



Ida E. Hood

# Belmont College: Beginnings

by Joan Yarborough



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. Adelicia 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, gas-machine 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.

Much appreciation goes to Jane Thomas, Belmont College archivist, as well as Carol Kaplan, Nashville Room librarian at Nashville Public Library, and Ruth Jarvis of the Tennessee State

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).

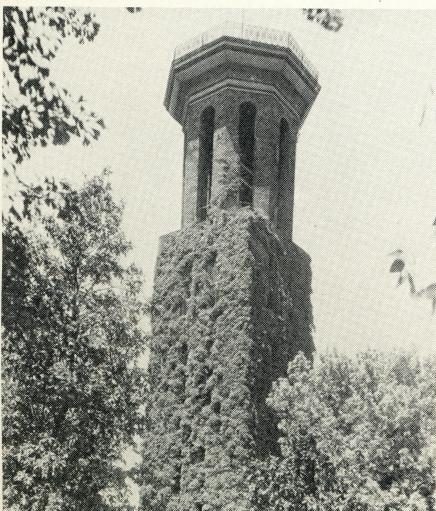


"Ladies in brown" in snow

group, usually to (Downtown) Presbyterian or McKendree Methodist. There were football games at Vanderbilt; and for cultural stimulation, there were trips to the Vendome Theatre where opera, the latest stage dramas, and concerts were presented. On some occasions, there were science lectures at Vanderbilt.

Sometimes there were trips out of town. Mammoth Cave was a two-day excursion by train. By 1900, the college was conducting three-month tours to Europe. The group would meet in New York at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel before setting sail together. Louise Davis relates an experience in Paris when they had been unable to get tickets to see Sarah Bernhardt in *L'Aiglon*. The actress heard of their disappointment and wrote each of the girls a special invitation to attend the performance. The girls saved those notes with her signature for their children and grandchildren.

Rules for the young women entrusted to the keeping of Belmont College were strict. (See rules reprinted from catalogue) Walking to the front gate without permission was considered "astonishing liberty" which called for reprimand. One young lady who waved at a young man in a



"It was the tower that did it."

## The Way It Was: Nashville in 1890

- "An overgrown country town" Nashville had a population of 76,168.
- The school rosters showed 9,000 students in 20 schools.
- The Governor of Tennessee was Robert L. Taylor.
- January 1—The *Evening Herald* celebrated its first year of publication.
- "West Nashville" was the city's fastest growing section. "Belmont Park" was the newest section, just beginning to develop. Ads lured prospects with talk of idyllic suburban life, "The prettiest and most desirable residence property in the South. It overlooks the entire city. Accessible by Electric Car Service." It also advertised "served by two 80-foot-wide boulevards macadamized and...rolled as smooth as a dancing floor with the best stone curbing and sidewalks."
- Vanderbilt University, established in 1875, was 15 years old.
- The first Jackson Day Ball and Reception was given by the Ladies Hermitage Association on January 8.
- The "in" place to meet and to entertain was The Maxwell House Hotel.
- January 28—City Council granted a franchise to United Electric Company to control the transition from mule-drawn carts to electric cars for public transportation. By January 1, 1891, the Company was considered the most up-to-date in the country with 17 lines operating with more than 50 miles of track and 4 additional lines being constructed.
- May 12—The first granite paving in Nashville was laid on Church Street from Vine (7th Ave.) to Cherry (4th).
- During the summer of 1890, workmen put the finishing touches on the enormous Union Station train shed. The grand train station had just been finished at the end of 1889.
- October 16—The new Jubilee Singers leave for tour to raise funds for the theological seminary at Fisk.

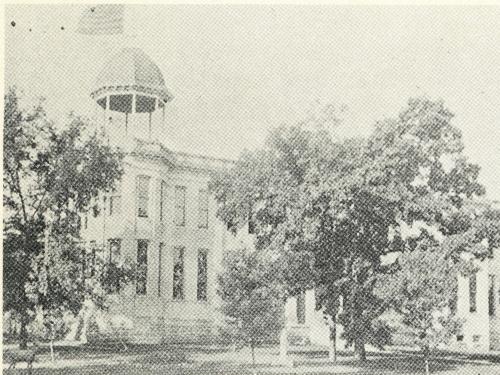
- November 3—Jubilee Singers gave first local concert.
- November 27—College football was introduced to Nashville when Vanderbilt University played the University of Nashville (later to become Peabody Normal) at Sulphur Springs bottom. Vanderbilt won, 40-0.
- The newest sports "fad" is the "safety" bicycle. Livery stable owners report a decrease in business due to this new attraction. Speaking against alcohol, a temperance advocate said, "Bicycle riding is a first-class antidote for drinking. The bicycle is spoiling the business of the drinking shops and low variety theatres. It is heaven's way of helping people to have a good time without using stimulants. It is a splendid thing to abolish drink by indirection."
- A popular event for ladies charities, to which tickets were sold at 50¢ each, was the "bonnet party."
- December 1—Vine Street Christian Church was dedicated.
- A young man starting out in business could expect a salary of approx. \$20/month.
- Prices:
  - a gentleman's summer-weight flannel shirt, 65¢.
  - India Wash Pongee, 9¢ a yard; velvet, silk, satin more expensive, 25¢ a yard.
  - a lady's fine straw hat with lace ribbon, 95¢.
- Real estate, which was aggressively advertised by full-page newspaper ads, handbills handed out on trolleys and on busy street corners, and posters:
  - choice, modern brick residence on N. Vine St. (7th)—\$12,000
  - (same) on S. Spruce St. (8th), \$8,000
  - fine, brick house on Demonbreum, lot 60' x 170', \$4,500; \$800 down, balance \$38.50 per month.
  - half interest in grocery store doing good business—\$500

Church St., looking west from 5th Ave.





*...all dressed up in the parlor.*



*North Front*

buggy had to spend 24 hours in her room. Another who got out of line going down the steps was made to eat dinner alone in her room.

Punishment for breaking rules came without hesitation. Davis reported in *The Tennessean* that "nobody could receive cakes or candy from home, or even flowers from sweethearts." If they did arrive, the gifts were promptly delivered to Nashville orphanages or hospitals.

Dining at the school was known to be an elegant affair—sumptuous meals served in the finest manner. Special occasions were always celebrated with a festive meal. Not only were the meals delicious, they were always accompanied by hot breads and pastries baked by the chef.

#### *An Era Closes*

Belmont College grew and flourished in the "Athens of the South" under the leadership of Misses Heron and Hood for 23 years. In 1913, the two, "tired of school," decided to retire and spend the rest of their lives in travel and enjoying their Nashville home. They had built their dream home at 211 Deer Park Drive in Belle Meade for \$35,000.

At the time they were making their decision to retire, Ward Seminary was looking for more space in a suburban location. Louise Davis commented in *The Tennessean* on the 1913 merger of the two rival schools: "That the two schools of such similar purpose should be joined, linked under the name Ward-Belmont, taking the buildings of one and the president of the other, seemed the logical answer to the problems of both."

*Next issue—Ward-Belmont*

## **Customs and Regulations**

**V**isitors will not be received in students' rooms nor in Chapter Houses. Girls going out with gentlemen other than their own fathers must invite a chaperon. Gifts from gentlemen are not delivered, and flowers and candy are immediately sent to some charitable institution.

Borrowing is distinctly prohibited, being both bad practice and bad taste. Borrower and lender are alike subject to reproof.

Theory, harmony and ear training are taught in class and at least one of these branches is required of each pupil studying music.

Good principles and high-toned, honorable conduct are conditions to be weighted in the award of certificate, diploma, degree, medal or honors.

Students are expected to keep an itemized account of expenses, and forward the same to parents monthly. Parents are requested to require this.

Absolute promptness in response to all bells and in performance of all duties is inflexibly insisted upon. Regular attendance upon classes is demanded.

Plans for daily exercise must be cheerfully met, the beautiful old Park of sixteen acres, the halls, veranda, and balconies offering attractive inducements.

Boxes of fresh fruit will be received, but, except at Christmas-time, no other eatables will be delivered. Parents are urged to spare us disagreeable duty in this.

Students breaking study hour, leaving their rooms or talking or burning lights after the last bell, will report to Night Study Hour. All studious, trustworthy girls keep study hours in their rooms at night; all others in the Assembly Hall.

Due reverence for the Sabbath prohibits visiting, reception of company, driving, unseemly reading, or loud and boisterous talking and laughing. Gossip, slang, exaggerations, light and frivolous conversations are deplored at all times.

No student will leave the grounds without a chaperon, nor remain out of the College over night except by special permission from parents and arrangement with faculty. Indolent and disorderly students must not expect visiting privileges.

Except at the discretion of the faculty, no student is received for music only and no student is allowed to average less than two and one-half hours recitation per day; which limited amount is sometimes allowed the mentally and physically weak.

From first to last the student who wishes to be contented and successful must find her pleasure and happiness in study. Outside diversions may afford temporary relief, but they cannot compensate for the true happiness that comes with a sense of duty.

Rooms must be left in order for the servants, who will do all sweeping and cleaning, but will not be responsible for books, sheet-music, or articles of apparel out of place about the rooms or building. Neatness in dress, in room and in her Assembly Hall desk is required of each student.

Students must never leave the college grounds without informing the disciplinarians who are personally responsible for their whereabouts. Their return, also, must be promptly announced to them.

Necessary shopping will be done by the College shoppers. A seamstress will come to the house when absolutely needed, not otherwise. All sewing and dressmaking, dentistry, photography, etc., should receive attention at home, since they seriously interfere with study and progress.

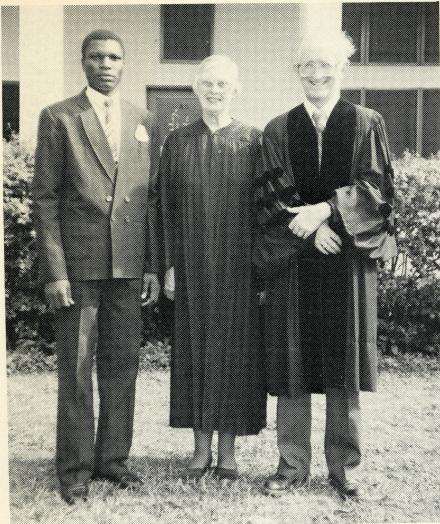
Deliberate carelessness in regard to health is severely reprimanded; hence young women must dress properly, must avoid exposure, and articles of food must not be kept in rooms to be eaten at unseasonable hours. Light weight, long-sleeved underwear, heavier hosiery and high shoes are required in winter.

All mail, packages, boxes, and telegrams to and from the College pass through the hands of the management, subject to their inspection. Suspected communications are opened in the presence of the student or are immediately forwarded to parents, who are expected to select and limit their daughters' correspondents.

Gentlemen callers must bring letters of introduction, but will only be received occasionally, and from eight to nine at night. Frequent and regular calling is not permitted. Newly acquired acquaintances must not expect the privilege. Brothers may call on their sisters at seven o'clock Sunday nights.

As room decorations each young lady will be allowed only four framed pictures, two photographs and two College pennants on her walls and dresser at the same time. Considerations of health and good taste necessitate this rule, which is inflexibly kept. A just regard for College property and for students who occupy the rooms afterwards should be a sufficient incentive to keep the custom cheerfully.

*—reprinted from an early Belmont College catalogue.*



Graduation Day in Ogbomosho

**N**ow that my wife and I are at home again, we often think of Nigeria. Our second trip there did not have an auspicious beginning, and our daughter was asking, "Are you sure it's God's will for you to go to Nigeria?"

First, our visas were delayed for nearly seven weeks, but finally I went to Atlanta and spent the day at the Nigerian Consulate. I came out with ninety-day visitors' visas instead of the one-year visas we were seeking as special project volunteers for the Foreign Mission Board of the SBC.

Next, we underestimated the time it would take to drive from our East Tennessee home to Atlanta. It still seems unbelievable that we managed to get two footlockers filled with books and food supplies, three suitcases, a box also filled with textbooks, a guitar, and ourselves on the plane after arriving at the Eastern Airlines' desk ten minutes before the plane flew. Yes, our baggage all made it, and we were more than ever convinced that it was God's will that we go. He was getting us there, in spite of our mistakes.

When we boarded a Sabena flight for Brussels in New York, we relaxed, assured that our next big hurdle would be negotiating customs in Lagos. We were wrong! Our flight from Brussels to Lagos was cancelled, and we spent the next four days shuttling back and forth between two Brussels hotels—one where we stayed and one where we took our meals. We knew many of our fellow passengers by the time we left Brussels. Finally, on September 26, we reached Lagos. There we were met by Ibiba Okpara, a 1968 Belmont graduate, who maneuvered us through customs with a minimum of difficulty. Within a few more hours we arrived safely at the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary where we unloaded our books at the library before we went to the house where we would stay. Again we were sure that God really wanted us there, for students

# Nigeria Revisited

by John H. Tullock, professor of Religion

and teachers alike assured us that they had been praying that we'd come soon.

Returning to the seminary was like going home (in many ways). My wife, Helen, and I had taught in Ogbomosho when I received my first sabbatical from Belmont College, and she received one from the Metro Board of Education. There had been a number of changes among the faculty, but there were still a number of familiar faces among both Nigerian and missionary faculty. One was Dr. Osad Imasogie, father of Ivie Imasogie who will graduate from Belmont in December. Max Sledd, a 1958 Belmont graduate, is professor of homiletics and is the seminary business manager, while Ibiba Okpara is a senior staff member in the seminary library. He teaches some classes and has written a book, *How to Study*.

In 1975-76, the seminary had a missionary as principal (president), and its teaching staff was predominately missionary. Today, Dr. Imasogie is the principal, and increasingly, the faculty is being staffed by Nigerians. All the administrators are Nigerians except the business manager, but that too will be a Nigerian within a year or so.

Changes are evident outside the seminary, too. In 1975-76, education for the masses of children was a dream, but today it is much closer to reality. Even though the schools are greatly overcrowded and have minimal support from the government, elementary education is available for those who will take advantage of it. Generally speaking, the children seem healthier; but with recent drastic changes in the Nigerian economy, this could change. In 1975-76, when Nigeria was entering the oil boom, food production fell as villagers moved to the large cities to seek work, imported foods became an increasing part of the diet and oil revenues were paying the bills. This has changed. The naira (standard unit of Nigerian currency) was worth \$1.60 and more in 1975; today, it is worth about 15¢. To force people to return to the farms and to increase food production, the military government has banned imported foods. The country is seething with unrest; universities have been closed because of student demonstrations; poor people are having difficulty getting food. Although a

new constitution promises a return to civilian rule in 1992, some fear that this could be wiped out by another coup.

All of this is particularly nerve-wracking for the missionaries. Since Muslims have a strong voice in the government and are pouring millions of dollars into West African missionary efforts, the status of Christian missions is somewhat shaky. When we left in August, only three non-medical missionaries in Ogbomosho had residence permits—the ones they had expired on July 17th. The three I mentioned had received six-months' renewals as opposed to the usual two years.

Recent events in the Southern Baptist Convention have also taken their toll, especially decreasing financial support. Also the controversial and widely misunderstood 70-30 policy of the FMB, which states that the goal of the board is to have 70% of mission personnel devoting 50% or more of their time to evangelism and starting new churches is being interpreted as applying equally to medical personnel and theological personnel. Doctors and teachers are wondering how they can spend long hours in addition to healing multitudes of sick bodies or long hours away from the job of training the leaders of all the new churches we hope to establish.

***...students and teachers alike assured us that they had been praying that we'd come soon.***

When we were in Nigeria earlier, missionaries coming up for retirement were searching for ways to lengthen their stay. Those there today are just as dedicated, but instead of trying to lengthen their stay, many are counting the days until they can retire.

In spite of the problems I have mentioned, one still feels very useful in Nigeria. The students are so eager for an education, books are so precious to them, and their "thank you" at the end of class periods seems so sincere. Of course, there is no way that all those who dream of studying in the U.S. can be brought here. Only a small percentage will have an opportunity like that.