

The year was 1945 and World War II was drawing to an end. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt had died and Harry Truman became the country's new president. "The Lost Weekend" won Best Picture and "On the Atchison, Topeka and the Santa Fe" Best Song at the Motion Picture Academy's awards ceremony. Here in North Carolina, the Southern Synod of the Evangelical and Reformed Church formally acquired the Hughes Estate, which came to be known as the Blowing Rock Assembly Grounds.

The 75-acre Hughes Estate, occupying the highest elevation in the Blowing Rock

area, had been the summer home of a Charleston lawyer. The main house had taken two years to construct. It was an impressive structure, visible from almost every area of Blowing Rock. The house consisted of three levels and was constructed of virgin pine. The walls and twelve-foot ceilings were paneled with beaded boards in a variety of patterns and



decorated extensively with wood filigree. Columnar archways accented the windows, and the fireplaces were surrounded by Italian marble tiles and topped with elaborate mantels. A huge cistern under the house provided a supply of water pumped from a distant spring and a large water storage tank in the attic above the third floor provided fire protection. For purposes of safety and to keep the house free of kitchen heat, a separate building served as the kitchen.

Local historians relate that this was just one of Mr. Hughes' homes. Area residents remember him for his lavish entertaining and fast horses. During this period the fields around the spring were planted in buckwheat. Accounts indicate that the Hughes Estate and the Moses Cone Estate provided the sites for the majority of the entertaining in Blowing Rock during the early 1900's, but there was one major difference. Since the Cones did not permit alcoholic beverages, the more spirited parties took place at the end of Goforth Road!

The 1945 purchase of the Hughes Estate by the Southern Synod of the Evangelical and Reformed Church included 58 acres and a variety of outbuildings. Mrs. Annie

Shuford, a member of what is now Trinity UCC in Conover, spearheaded a campaign to raise sufficient funds to cover the \$16,500.00 purchase price from members of the Shuford family.

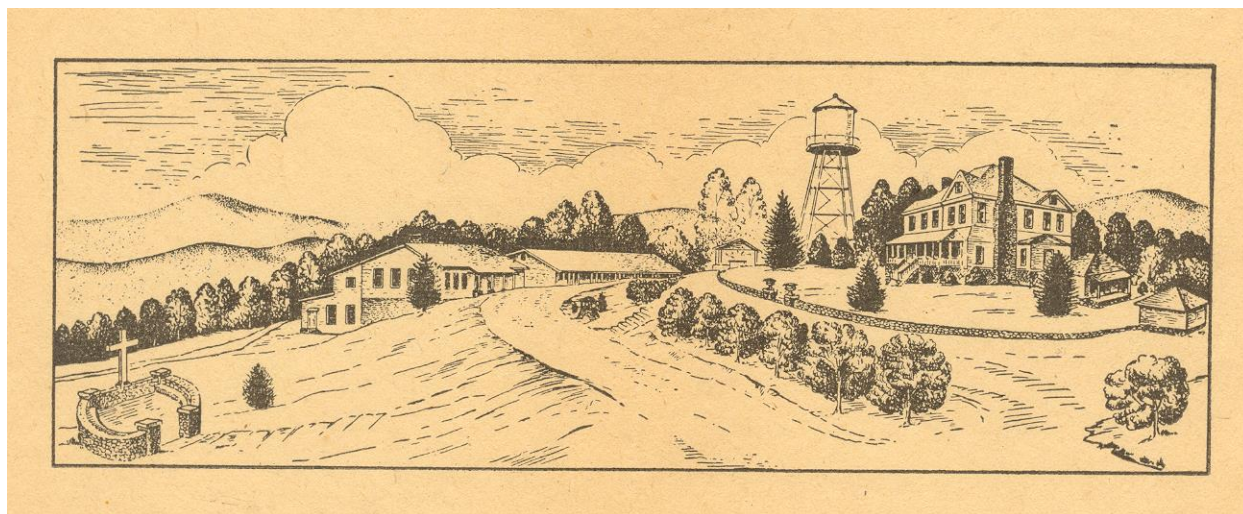
In 1948, by action of the Southern Synod, the property was named "The Blowing Rock Assembly Grounds".

Mr. and Mrs. Perry A. Carpenter were hired in 1949 as manager and hostess for the first summer of operation, serving 516 overnight guests. Although the Carpenters served only one year, it was through their efforts that the Synod recognized the wisdom of employing full time management during their summer season.

### **1950-1970: The Early Years**

The papers for incorporation of the Blowing Rock Assembly Grounds were filed on November 8, 1950.

For the first several years of operation, the "big white house" served as the only facility at Blowing Rock Assembly Grounds, with all activities taking place in that one building. In the early 1950's the transformation from a family's summer estate into an assembly grounds for the church began in 1952-53 with the building of Rowe Dorm, named for Rev. Dr. Walter W. Rowe, whose vision inspired the property acquisition.



*Early sketch of the Assembly  
Grounds*

During those same years, Shuford Hall's Guild Room and Brotherhood Hall were erected to provide dining and meeting space and the beautiful outdoor chapel was constructed. With the combination of Rowe Motel and the old manor house, the Assembly Grounds could now accommodate eighty-one guests at one time.

Over the course of a summer season, as many as 1,150 guests would stay at the Assembly Grounds. In 1960, the cottages were built; Shuford A, Shuford B, Barringer (C) and Hoover (D) Cottages brought a new dimension to the Assembly Grounds.

During this busy and exciting period of 1950 until 1967, Mr. and Mrs. Homer (Edith) Bonds, from Salisbury, North Carolina, were the summer managers. In 1967 Rev. Dr. George Dillinger was called to be the first full time Executive Director and charged with 'developing the Blowing Rock Assembly Grounds as the great conference center of our newly merged church (referring to the merger of Evangelical and Reformed churches with Congregational and Christian Churches), both regional-wise and denominational-wise.'



Rev. Dr. Sterling Whitener succeeded Rev. Dillinger in 1969, serving as part-time Executive Director.

During those early years of 1950-1970, the minutes of Board of Trustees meetings contain a number of interesting notations:

- Congregations were challenged to give 50¢ per member to the Assembly Grounds, and many did. It was noted in 1958 that \$5,097.95 was received, and that over the previous fifteen years a total of \$91,370.72 had been given by churches and individuals, about one-third of BRAG's operating budget at that time.
- In 1954, the American Freedom Association from Salisbury was the first "outside" group to use the Assembly Grounds, for a charge of \$7.00 per person per day.
- The 1959 summer folder was mailed to every E & R pastor east of the Mississippi River, and to Congregational Christian Churches in North Carolina and Virginia.

- The youth fellowships of Davidson County raised \$400.00 to build a shelter.
- The 17<sup>th</sup> item in the agenda of the 1960 fall board meeting was a discussion concerning problems during the past season; "We had too many outsiders and our own people had to sleep in cars, a dog was running through the kitchen and dining room, the loose operation of concessions, the sale of articles on the grounds, and the asking of groups to fund pet projects".

On the whole, the board meeting minutes from those early years do not differ dramatically from today's: faithful staff and committed board members all wrestling with what it means to be a church-related conference center, paying the bills, maintaining and upgrading the facility, and being of service.

### **The 1970's: The Abernethy Years**



*Mike Abernethy, 1990*

The 1970's were years of financial challenges. After three years of having a full time executive director, the operation had not expanded either regionally or denominationally, so the Board of Trustees was forced to return to employing only seasonal staff.

Mike and Flora Belle Abernethy and their family, members of Grace UCC in Newton, volunteered to be directors for several summers (1971-78) and served faithfully. However, these were years when financial support on the conference level was non-existent and there was little in the way of support through usage or encouragement, and income continued at

the same level as in the 1960's. Even so, the Abernethy family managed to keep the Assembly Grounds operational and broadened the support base among church groups.

From 1973 to 1975 a capital campaign to raise \$50,000 to build a tent and trailer area was unsuccessful, and in 1977 the Southern Conference of the United Church of Christ recommended, based on a task force report, the closure of the Assembly Grounds. The incorporated BRAG Board of Trustees, feeling that the Assembly Grounds was important in the life of the Conference, rejected the report and charted a new course of leadership and expansion.

### **The 1980's: The Clapp Years**

In March of 1979 Rev. Ken Clapp was called to serve as the full-time General Manager of the Assembly Grounds. The all-inclusive responsibilities of the position included employee supervision, maintenance and upkeep of buildings, adequate and tasty meals, worship services at the 'Little White Church', initiation and

implementation of Christian Education programs, preparation of printed materials, and publication of promotional articles'.

In 1979, Ken approached the Board of Trustees with a concern that demand for the use of the Grounds far exceeded its capacity. He suggested that an expansion program be considered to deal with this "problem". The Board acted, amid feelings of nostalgia, to tear down the three-story manor house and replace it with a new building, for the cost of making the old house fully usable would have been prohibitive. The removal of the house began late that year.



*Ken Clapp, on duty at the front desk.*

It was also in the fall of 1979 that the Board of Trustees approved the winterization of the Cottages, and the Assembly Grounds became a year-round operation. By the following March, Zwingli Cottage had been built and Calvin Cottage was under construction.



for year round usage, and as the decade drew to a close, the Southern Conference Youth Center, Abernethy Cottage and the Ken Clapp Gymnatorium were

*The Southern Conference Youth Center, under construction in 1988*

But bigger things were to come, for in October 1980, ground was broken for Corriher Lodge. Just as the Shuford family had rallied around the great potential of the idea of an assembly grounds in the 1940's, another family, Mr. and Mrs. J. Fred Corriher, Sr. and their sons Fred Jr. and Gene provided financial impetus for the creation of this new facility.

In 1984 Rowe Dorm was winterized and constructed, and dedicated in May of 1990.

Ken had been hired to develop the Assembly Grounds as a viable ministry. With exceptional support from trustees, churches, staff and others:

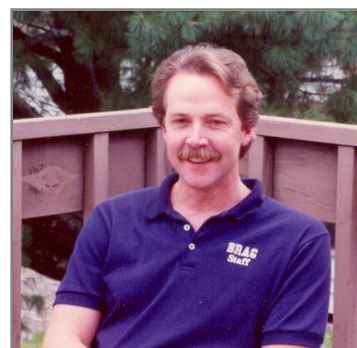
- BRAG became the second member of the American Youth Hostels in North Carolina
- College students were employed as summer staff
- Non-church groups were invited to utilize the Assembly Grounds
- BRAG's first Confirmation Retreat began in 1980, and other programs soon followed
- A land-use plan was developed
- The operation exceeded \$100,000 in revenues
- The BRAG Corps, our church-related booster club, began in 1980
- A major gift from the Corriher family enabled lodge construction to begin
- BRAG and John's River Camp entered into a shared staffing arrangement
- Capital expenditures of over two million dollars more than doubled the size of the operation

In ten years the Assembly Grounds had gone from a seasonal operation with part-time volunteer management to a year-round operation with multiple professional staff members, had invested greatly in capital improvements, and had developed strong partnerships with not-for-profit groups outside the United Church of Christ.

In the summer of 1989, Ken Clapp accepted a new call and change in his ministry as chaplain of his Alma Mater, Catawba College in Salisbury, and Michael Chambliss stepped in as Acting Executive Director.

## 1990-2001: The Johnson Years

Eric Johnson was called in 1989 to be the Assembly Grounds' next Executive Director. Eric and the Board of Trustees were confronted with a different set of issues than any of their predecessors. Utilization of the Assembly Grounds was booming and adult space was in demand, yet there was no successful programmatic following. Times had changed, and buildings that were viable in the 1950's did not always meet present needs. A major concern was that some of our larger United Church of Christ retreats were unhappy with the dorm accommodations.



*Eric Johnson, 1990*

The Board of Trustees engaged the Babcock School of Business to conduct a field study, and it was determined that expansion was a viable option. However, the

idea of new construction was met with mixed reviews by the Board of Trustees and friends of the Assembly Grounds. While some felt that modern facilities would attract more guests, it was also perceived that present facilities were not in good repair and that programming was not driving the need for additional lodging.

The 'expansionist' members of the Board of Trustees prevailed, over 1.5 million dollars was borrowed, and in 1995 the construction of South Corriher Lodge and the expansion of Leonard Dining Room (so named for Rev. Billy Joe Leonard, President of the BRAG Board of Trustees from 1961 to 1979) was begun. The goal was for new business and new revenues to pay off the debt. Business did expand – \$400,000 in annual revenues grew to \$650,000. However, annual loan payments of \$186,000 and increased operating expenses began to take their toll on cash reserves. The operation was losing ground and it was time to act boldly to reduce the debt.

In 2001, Eric completed nearly twelve years of service and resigned to pursue other interests, and Steve MacDow agreed to serve as Acting Director for the interim period.



It was also in 2001 that the Board of Trustees launched a capital campaign to pay off the construction debt and upgrade the facilities. The "Lifting Spirits High" campaign raised \$265,000, which, after expenses, was used for debt reduction. The Board's decision to expand has been proven a sound one – the new rooms represent one-third of present utilization and 200-250 guests are routinely hosted.

*View of South Corriher Lodge, 2005*

## **Alive and Well: 2002 and Beyond**

The Board of Trustees called William Bourdon as Executive Director in September 2002. Both the Board of Trustees and Bill realized the precariousness of the Assembly Grounds' financial situation. Income was falling short of projections, assets were being sold to shore up the operation, the capital campaign was far from meeting its million-dollar goal, and ten years of debt had taken their toll on routine maintenance.

The Board of Trustees guided and authorized Bill to reduce the debt and operate a balanced budget. Year round and summer staff expenses were adjusted to adhere

more closely to national norms. Buffering parcels of land purchased in the late 1980's and early 1990's not being used by the Grounds were evaluated and portions were sold to retire the debt.

In 2003, the consulting firm of Richard K. Chamberlain and Associates was contracted to help the Board focus on the long-term future of the Assembly Grounds. A year of study resulted in the Board addressing key issues so that the Grounds would become a viable ministry for years to come. A new mission statement was written that recognizes that we **are** an ecumenical center; the name was changed to more accurately describe who we are today, and the vision that we are to be a well-run and well maintained conference center was identified. The mission statement exemplifies why we are here: This holy ground of Blowing Rock Conference Center exists so that God's people can gather for community development, education, and spiritual growth.

As in the early years, committed Board members and a faithful staff continue to deal with what it means to be church-related, where to upgrade the facility, and how to best serve all who pass through our doors. Our ministry, now over 16,000 guest nights per year, is fueled by the effort of countless people who share in leading programs, directing retreats, cleaning dining room tables, chaperoning youth groups, volunteering for Special Days, and bringing work groups – all to bring us closer to living out the special mission that is the Blowing Rock Conference Center.

Thousands of diverse individuals now travel to these Blue Ridge Mountains in North Carolina in all seasons for retreats, meetings, and workshops at the Conference Center. What was initially only a summer gathering place for Evangelical & Reformed Churches 60 years ago continues to be their 'place in the mountains', but it is now much more thanks to gifted leadership, generous contributors, guests who return every year, and many people in local congregations who give according to their means to make possible the development of these facilities. Donations from many churches and individuals have been invested in the property and have returned ten-fold to create a vision of what Dr. Rowe felt in 1945 when he said that "this might prove to become a conference grounds". We are grateful to each and every one.

"To this place, fashioned by the Divine Hand, go hundreds of people each season just to breathe the air and catch the vision of larger things."

*Banks J. Peeler*  
*Editor, A Story of the Southern Synod*  
*Of the Evangelical and Reformed Church*  
1968



# The First Sixty Years

Blowing Rock Conference  
Center