

# Bethlehem School Construction:

## First New School – 1924; Second New School - 1988-1991

By Dr. Warren Hollar

The recent demolition and burning of the old first grade building at Bethlehem Elementary School brought back many memories of the construction of the present school. As the former principal, I had many responsibilities for the planning and review of the new school construction as well as the safety of all who used the school during this period. Since few of the original staff of the school are still there, I thought it might be interesting and relevant to review the process with pictures, so a historical record could be kept through the archives of the Bethlehem Star. As part of this record, I am including the history of the construction of the first school and some historical glimpses of the community and the churches of the Bethlehem area.

### Original Bethlehem School built in the 1920's

The following information was presented in the Bethlehem Star in 2008 as a Hogan's Mountain Column. The information for this column came from several sources including work done by Judy Craig, a former teacher at Bethlehem School, and her students; Elsie Moretz, former teacher and first editor of the Bethlehem School Star; interviews with former students and staff members; and first-hand knowledge from my years at Bethlehem.

### A New School for Bethlehem

In the summer of 1924, Katie Moretz was sitting at the kitchen table with her parents Webster and Rhoda Moretz discussing the opening of a new school in the Bethlehem area. This new school would be called Bethlehem School and would provide large classrooms, an auditorium, and even electric lights powered by a generator. Webster had heard that construction was behind schedule and the school would not open until later in the fall. On the far side of Hogan's Mountain, John and Lena Hollar were holding the same discussion with their sons, Ed and Jay Hollar. John and Lena were asking their sons if they were willing to cross over Hogan's Mountain with their younger siblings to meet the bus to the new school. Both sets of parents expressed their wonder that a bus system would provide transportation for their children to school for the first time in county history. Little did Katie and Jay know that attending the new consolidated school would provide opportunities for the development of a life-long love affair and having five sons, one of whom would become principal of Bethlehem School. Jay

Hollar and Katie Moretz Hollar were my parents and members of the graduating class of 1929 of Bethlehem Consolidated High School.

Bethlehem was the first consolidated school in the county and was composed of students from early one and two teacher schools such as Pisgah, Herman, Duncan, Teague, Preslar and Lail schools. The land for the new school was acquired from Robert Starnes and Taylor Johnson. The eight-classroom school and auditorium were contracted by Alexander County to Cline and Marlow Construction Company for the sum of \$55,000.

Great excitement abounded for the 150-160 students scheduled to attend the new eight-grade school. Weather and construction issues delayed the opening of the new school to the late fall of 1924. Robert Clemmer, who went on to become a well-known architect in Hickory was the first principal. Mr. Clemmer took the job after his sophomore year at Lenoir Rhyne College at the ripe-old age of 21 years. He was paid the princely sum of \$125 per month for his services. He not only was the principal but taught eighth grade. Six other teachers served then new school including Elijah Teague, Mary Woodfin, Rachel Alexander, Elizabeth Wike and Carrie Preslar. Teachers and the principal boarded in residents' homes.

In 1926, the high school was added. Students graduated after eleventh grade instead of after the present twelfth grade. The first class graduated in May 1927 with five graduates. Members of the first class where Ed Hollar, Ray Sherrill, Edith Teague, Cecil Teague, and Essie Johnson. The school remained a high school until 1931, when the tenth and eleventh grade were moved to Taylorsville High School. In 1941, the ninth grade moved to Taylorsville. In 1976, West Middle School opened. Seventh and eighth grade students were moved there. Sixth grade was moved to West Middle when Alexander Central High School was expanded.

A state bus transportation program was started in rural areas in the 1920's. Bethlehem was the first school in the county to have buses. The first two buses were World War I army buses. These buses had bench seats down each side and back to back bench seats in the middle of the bus. The metal windows of the bus were raised on hinges and attached to the inside top of the bus. This created an added incentive for students to remain seated because of the ever-pres-

ent danger of being hit in the head. Roads were not paved so there was a real chance that a window cover would come crashing down at some time during the bus route. A barn belonging to Robert Starnes was next to the school property. This was used as the bus garage. The first two bus drivers were Dewey Preslar and Willard Starnes. Pay for driving the bus was 50 dollars per year. Other early drivers included Sam Hefner, Marvin Hefner, J.W. Hall, W.T. Starnes, Partee Coonse, Partee Reese, and Adam Bowman.

For many years the school was heated with a coal-fired boiler in the basement. The heat was spread throughout the building with radiators. The temperature in the classrooms was regulated by raising and lowering high windows in each classroom. Custodians had the duty to fire the boiler and shovel the coal. On many occasions wayward students were enlisted to do their time on the coal pile. Early custodians also had the duty to keep the generator and batteries for the lights in working order. In the early years there were no electric power lines providing service to the school. The first custodian was Partee Austin. Some other custodians included Gus Bowman (killed on the way to school), Partee Coonse, Partee Reese, Adam Bowman, and Wade and Ann Bowman. So, it seems that people with the name of Partee or Bowman filled this position for many years.

In the early years of the school, travel was difficult because of the dirt roads in winter. The teachers in the school chose to board at the homes of different community citizens. Some boarded at the home of Taylor Johnson, others boarded at the home of Robert Starnes who was the chair of the local school committee, and others boarded with Dewey Preslar.

### Historical Glimpse of the Community Served by Bethlehem High School

The Bethlehem Community was very rural during the days of Bethlehem High School. The nearest thing to a village was the area around the high school. The area had two stores and a church near the school. One of the stores belonged to Robert Starnes, who gave land for the school and served as a county commissioner.

Although there was no electric power in the immediate area, a hydro-electric dam had been built on the Middle Little River near where the Moretz Grain Mill operated. The dam was operated by the Dudley Shoals

Company and was later sold to Southern Power Company, the precursor of Duke Power Company.

The road leading by the school was dirt and often in ill-repair during the winter. The road basically followed the present-day route to the area near Mt. Bethel Church. It then took a more south westerly path by the Pumpkin Center Cotton Mill and then through the bottom lands of the Catawba River to the Moore's Ferry which was near the present Oliver's Landing area. Our family is lucky enough to have a picture of my grandmother, Rhoda Moretz, pulling her buggy onto the Moore's Ferry on her way to deliver produce to Hickory.

If we look even further back in history, we can see that the Bethlehem area was populated partially by those who received land grants for their service in battles such as Kings Mountain and the Indian Wars. One such person was Joseph Starnes who was an ancestor of many present-day Bethlehem residents. He received a land grant issued by the high sheriff of Burke County. Note: The Bethlehem area was part of both Burke and Caldwell counties before the formation of Alexander County in 1847. Mr. Starnes received a land grant of 650 acres for his service at Kings Mountain and with Daniel Boone in Kentucky. This land was in the area around the present school and Bethlehem Baptist Church.

My source for the following story, H.E. Moretz, is now deceased, but the printed information implied that the story was printed in the Mountain Scout, the precursor of The Taylorsville Times. The article talked about the vast expanses of forest that stood in the Wittenberg Township. The article went into great deal concerning how one of resident's sheep got mixed up with another farmer's flock and went home with it. The farmer missed the sheep and mounted a large ox that he owned and went after the sheep. Each farmer had a stock mark to identify their animals since there were few fences in those days. When he arrived at his neighbor's farm, the sheep was easily identified and easily captured with a bowl of bran and salt. The farmer mounted his ox for the return home and asked the other farmer to hand him the sheep. The bull objected and the first attempt to hand the sheep to the farmer failed. The second farmer took off his vest and covered the ox's eyes. He then handed the sheep to the first farmer and uncovered the ox's eyes. The bull then raised his voice and tail and moved to strike out home at a rapid pace. For the first hundred yards the distance between the farmer and the bull was from ten to fifteen inches at short intervals, but the distance was vertical. Impressively, the farmer regained his seat each time. It was further noted that as the bull crossed the crest of the hill, the bull's voice had lost none of its resonance and his tail was described as circling the air at about a three-foot diameter and at

a rate of thirty revolutions per minute. The whole proceeding was ended at the farmer's barn where both the farmer and sheep were deposited in a briar patch via an abrupt stop.

The farmer was identified as William Fox, the son of Moses and Polly Fox. He was married to Nancy Julian. They had five sons and three daughters. William served in the Confederacy under the Conscription Acts. He was killed in the battle of Hanover Junction by a ball through his head. His brother, Solomon Fox, was killed in the same manner at Antietam. Another brother was killed at Petersburg, one of the last battles of the Civil War.

William's oldest son, Harvey Fox, was a soldier in General Custer's famous black horse cavalry and barely missed the fight at Little Big Horn. It just so happened that he was in Major Reno's detachment that was sent out just before the Indians appeared. Frank Martin, another soldier from the northeast section of Alexander County, was not so lucky. He was killed at the Battle of the Little Big Horn. Today on the windswept plains of Montana, at the Little Big Horn, there is a granite marker to Frank Martin. One can only imagine how these two Alexander County residents wound up under General Custer's command.

I did digress from my description of the community in the 1920's. There are just so many rich stories of our local history that it is hard not to make them known. Components of this column came from information obtained from H.E. Moretz before his death, from an early Bethlehem Star, and from the Alexander County webpage.

### Early Bethlehem Churches

During the 1800's several churches were started in Wittenburg Township. The main roads today are Highway 127, Rink Dam Road, Icard Ridge Road, and Teague Town Road. In the early days, the two main roads were the Ellendale-Hickory Highway and the Barrett's Road which ran from the area near the present Oxford Dam and the confluence of the Catawba River and Upper Little River. Several of these churches were directly on the old Barrett's Road. Based on early maps, the Barrett's Road meandered closely to the present Rink Dam Road and Hubbard Road and into Caldwell County near an estate called Catawba View. Catawba View was the home of Abner Payne, Dr. Cyrus Flowers and other leading merchants and farmers.

### Pisgah Methodist Church

The church was in the southwest corner of Wittenburg township about three-fourths of a mile north of the Catawba River and directly on the Barrett's Road. A large pine tree marked the entrance to the church cemetery. This is the present Pisgah Cemetery at the junction of Hubbard Road and Cemetery Loop.

The church had many influential citizens from Alexander, Catawba, and

Caldwell Counties. Dr. Cyrus Flowers and his family were members of the church. His father, Adam Flowers, was a soldier in the War of 1812 and one of the early settlers along the Catawba River. The Payne and Marshall families, successful early merchants and farmers were also early members. Coleman Payne was a member from Caldwell County and a resident of part of Catawba View.

The church was known for its large camp meetings that were attended by many influential residents of the three county areas. As the years progressed toward the end of the nineteenth century, many of the residents of places such as Catawba View chose to build city mansions in the "urban" area of Hickory and join churches in that area. The original building had been shared with a small Lutheran congregation which was the precursor to the present Mt. Pisgah Lutheran Church.

### Mt. Pisgah Lutheran Church

The first building was used for both Pisgah Methodist and Pisgah Lutheran on alternating Sundays. The land donated by Abraham Bolick was also used for a school. The building was destroyed by fire in the early 1930's. Shiloh Lutheran Church allowed the Pisgah Lutherans to use their building until a new building could be constructed on land donated by Partee Bolick. The new building opened in 1934 and served as a church until the building had to be moved because of the construction of NC 127 in 1967. The present building was opened and serves the needs of the congregation and houses a food bank for the needy, the Bethlehem Senior Center, and scouting groups. The Bethlehem Star is also located on church property.

### Mt Bethel Methodist Episcopal Church

Mt Bethel was begun in 1876 as Mt. Bethel Methodist Episcopal Church and affiliated with the Blue Ridge-Atlantic Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. The church was and is located on Highway 127 which at the time of the church founding was called the Ellendale-Hickory Highway. The church was about 1/3 mile north of the Barrett's Road and two miles south of the Bethlehem Baptist Church. As with other churches in the community, there were very strong family ties to the church. Henry Payne and Anna Price conveyed the land for the original church building. The church was heavily populated with people with last names of Starnes, Payne and Bolick. It is also interesting that there were at least two sets of ministers with the same last names - Clark and Dennis. In later years the church was affiliated with the United Methodist Church and the name was changed to Mt Bethel United Methodist Church.

**Shiloh Lutheran Church**

Shiloh Lutheran Church was organized about 1893 and was located on the old Barrett's Road (Present Hubbard Road) about three fourths mile

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Bethlehem School in 1927



The first graduating class of Bethlehem High School in 1927

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