

WARD-BELMONT REUNION---1986

How many schools that have not existed for 35 years can boast of holding a reunion to which more than 650 former students came from all over the United States with a waiting list of well over 100? Such was the case when a Ward-Belmont reunion was held in Nashville, Tennessee, the weekend of April 18, 19, and 20, 1986.

It all began when a group got together more than a year before to wonder if such an occasion would be feasible. It was agreed that a letter should be sent out as a "feeler" to try and determine just how many would be interested if such a reunion were held. The response was overwhelming and it was decided immediately that it had to be done.

At the first committee meeting in April of 1985, someone asked how many we thought we could expect to attend. Minnie Pearl, who was co-chairman along with Ellen Hofstead, thought we probably should count on around 400. She was almost laughed out of the room! After all, members of the committee said, the school had not existed since 1951 and so many had died during that time; it was finally decided that we would do well to expect 250. The results prove that Minnie was nearer correct than the majority but even she missed it by a goodly number.

Registration for the occasion began on Friday afternoon in the lobby of the Vanderbilt Plaza Hotel which was headquarters for the reunion. Ward-Belmont "girls" began descending on the place in large numbers and all afternoon the lobby was filled with screams, hugs, and a few tears. There were old friends and classmates who had not seen one another for more than 50 years! A good many lies were told that afternoon when old friends remarked, "You haven't changed a bit!" I could not help being reminded of one of my close Ward-Belmont friends who, when told she hadn't changed "a bit," replied, "I'd hate like hell to think I looked like this 50 years ago!"

Registration continued throughout the late afternoon until it was time to get dressed for the cocktail supper which was held there at the hotel and so generously hosted by Aylene and Jack Massey. Once again there were screams, hugs, and tears when many who had not seen each other during the afternoon met for the first time that evening. Drinks were obtained at a cash bar and a buffet supper served afterward. A Combo was provided for the evening by Dorothy and Tom Frist who also furnished the lovely flower arrangements for the occasion.

Minnie Pearl, acting as Master of Ceremonies for the evening's event, tried in vain to get the attention of the "girls" in order to make a number of remarks. Later, on a TV program, she mentioned that her throat was sore from trying to talk above almost 700 women! Some of our old school songs were sung by the entire group (though few could remember the words).

Of course, the evening's activities concluded with the singing of "The Bells Of Ward-Belmont," the words of which most could remember. We wonder just how many times during the weekend that was sung and each time it brought tears to many eyes.

Saturday morning groups of friends gathered in the coffee shop for breakfast and soon afterward boarded buses for Belmont College, the geographical location of our old school. It was a gorgeous day and Belmont College went all out to make our visit there everything it could possibly be. Many of the students were there to greet us and were stationed around the campus to answer questions or be of any help they could be. The school had provided two photographers with instant cameras to take pictures of groups of friends and each friend was given a copy. We thought this an extra-special act of thoughtfulness and kindness on the part of the school. A relaxed, informal tour of the campus was available and many were able to visit their old rooms. Dr. Troutt, President of Belmont College, welcomed the group and offered a prayer before a box lunch was served in the area we knew as "Club Village." Once again Minnie Pearl attempted to get the attention of the "girls" but gave up and began playing the piano inspiring us all once again to attempt to sing some of the old school songs. A collection was taken up to help Miss Morrison defray some of the expenses of the nursing home where she is living now; now totally blind, she was 100 years old on March 15th and is the only teacher who came to Ward-Belmont when it was organized in 1913 and remained throughout all the years of its existence leaving only when the school was sold in 1951. We felt this a meaningful gesture to be able to make some little contribution to help her in these declining years of her life.

Many changes have taken place on the old Ward-Belmont campus since we were students there but the love and appreciation of the present school is evidenced everywhere. Even though it is a completely different institution, we who loved Ward-Belmont are deeply gratified to see that the present administration obviously appreciates its heritage and is dedicated to carrying on many of the fine traditions of Ward-Belmont.

After our visit to Belmont, out-of-town alumnae boarded the bus for a trip to Minnie Pearl's Museum as guests of Minnie herself. En route she gave an interesting account of all the changes that have taken place along Music Row, the street we knew as 16th Avenue when we were in school. This is the center of the Country Music Industry with numerous recording studios. Minnie said the little yellow house which contains memorabilia of her career is the type house she thinks a real Minnie Pearl would have lived in. Or, as she once expressed it, "It's filled with lots of love and mementos of my life and fifty years of entertaining."

I want to see Miss Morrison while I was there. She's of course, remembered me!

From Minnie's Museum the buses took us back to the hotel where we rested and visited with friends until time to leave for the drive to Harpeth Hall. As most Ward-Belmont "girls" know, Harpeth Hall is the private girls' school which was organized immediately after Ward-Belmont was sold. Many of the teachers went directly there and also many of the students who were suddenly shaken by the close of the school they loved. Harpeth Hall has become a school of outstanding merit with a nation-wide reputation for its scholastic achievements as well as those in other fields. It, too, deeply appreciates its heritage and continues to perpetuate so many of the traditions of its predecessor. As Dave Wood, Headmaster of Harpeth Hall, expressed it, "Indeed we do have a goodly heritage."

Arriving at Harpeth Hall we were directed to the old gymnasium where we were served wine during a period when we continued visiting and reminiscing with old friends and acquaintances. Soon we were led to the Catherine Morrison gymnasium where we were served a delicious, old-fashioned, country supper. At every plate was a white, sailor-type hat with the initials WB on one side and HH on the other, a gift to all the "girls" from Luke Simons.

Immediately after the supper we went to the auditorium for the program. Welcoming remarks and a prayer were given by Dave Wood and the program began. Ellen Hofstead acted as a psychiatrist and Minnie Pearl as a former Ward-Belmont girl. The psychiatrist asked Minnie why she had come to her. Minnie replied, "I want to go back." "Back where," asked the psychiatrist? At this point Minnie became uncontrollably tickled and, tucking her head between her knees said, "Back stage right now!" The point was that she wanted to go back to Ward-Belmont and the program proceeded with alums reinacting some of the events that were so much a part of our days at the school: a skit of swimmers dressed in tank-top bathing suits of the period; the Gym Class with the participants wearing authentic bloomers and middy blouses; the May Pole dance; George and Martha Washington and the minuet. Needless to say, all skits brought down the house. Minnie Pearl closed the program section with a Grinder's Switch skit which was followed by numbers sung by the Harpeth Hall chorus. The evening, and the planned Reunion, ended with the audience singing "The Bells Of Ward-Belmont."

Sunday morning the lobby of the hotel was alive with everyone trying to check out and saying "goodbye" amid more hugs and tears. Some extended their stay in the city by taking a trip on the Cumberland River in the new showboat, the General Jackson; others had brunch at the Opryland Hotel, an occasion highlighted by the strains of "The Bells Of Ward-Belmont" being played by a small combo in the lobby.

The love and devotion to Ward-Belmont was evidenced at every turn during the weekend. We who were fortunate enough to have spent some of our formative years at that institution will never outgrow the tremendous influence it had on our lives. We are indeed a privileged group!