

Whispering through the Trees—Eagle Eyrie’s 45 years of Ministry

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Many Lynchburg residents have never been to Eagle Eyrie, or even know what it is. Of those who have heard the name, few realize how large it is, or understand the impact it has on area businesses. Located ten miles from downtown Lynchburg, overlooking the grandeur of the hills and valleys of the Blue Ridge Mountains, Eagle Eyrie Baptist Conference Center perches atop Locke Mountain. One of the largest conference centers on the eastern coast, the facility will celebrate 45 years of service as a religious retreat center in July.

Owned and operated by the Virginia Baptist Mission Board of the Baptist General Association of Virginia, an association of 1,400 Southern Baptist Churches of Virginia, the property was purchased from C. J. Stephenson, a retired Canadian banker, in 1950. The original 195 acres have since grown to almost 600, and what was once merely a place to hold summer assemblies has developed into a conference ministry with about 23,000 guests annually.

Within its secluded and serene wooded acres, Eagle Eyrie is a 1,000-bed center with 45 buildings on campus. These include the 45-bedroom Cedar Crest Hotel; 32 self-contained homes called Lodges, averaging 6 bedrooms each; the 15-bedroom Voight Conference Center; a Prayer Chapel; an auditorium with seating for 1,000 and 40 classrooms; and the 6-bedroom Hoover Learning Center, its newest acquisition.

“We do about 190 events per year, anywhere from a 20-person guest banquet to 1,160 teenagers and their sponsors,” said W. Wesley Huff, director and administrator for the past 13 years. “Our primary clientele are Christian groups.”

Like a small town, the center has a lake that provides the facility with water. “We operate our own water processing and waste water treatment plants, street lights, and roads. The only thing we don’t do is generate our own power.”

Eagle Eyrie, which means “Eagle’s Nest,” has a history that spans 240 years. Originally part of a generous land grant from King George III of England that also included Natural Bridge, the land was eventually divided between Nicholas Davies and Thomas Jefferson.

Davies, a successful merchant in Henrico County, received over 30,000 acres, including the areas that now comprise Amherst and Bedford Counties. Jefferson received the remaining portion of the grant, including Natural Bridge.

Davies built Eagle Eyrie on a section of the property he named Fleming Mountain in honor of his wife Judith Fleming Randolph. He also named the

stream at the foot of the mountain for her—Judith’s Creek. In 1785, when he moved into his manor house, Eagle Eyrie became a hunting lodge. Later, this part of the land was sold to the Ogdens, who took over ownership of the Eagle Eyrie tavern in 1858, and the area was renamed Ogden’s Gap.

Lore has it that during horse and buggy days when the tavern was an overnight stop for travelers between Lynchburg and Lexington, the coach’s driver would ring a bell down at Judith Creek to notify the tavern keeper how many suppers to prepare. The number of rings represented the number of guests. It would then take an hour to make the arduous trek to the top of the mountain, a trip that now takes about three minutes. The original stone entrance for the stagecoach still stands.

The tavern was sold to Seymour Locke in 1909, a retired New York architect, and the peak was renamed Locke Mountain. Today, the mountain across the highway from Locke Mountain is officially known as Fleming Mountain. Locke redesigned the old tavern into a home, and converted the old post office into a guest cottage.

In 1915 a refugee from Holland, Baron O’Quarles von Ufford, purchased the property from Locke. But the refuge he sought never came. Suspected of spying for the Germans, he was under constant surveillance, and many of the local residents were afraid of the family. Faced with such unfriendliness and overt hostility, the Baron, his wife, and mother-in-law left the area.

After catering to many a wedding party and club or college banquet over the years, the beautiful twelve-room mansion they built to replace the Locke home, called the “White House,” fell into disrepair and was demolished by the Virginia Baptist Mission Board to prepare the way for the Voight Conference Center.

A later owner, Howard Cheatham, constructed the Rock Gate House as a roadside “Tea Room.” The Gate House is still standing, serving the retreat as an ice cream parlor and a bookstore, and staff members, dubbing it “the Palace,” have even slept there. “It’s an interesting place,” said Huff, smiling broadly. Reputedly, it is a large beehive at the present time, as honeybees have taken up residence.

Ironically, the original owner, Nicholas Davies, was a faithful member of the Established Church of England, staunchly believing that the then-despised Baptists were heretics. He served as a member of the grand jury in Henrico County that sentenced several early Baptist preachers to prison. Little did he know in the distant future, descendents of these Baptists would own and operate their conference center on his former property.

On July 2, 1999, the Virginia Baptist Mission Board acquired the Donald Britton property, consisting of an 8,000-square foot home on 25 acres. In

September of that same year, they opened an adult training facility on that property known as the Lawrence Hoover Learning Center, honoring the generosity of the Lawrence Hoover family in the acquisition and development of the new facility.

The upscale center features six bedrooms, a conference area, a media center, a library, an exercise room, a sunroom, an outdoor pool and deck, and a therapeutic hot tub. In redesigning the home as an adult training facility, the living room was converted into a bedroom, one of the balconies was closed off, and Britton's lodge was converted into an executive suite.

Joan McDonough, wife of Executive Director Dr. Reginald M. McDonough, decorated three of the bedroom and bathroom areas, while Huff's wife Fern decorated the other three. Each area has its own theme, and features such amenities as robes and slippers for two guests. The center is available for such programs as Bible study groups, marriage enrichment, deacon training, church staff and adult spiritual retreats, and church council meetings. Future plans for the Hoover Center include expanding the number of bedrooms to 20.

Last year, Eagle Eyrie converted one of the Lodges into two apartments to serve as a respite for ministers who are terminated from service. The ministers and their families can come and live for free while they get therapy to help them reconstruct their lives. This is a new ministry for the center.

The Conference Center also owns Fleming Mountain. Although there are no retreat facilities located on this side of the highway, the area does feature hiking trails and a beautiful view of the surrounding hills and valleys. The remains of the foundation from Davies' hunting lodge can still be seen.

Eagle Eyrie as a whole is continually undergoing improvements, and there are plans for several new buildings and a campus-wide rebuilding that will separate administration, food service, and programs into individual locations. Considering how far they have already come from the primitive facilities of the 1950s, it is not hard to imagine their plans will bear fruit.

At the 40th anniversary celebration in 1996, the first director, William Beazley (1956-59), reminisced about clearing brush, ridding the area of poisonous snakes, and living within a monthly equipment budget of \$50. Times have indeed changed! Through the efforts of Beazley, Malcolm Burgess (director from 1960-1988), the Reverend Herbert R. Carlton (first Secretary for Summer Assemblies), Huff, and many other dedicated staff members and volunteers, Eagle Eyrie has become, as McDonough called it, "one of the primary ministries of Virginia Baptists."

Stepping out onto the pool deck at the Hoover Center, one cannot help but feel awed by the towering trees that provide Eagle Eyrie with serene seclusion just minutes away from the hustle and bustle of downtown Lynchburg and its

major arteries. From this vantage point, one looks toward Appomattox, the airport, the Peaks of Otter, Charlottesville, the Blue Ridge Parkway, and Big Island.

In the winter, the hills and the valley are the most visible, majestic in their barrenness, with crystalline branches glistening with frost and occasional pockets of snow. The spring brings a steady awakening, as the once bare trees bloom in the warmth of the sun. In the height of the summer, morning mists coat the trees in a humid shroud until the rising sun lifts the veil and a verdant blanket shades the valleys. With fall, the hills blaze briefly in a cacophony of color until the breath of frost returns.

In her booklet entitled "The Romance of Eagle Eyrie," Annie L. Carlton, wife of Reverend Carlton, touches upon the history, dreams, and inspired faith that have blended together to make the reality that is Eagle Eyrie today. She writes, "God is waiting to meet us in this place...In the singing of the birds and the west wind's whispering through the trees we shall hear His voice saying, 'Be still and know that I am God.'" All you have to do is listen.