



Ida E. Hood

Belmont College: *Beginnings*



Susan L. Heron

In reporting the opening of Belmont College on September 4, 1890, the *Nashville Daily American* called the new school for young ladies "the Vassar of the South." The inaugural ceremony, filled with the pomp and circumstance befitting an institution of its stature, was indeed a grand occasion—"a red letter day in the educational annals of the city."

Girls from prestigious families all across the South and Southwest filled all the available spaces in the inaugural class, and 40 other disappointed girls had to enroll elsewhere. *The Daily American* said, "As it was, the roll call yesterday contained the names of ninety young ladies...daughters of the very best people of the sections they represent, and no more appropriate school-house could have been provided for them than this."

The newspaper account stated that the "grand old place" had never looked more beautiful, having had "every improvement that money and science can furnish." It further described the school as combining "stately grandeur of an ante-bellum mansion with the cosy conveniences of modern invention."

A Woman-Run School

The school's founders were Misses Susan Heron and Ida Hood. For 5 years, the women had been co-principals of Martin College in Pulaski. They were considering a move, to use their reputation for fine scholarship to better advantage in a larger city, perhaps Boston. Some Nashville friends persuaded the ladies to come to Nashville to see the Acklen estate which was, at that time, being offered for sale.

Mrs. Adelia Cheatham (who built the estate with her second husband, Joseph Acklen) had envisioned a school for young ladies on the property and had offered it for sale for that purpose. However, her dream was not realized until after her death.

Miss Hood later wrote, "We were driving out Hillsboro Road when we saw it for the first time. Miss Heron was extravagantly pleased with the place and forthwith made arrangements for locating here."

They acquired the property for \$52,000 and renovation of the house began. The *Daily American* reported: "It is well known that more than \$300,000 was spent on the house, grounds and outhouses, and doubtless much more if it could be investigated

accurately." It went on to say that the purchase included the house, the brick bowling alley, pavilions, extensive hot-houses and the water tower.

Wooldridge's *History of Nashville, Tennessee* described the new school in ultra-modern terms: "Belmont Place, as this location is called, has its own water-works, gasmachine and appliances, and electric light plant, and is thus independent of the city in these modern conveniences. The source of water supply is a never-failing limestone spring."

When friends later asked how they happened to choose the deserted Belmont estate which needed such extensive improvements to make it usable as a school, one of them would reply, "It was the old tower that did it."

Many of their former students and several teachers came with the ladies from Pulaski to the new school. Other faculty were recruited from Wellesley College and Cornell University. Both Heron and Hood were determined that their school would not be only a "finishing school." They had stated that they believed in "girl brains" and felt that girls were "as deserving of development as boy-brains." Therefore, a rigorous academy was instituted.

The school's early catalogues stated that Latin and Greek were standard for Belmont students. Also included in the \$60 a year tuition were class elocution, calisthenics and chorus singing. Private lessons in piano and voice were available, each for \$80 per year. Art and private elocution lessons were also offered.

Little is known of the Belmont College founders. Susan L. Heron and Ida E.

Hood were classmates in college, but the whereabouts of that college is uncertain. It is presumed to be in the Philadelphia vicinity. Almost nothing is known of their families. *Tennessean* writer Louise Davis wrote in 1948 that the town of Ida Grove, Iowa was named for Ida Hood. It is also known that Miss Heron had a brother in Virginia. When the ladies consulted him about their plan to establish a school, he told them to "Go South."

Davis also quotes a man who had known them in their early teaching years as saying, "Miss Heron was plump, red-headed, brown-eyed and evidently the leader." Heron, described as strong-willed, took care of the school's business, while "the gentle Miss Hood" had charge of the institution's academic side.

Before long, the college had grown enough to begin adding buildings. Fidelity and Founders halls were added to the west and east of "Friendship Hall" (later referred to as North Front), which began the north facade of the campus. The three buildings looked down the hill toward the city of Nashville in the distance. The *Daily American* reported that the school was "connected with the city by a private street-car line."

Life at Belmont

Activities enjoyed by the girls included outings to the zoo and picnicing in Glendale Park, accessible by street-car for 5 cents. In winter, they could hire a horse-drawn sleigh for \$5 an hour. They also made street-car excursions into Nashville for shopping—with chaperones, of course. On Sundays, the girls attended church in a

(continued on next page)

Editor's note: In anticipation of our Centennial Celebration in the 1990-91 school year, *The Circle* will feature a series of historical articles. These will relate the founding of the original Belmont College in 1890, its merging with Ward Seminary in 1913 to form Ward-Belmont School, and the founding of the present Belmont College in 1951 by the Tennessee Baptist Convention.

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Archives and Library. With their valuable assistance, research was not only interesting and exciting but considerably much easier.

Historical sources used include: *The Daily American*, April 27, 1890 and Sept. 5, 1890; *The Evening Herald*, June 5, 1890 and Sept. 4, 1890; *The Nashville American*, Oct. 24, 1899; *Nashville in the New South, 1880-1930* by Don H. Doyle; (1985, University of Tennessee Press) *Olympian Magazine*, vol. 2, July, 1903; and *History of Nashville, Tennessee* edited by J. Wooldridge (1890 edition, facsimile copy by Charles Elder Bookseller).