It turned out that both of the rods had been given to Frank by appreciative visiting anglers he had helped.

We talked some about our shared fishing experiences together over the years and then got down to the matter at hand. "I don't need these fancy rods," Frank said, "but I know they are worth quite a bit and I sure would like to raise some money for Camp Living Water. It's also a way for me to remember as fine a man as I ever knew, W. Herbert Brown." We talked further and the end result was that the two rods (a one-piece English rod made by Hardy and a three-piece American one from F. E. Thomas Rod Company) became part of my angling paraphernalia. Frank, for his part, was able to donate money, not to mention countless work hours he had already put in there, to Camp Living Water.

Rev. Brown had that degree of impact on many folks. Camp Living Water, Hillside Baptist Church, the Smoky Mountain Bible Conference, a fine literary legacy, and countless changed lives all are testament to an exceptional life lived by a man who, while not a Swain native, made a lasting impact on the local scene and beyond.