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The Story of the Class of 1939 Bell Tower

Clemson University

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The Story of the
Class of 1939 Bell Tower

63rd Anniversary Reunion
Friday, June 14, 2002
Genesis of the Bell Tower

At our forty-sixth anniversary reunion in 1985, Tee Senn appointed a committee to decide on a suitable gift from the Class of 1939 to the University on the occasion of our golden anniversary, and to develop the funds needed to support the gift.

The Committee included the following:

Henry E. "Bobby" Avent, Sr.
Frank W. "Nellie" O'Neal
Barham F. "Tommy" Thomson, Jr.
Russell S. "Russ" Wolfe, III
William B. "Bill" Zeigler
James O. "Jim" Sweeny, Chairman
Taze L. "Tee" Senn, Ex Officio

The first meeting of the committee was held at Clemson on Oct, 13, 1985. Tommy Thomson chaired the meeting in the absence of Chairman Sweeny, and was elected permanent vice-chairman. It was more-or-less an organizational meeting, but at that meeting Tee Senn presented a proposal for the creation of a fund for the benefit of the Horticultural Gardens. The committee deferred action on Tee's proposal, feeling that other possibilities should be considered before a final selection was made. The committee did decide to set a goal of $250,000 for the class fund - which was designated the Class of '39 Golden Anniversary Endowment.
Prior to the second meeting of the committee, the chairman asked the President of the University (who just happened to be our own Walter Cox) what he felt the greatest needs to be. President Cox replied that in his and his associate's views, there was a great need for undergraduate scholarships. He also indicated that he felt our goal of $250,000 to be a reasonable one.

On December 5, 1985, the committee met for the second time. At this meeting, we revisited the question of the fund goal, and decided on a more ambitious objective of $500,000. A major portion would be allocated to scholarships in accordance with President Cox's expression of need, and another major part would go to help establish a Botanical Garden - South Carolina's first - in the Horticultural Garden grounds. Small allocations would go toward helping improve faculty salaries, and to support the operations of the Alumni Association.

With these objectives identified, the first solicitation letter was prepared by the chairman and mailed to all members of the class of 1939 in late December. By the end of January, well over $50,000 in gifts and pledges had been received in response.
The third committee meeting was held at Clemson on January 23, 1986. Once again the discussion centered on what projects might be undertaken. Serious thought was given to how to help improve faculty salaries, and it was realized that direct improvement would result in insignificant benefit, given that there are over a thousand faculty members. An alternative approach was suggested—that some kind of recognition of faculty performance might be a better objective, and so the chairman appointed himself and Tee Senn to consider this possibility and report back to the committee at the next meeting.

Accordingly, Sweeny and Senn met in February and drafted up a plan for a faculty Excellence award, featuring these several elements:

a. For exemplary contributions over the preceding five year period, selection to be made by a secret vote of the faculty senate.

b. The award to be $5,000, plus a certificate, some distinctive addition to the academic regalia, and permanent recognition by an engraved inscription on a planned new housing for the old Tillman Hall bell.

c. The award to be made annually if funds are available—otherwise every four years.
This proposal was presented to the committee at its next meeting in April, 1986, and enthusiastically endorsed by the group. Now we had three projects clearly identified:

- Undergraduate Scholarships
- Clemson Botanical Garden
- Faculty Award for Excellence

It remained to flesh out each of these, and to concentrate on raising the $500,000 needed to implement them. A letter was written to Clemson's new president, Max Lennon, telling him of our plans. He replied, congratulating us on our project selections, and adding that we really ought to be able to raise at least $1,000,000. (We weren't convinced - and so did not change our goal). Letters were also prepared for mailing to class members, as well as to widows of classmates whom, we felt, might want to contribute in memory of their husbands.

Our next two meetings, in August and October, were devoted to the fleshing out process. First, we needed a design for a structure to display the Tillman Hall bell - and a location on campus where the bell would be sited. It was decided to ask a classmate, Bill Carlisle, to work up a design for the bell structure, and we approached the University planning people to help us find a suitable site.
By the time of our next meeting in January 1987, slightly over $135,000 in cash and pledges had been credited to the Class of '39 Golden Anniversary Endowment Fund, encouraging, but far short on the goal.

Russ Wolfe reported that Bill Carlisle had talked to, a personal friend of his, the then Dean of the Clemson School of Architecture (a fellow named Jim Barker), who had agreed to set up a competition among architectural students for a design for our bell structure. We then wrote Dean Barker, thanking him for his cooperation and giving him our thoughts on the bell structure, including the following:

Classic simplicity is the impression we want the structure to give the viewer. It need not be elaborate; understatement might better suit its purpose. In any event, it must not conflict with the architecture of the surrounding buildings. It must attract attention, but not at the expense of being an intrusion on the landscape. Its size should be determined only by the requirements of holding the bell and displaying the plaques. Whether the bell is mounted at or above eye level, whether the plaques are read from the inside or the outside of the structure, whether the structure straddles a pathway or stands beside it, are all questions we leave to the designer.

By the time of our next meeting in June of 1987, we had learned that the Horticultural Department had presented a proposal to the Board of Trustees for the establishment of a Clemson Botanical Garden, and that the Board had agreed. One objective of our project list was now a fait accompli - so it was back to the drawing board!
At our meeting in Columbia in September, thought was given to what might be done in the Botanical Gardens - even including an ambitious program to create a sort of outdoor Heritage Museum, but it quickly became apparent that our time and money constraints would not support such an effort. Thus it was decided to focus the Botanical Garden fund on helping the Garden become a self-supporting entity for its first ten years, and thereafter to use the income to maintain the Caboose area. It was then decided to reduce the allocation of funds to the Botanical Garden project, and to correspondingly increase the funding of the Award for Excellence project - thus increasing the possibility that the award could become an annual event.

At our meeting in November 1977, Bill Carlisle reported that our cost criterium for the bell structure had not been passed along to the student architects, with the result that many of their proposed designs were quite beyond our means. He felt, however, that enough good ideas would be coming out of the study to enable him to work up a suitable design.

In February 1988, Bill showed slides of their designs, which ranged from the very simple structure shown on the next page, to very elaborate structures that would be entirely out-of-place on our campus.

The committee asked Bill to put his own thoughts down on the drawing board, and Bill agreed to do so.
Finally, at our meeting in March of 1988, Bill Carlisle presented a design that he felt met the criteria we had established for the bell structure - and so did the committee! This was the sketch he gave us.
Meanwhile, after many meetings with University officials, and many reviews of possible sites, the committee selected a site on what was called “The Spine.” This would be in an area that would be developed by a gift of the class of 1943, and would remain a permanent open space looking down toward the amphitheater and library. The architect for the class of 1943 project added the bell structure to their site plan, and we were ready to begin construction.

Walter Cox agreed to undertake to obtain a gift of the necessary materials for the structure, and Bill Carlisle agreed to manage the construction project through to completion. November 18 was selected as the date for the groundbreaking ceremony - which went off without a hitch. Actual construction began in February of 1989, and the structure was completed in time to be dedicated at our Class reunion in June 1989.

So how did the design evolve? Jim Barker relates that one afternoon, he and Bill Carlisle were standing near the still empty site, discussing the design. Jim says that he looked up and noticed the details of the entrance to Tillman Hall, and was struck by how well that entrance design fit our stated criteria. He and Bill talked this over and decided that an adaptation of the design could very well be used.

This is what they saw when they looked up at Clemson's oldest and most distinctive building.
Main entrance to Tillman Hall
It was easy, then, for Bill to visualize hanging the bell in the center of the entrance, and so he in effect duplicated the entrance as the main element of the bell structure, as seen below.
The finished structure, seen as it looks today, is shown below and on the cover of this little brochure.
On the right side of the structure (viewed from the road side) is located a plaque that carries out a strong secondary purpose of the structure - a memorial to those classmates who died serving their country in World War II.
On the left side of the structure is a plaque telling about the bell, and giving credit to those most directly associated with construction of the tower.

THE OLD TILLMAN HALL BELL


THE STRUCTURE WHICH ENSHRINES THE BELL INCLUDES MATERIALS AND DESIGN ELEMENTS PATTERNED AFTER DISTINCTIVE ARCHITECTURAL DETAILS FOUND IN TILLMAN HALL

ARCHITECT - WILLIAM A. CARLISLE, FAIA, CLASS OF '39
BRICK BY SOUTHERN BRICK CO., NINETY SIX, SC
GENERAL CONTRACTOR - ZORN CONSTRUCTION, CO., SENECA, SC
GRANITE BY ELBERTON GRANITE FINISHING CORP., ELBERTON, GA.

JUNE 10, 1989
Directly below the bell, on a massive granite stone slab, are engraved the names of those faculty members selected annually by their peers to receive the Class of 1939 Award for Excellence.
It should be pointed out that the structure that was dedicated at our reunion in 1989, and the structure seen on the preceding page, differ in two significant details. Originally, the structure had a flat top, and the words:

*Class of 1939*

did not appear on the stone beam supporting the bell.

When the class of 1943 completed their development of the area surrounding the bell structure, two things became painfully obvious. First, the massive brick and iron fence they built around the whole area had shaped capstones on top each fence pier, and these made our structure look uncompleted. Second, the plaques they placed in the entrance to the bell structure area gave the impression that the whole affair was a Class of 1943 project. One had to read the plaques on the side of the bell structure to know otherwise, so a fix had to be made. Bill Carlisle designed a shaped granite capstone for the bell structure that tied in nicely with the capstones on the fence piers, and wording added to the bell support beam clearly indicates who is responsible for the bell structure.

The result is that the Class of ’43 project and our Bell Tower complement each other to a degree not anticipated by either class. And the University is the better for it.
DEDICATION

This little booklet is dedicated to those wonderful alumni who constituted the Class of 1939 Golden Anniversary Endowment Committee. Without exception, they accepted the challenge that President Senn outlined at the first meeting of the committee, and with patience, diligence, vision, and an acute understanding of the needs of their school, met the challenge in a truly outstanding manner.

It was a privilege to have had the opportunity of working with these dedicated classmates. Their complete cooperation in carrying out the work of the committee, their willingness to generate and explore new ideas, and their unselfish approach to the development of a final product made my job as chairman both a pleasure and a wonderful learning experience.

That their work was appreciated by the University has been indicated in a variety of ways - not the least of which have been repeated special recognitions by the Faculty Senate.

My heartfelt thanks go to my fellow committee members.

James O. Sweeny
June 13, 2002