TALES FROM FINCASTLE HALL

How a Community College Grew Up

Earl K. Cherry Jr.

Virginia has had a system of higher education in place since 1693. For the larger part of three centuries, only privileged white males were able to receive their higher education from a Virginia institution. Eventually, the traditionally rich, white, and male-dominated colleges allowed a token few non-white and non-male students to enroll. However, many of the non-rich remained unable to gain an education past high school, if at all. By the early twentieth century, opinions on equal access to education began to change. The State Superintendent of Public Instruction, J. D. Eggleston Jr., mused that the responsibility of the public school system was "to put all the people, young and old, to studying how to improve themselves, and their occupations, and how to improve community conditions." He went on to say that "the school must reach out and strengthen the social and economic life of the community in which it is situated. To do this properly, it must touch...every social and economic interest that concerns the community."[1] This idea took root in the fertile soil of Virginia but proved to be a slow-growing tree. It would take numerous committees, commissions, councils, studies, speakers, and a cast of thousands to bring it to bloom. After it had begun to bear, the following generations took over and increased the benefits to be

1 George B. Vaughan and Don Puyear, *Pursuing the American Dream: A History of the Development of the Virginia Community College System* (Richmond: Virginia Community College System, 1987), 3.

harvested a hundredfold.

In this tangled debate over community improvement and equality, Wytheville Community College (WCC) and the Virginia Community College System (VCCS) emerged from the age of Massive Resistance in Virginia.[2] A small, partly open-door branch of Virginia Polytechnic Institute (VPI), Wytheville Community College was annexed into an education system focused on equal access—the likes of which had never been seen on Virginia soil. This was only part of the tale, however. The Virginia Community College System rose out of a fundamental shift in Southern educational ideals and philosophy, brought about by a new generation of educators and legislators who saw a need for the radical expansion of educational opportunity. Through their efforts, Virginia made a complete about-face in policy and created a truly open system of higher education.

The louder that Senator Harry F. Byrd Sr. sang the glories of Massive Resistance in Washington, DC, the more Southern states joined in the tune. This idea of wholesale resistance to efforts to break the back of Jim Crow laws in the "separate but equal" South may not have sprung from the Virginia senator's mind, but he was most assuredly one of its greatest proponents. Desegregation created an atmosphere Southern education systems. To those in charge, there were only two possibilities: give in and integrate the schools, or close them to preserve segregation. When Georgia heard the mighty Byrd's opposition to desegregation, the same conflict sprang up in Georgia as it had in Virginia.

A 1956 meeting between Roy Harris—"the man who ran Georgia"—and leaders from across the South sought to bring a united front of constitutional interposition against the inherent evil of desegregation.[3] This campaign paralleled the same ideals that slave-owning elites used to fight the abolition of slavery a century before. In their minds, a state could, and should, block enforcement of a federal law within its borders if the law was either a "deliberate, palpable, and dangerous exercise" of powers not given the federal government, or if the law was an "evil" against the state.[4] Many

2 Massive Resistance was a strategy instituted by Senator Harry F. Byrd to enlist white Virginians in resisting desegregation following the landmark Brown v. Board of Education decision in 1954.

3 Jeff Roche, *Restructured Resistance: The Sibley Commission and the Politics of Desegregation in Georgia* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 30.

4 J. W. Randolph, *The Virginia Report of 1799–1800, Touching the Alien and Sedition Laws, Together with the Virginia Resolutions of December 21, 1798* (Philadelphia: C.

of the men at the 1956 meeting shared these ideals, but others saw integration as inevitable, if not the right thing to do. The rhetoric on both sides escalated throughout the late 1950s, until Governor Ernest Vandiver put together the Georgia General Assembly Committee on Schools. Governor Vandiver appointed lawyer John Sibley of Atlanta to steer the committee toward a decision on whether or not to allow desegregation.[5] Hearings began on March 3, 1960 and continued through the month, taking testimony from educators and concerned citizens around the state.[6] At the Atlanta meeting, the superintendent of the DeKalb County Public Schools, Jim D. Cherry, was called upon to testify.

Jim Cherry grew up in Clay County and later in Decatur County, Georgia. An illiterate former slave in his eighties, he lived down the road from the Cherrys near Fowlston, Georgia. The white families called him "Mr. Aleck." The title of "mister," rather than the more common and demeaning title "uncle," showed the respect these families held for their neighbor. Mr. Aleck used the front door when he came to visit his neighbors every Saturday afternoon and would take a cup of coffee with them when invited in.[7] This kind of fraternization, uncommon between blacks and whites even in 1960s Georgia, was almost unheard of during Cherry's childhood in the 1920s. Mr. Aleck's visits with neighboring families were a blatant and defiant violation of the racial etiquette of Southwestern Georgia.[8] The Cherry family overlooked this violation. At the very least, several of

---

Sherman, 1850), 22.

5 Roche, *Restructured Resistance*, 83-84.

6 Roche, *Restructured Resistance*, 97.

7 Rachel H. Cherry, Interview by author, Comer's Rock, Virginia, 11/18/2013. According to 1920 US Census Data for Fowlstown, Georgia, there are a number of potential "Mr. Alecks." In recounting these stories, no one could remember his last name. "Mr. Aleck," was likely a man named Alex Albert, based on the age he would have been in 1861, the fact that he owned property, and that he was listed as illiterate. There is no way, however, to know for sure that he was the "Mr. Aleck" referred to by the Cherry family. There is no way to check the proximity of his residence to the Cherrys, as they did not move to the Fowlstown area until circa 1922. "Mr. Aleck" died prior to Jim's going to college in 1930, and Alex Albert is not on the 1930 Census.

8 For numerous examples of how blacks and whites of all classes interacted in rural Georgia in the early twentieth century, consult Mark Schultz, *The Rural Face of White Supremacy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005). A discussion on the perceived disrespect of the term "uncle" can be found on page 85–86, and a section on interracial dining appears on pages 98–102.

the families near Mr. Aleck saw beyond the color of his skin. They saw a farmer just as poor and hard-working as they were.

Jim and his siblings learned about race in Southern society from Mr. Aleck's stories about his days as a slave. He told them about his experiences as a teenage field hand during the Civil War. They learned that although Mr. Aleck was treated kindly, he did not receive an education because it was illegal to teach a slave to read or write in Georgia.[9] Mr. Aleck instilled the importance of education in the Cherry siblings. Most significantly, Mr. Aleck taught Jim Cherry, the future superintendent of the DeKalb County school system, that race was not an excuse for limiting the opportunities an education provided.

The Sibley committee hearings convinced Jim Cherry that there was a good chance Georgia would close its schools rather than submit to desegregation. Cherry viewed desegregation as the first blow against Jim Crow's reign in the South. At the committee's Atlanta meeting, Superintendent Cherry argued that closing schools would not stop integration, but would only cost the children of the state of Georgia their futures. He believed that allowing the counties themselves to choose whether to close or integrate would be a much better option than the state potentially closing them all down. He favored a plan that would allow those that did not agree with desegregation the option to send their child to a private school at county expense.[10] Mr. Cherry attempted to sway those opposed to integration to pull the issue from the state's control. If control was given to the counties by the state then the superintendent could keep DeKalb schools open, as well as integrate them.

The testimony at the hearings generally called for the public schools of Georgia to shut down by adopting a policy similar to that of Prince Edward County, Virginia. Virginia's policy required any public school in the state that attempted to integrate along racial lines to close. It was named for then-governor Thomas Stanley and passed by a special session of the Virginia General Assembly in August 1956. The federal courts and the Virginia Supreme Court struck down the law in 1959. Members of the Prince Edward County School Board decided to take matters into their own hands, and closed their schools in defiance of federal integration orders.[11] Several members

9 Rachel H. Cherry, Interview by author. Comer's Rock, Virginia, 11/18/2013.

10 Roche, *Restructured Resistance*, 148.

11 Peter Wallenstein, *Cradle of America: A History of Virginia*, 2nd ed. (Lawrence:

of the Sibley committee traveled to Virginia to meet with Governor Lindsay Almond and several of the Prince Edward County Public School officials to gain a better understanding of the situation and, presumably, the plausibility of such a move in Georgia.[12] Both this trip and Mr. Cherry's testimony weighed very heavily in the group's deliberations in mid-April. When Mr. Sibley delivered the findings of the committee on April 28, 1960, they found that the state should leave the decision to the counties, and recommended open schools above all else. John Sibley ended his remarks by asking the people of the state of Georgia to accept at least some, albeit token, integration.[13]

After the Sibley Committee and Governor Vandiver settled the question of desegregation for the public school system in Georgia, Jim Cherry moved on to other projects that fell in line with his idea of quality comprehensive education. One of these was developing the community college founded by the DeKalb County Board of Education under Georgia's Junior College Act of 1958. By the time DeKalb Community College opened its doors in 1964 as the only public two-year college in the state run by a local school board, it was integrated just like the other public schools run by DeKalb County.[14] This allowed the DeKalb public schools to provide continuous, comprehensive schooling for students ranging from kindergarten to college sophomores.

Jim Cherry's emphasis on education for the underprivileged was a product of his childhood in poor, pre-Depression South Georgia. Cherry demonstrated a philosophy of equal access to education through the fight to keep public schools open in Georgia and his role in the opening of DeKalb Community College. His efforts mirrored that of educators across the South, including his youngest brother: history teacher, principal, and counselor Earl K. Cherry.

As the Sibley committee hearings came to a close in Georgia, the Virginia General Assembly was mulling over a study requested by the State Council of Higher Education. This study, conducted in 1959 by Sebastian V. Martorana of the US Department of Education, called for a system of junior colleges to provide comprehensive technical, occupational, and academic education beyond the high school level

---

University Press of Kansas, 2014), 375, 382.

12 Roche, *Restructured Resistance,* 162.

13 Roche, *Restructured Resistance,* 163–165.

14 "History," *Online College Catalog,* Georgia Perimeter College, 2014, accessed on December 5, 2014, http://www.gpc.edu/catalog/history .

and serve the communities beyond the campuses. Martorana knew that Virginia could not make the leap to an independent system of community colleges at one time. He and his colleagues decided to recommend a system where the new schools would act as branches of existing ones. He hoped that this would be a "transitional agreement" on the way to an independent system.

The question of color is absent from the study, which means the question of integration is absent as well. Martorana explained, "In our studies and probing into that, we got no overt or open indication that this should be a factor that in any way would influence our recommendation." He supported this by declaring, "No significant people or group that we interviewed or dealt with suggested a separate and equal or separate segregated system of two-year colleges."[15] For those against integration, the study implied that there would be no black students at the recommended institutions. For those supporting integration, however, the study's lack of attention to race showed that perhaps things could change.

The report also outlined areas that Martorana believed had the greatest need for post-high school education. It originally called for a junior college to be opened in or near the independent city of Galax, due to the expanding population of upcoming high school seniors in that area. However, there was a stronger push for the college in nearby Wythe County. The steering committee, formed on the news of a community college coming to the area, worked tirelessly to secure the campus's location in the old frontier county. By the time the 1962 session of the General Assembly was finished, funding had been allocated for the establishment of a branch college of Virginia Polytechnic Institute in Wytheville.[16]

A flurry of activity began near the Wythe Courthouse. The county quickly started renovations at 275 South Fourth Street—formerly the Simmerman family mansion— converting it from a residence into office and classroom space. VPI selected faculty, furniture, and a mascot. Under the leadership of Director Sherrard Moseley, the faculty—Col. Richard Perkins, James Branscome, Jean Diggs, D. York Brannock, and recent VPI graduate James Wade Gilley—prepared for classes with course outlines and books provided by the Blacksburg campus. VPI chose a Confederate cavalryman on

15 Vaughan and Puyear, *Pursuing the American Dream*, 12–16.

16 J. Wade Gilley, *The First Ten Years: A History of Wytheville Community College 1962–1972* (Wytheville, Virginia: Wytheville Community College, 1972), 1–4.

horseback charging in front of the Confederate Naval Jack as the junior college's mascot, calling him the Gray Ghost. The doors opened to the high school class of 1963 from Wythe, Grayson, Carroll, Bland, and Smyth Counties and the City of Galax on Thursday, September 19. One hundred five students registered that day and, by the end of the registration period for the quarter, two more had enrolled. The majority of the students were present when Governor Albertis Harrison came on October 6 to dedicate the new school.[17] At this time, the long, strange story of the Wytheville Community College and her "Gray Ghosts" began – the community college whose support came from Richmond by way of Blacksburg.

As with any new organization, there were growing pains. The college outgrew the newly renovated building almost immediately, and another wing was added to the building until a new site could be found for the growing campus.[18] Other issues emerged in the college's administration. The faculty found it harder and harder to operate under the VPI blanket of authority. Don Puyear, the director of another VPI branch school, described relations between the branches and the home campus:

> It was a most strangulating situation. We were to offer only courses that were offered at VPI. We used the same outline and the same textbooks. There was nothing left to the discretion of the faculty at the branch. Our faculty then became the second rate faculty as far as the faculty members on the main campus were concerned. In many cases our people were as qualified or even more qualified than those on the parent campus.[19]

Due to the micro-management of the Blacksburg administration and their view of the branch faculty as inferior, the branch schools had very limited options. The focus on academic courses left technical or occupational classes—seen as "embarrassing" to VPI administrators—to be offered "under the table," if at all.[20]

One local advisory board believed in the beginning that the branches would not only provide two years of transfer-oriented collegiate study, but also help those left unprepared by their primary and

17 Gilley, *The First Ten Years*, 6.

18 Gilley, *The First Ten Years*, 9.

19 Vaughan and Puyear, *Pursuing the American Dream*, 24.

20 Vaughan and Puyear, *Pursuing the American Dream*, 24.

secondary education to acquire the necessary skills and prerequisites to comprehend college-level academics. The board chairman lamented the junior college's role as a stepping stone for VPI:

> VPI was really interested only in the branch as a commuter school for the main campus at Blacksburg. We began to feel, and particularly in that respect, that we had been somewhat stifled by the attempts to set up a very high quality of education. The requirements were too high for most students of the area to get into.[21]

The negative relations between Burruss Hall and the branch schools, the crowded classrooms, and the ever-increasing needs of the communities began to wear on everyone involved. Wytheville Community College lifted some of this tension when it acquired funds for a new campus. Construction on a new building began almost immediately. Enrollment had tripled in the first three years of WCC's existence. As 1965 droned on, even bigger news awaited the new school system.[22]

Even though he was the head of VPI and its four branch colleges, T. Marshall Hahn supported an independent community college system. The explosion in enrollment at WCC likely influenced his stance. Dr. Hahn pointed out the branches' highly selective admission policies as part of the problem.[23] Just as the course outlines of the branch had to match those used on the Blacksburg campus, admission policies and tuition rates had to match as well. Escalating enrollment rates required more funding for the branch colleges. The home communities of these branches wanted more comprehensive programs while branch faculty and staff desired more freedom in course determination. The men in charge of the junior colleges faced pressure from all angles. Before the ink was dry on the check to purchase more land for Wytheville Community College, the General Assembly took another look at Dr. Martorana's original recommendation for a state-wide independent community college system.[24]

The General Assembly decided to fund a new system of state-wide comprehensive community colleges, a premise completely new to

21 Vaughan and Puyear, *Pursuing the American Dream*, 25.

22 Gilley, *The First Ten Years*, 9.

23 Vaughan and Puyear, *Pursuing the American Dream*, 25.

24 Gilley, *The First Ten Years*, 9.

Virginia. After this landmark legislation passed, Eric Rhodes prepared a master plan for the new Virginia Community College System. He and his staff worked to develop guidelines for the placement of service regions and campuses, programs of education including an occupational and technical program, and of the established schools. Rhodes also read Martorana's 1959 study very closely, using many of the same ideas.[25] In January 1967, Rhodes presented his recommendations, officially titled "A Proposed Master-Plan for a Statewide System of Community College Education in Virginia." The work defined what a comprehensive community college was, what services it would offer the localities inside its service region, and how it would "make community college education available in a practical way to the maximum number of citizens in all counties and cities in the state."[26] It established boundary lines for each of the twenty-two service regions and located campuses to serve each. Location was based on a population size of 100,000 people, length and duration of the commute from the boundary of the region to the campus, and accessibility to main roads. The placement regulations also accounted for any pre-existing vocational school offering post-high school technical programs or "two-year university branches scheduled to become part of the Community College System." The Rhodes Report set tuition at $45 per quarter, and allowed for a higher rate to be determined for out-of-state students.

Educational programs were based on population, economic need, cultural need, and educational need of those regions. One significant element was regional enrollment reciprocity.[27] The open-door policy adopted by the General Assembly for the VCCS eliminated race, gender, and—to a large extent—economic status as factors of exclusion. Now geography was added to the list. For the first time in Virginia history, any state resident could attend school in any part of the state. Furthermore, any state resident could potentially obtain an Associate's Degree and transfer to a four-year institution. This open-door policy came to the Old Dominion just as Harry F. Byrd Sr., erstwhile opponent of desegregation, was preparing to leave it. Byrd resigned his Senate seat in November 1965 and passed away less

25 Vaughan and Puyear, *Pursuing the American Dream*, 15.

26 Eric Rhodes, *A Proposed Master Plan for a Statewide System of Community College Education in Virginia* (Richmond: Commonwealth of Virginia Press, 1967), 6.

27 Rhodes, *A Proposed Master Plan for a Statewide System of Community College Education in Virginia*, 7–10.

than a year later.

For WCC, the report proposed an initial offering of eleven programs: six occupational and technical and five university parallel or transfer programs. Full-time enrollment increased to 730 in two years and part-time increased to 600 over the same period. Wytheville Community College occupied the renovated Simmerman mansion until "expansion of the new facility [assured] adequate space."[28] Rhodes recorded his overall impression of the "Gray Ghosts" at the end of the section detailing the school:

> The Wytheville Community College, a branch of VPI, is operating in old facilities in Wytheville with an ongoing program, principally of engineering studies. An excellent site on the outskirts of Wytheville has been acquired, and will be turned over together with operation of the community college program, to the State Board for Community Colleges in July, 1967...construction of new building plans have been made, and construction of a new facility is planned for completion by September, 1968. Development of a complete comprehensive community college program, built upon the existing staff and student body should lead to expansion of enrollment, and operation of an excellent program.[29]

One thing did not survive the change. The WCC "Gray Ghost" mascot dismounted, hung up his saber, and faded away—just as the Confederate cavalrymen he represented had a century before.

With Massive Resistance, Harry Byrd Sr., and the "Gray Ghost" gone, WCC and education in the Old Dominion entered a new era. For the first time in the history of Virginia, anyone could enter the realm of higher education regardless of race, color, or gender. The efforts of an entire generation of lawmakers and educators—including Cherry, Martorana, and Hahn—had shifted educational policy from a focus on opportunity according to race to opportunity for all.[30] However, for people who did not have the financial means or

---

28 Rhodes, *A Proposed Master Plan for a Statewide System of Community College Education in Virginia*, 306.

29 Rhodes, *A Proposed Master Plan for a Statewide System of Community College Education in Virginia*, 20.

30 Peter Wallenstein, *Cradle of America*, 405; James H Hershman, Jr., *Encyclopedia Virginia*, s.v. "A. Linwood Holton," (Richmond: Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, 2014) accessed on 11/25/2014, http://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Holton_A_Linwood_1923-#start_entry.

basic levels of education, attending college remained a dream. Federal Student Aid, established under President Johnson's Higher Education Act of 1965 as part of his War on Poverty, evolved too slowly for those dreamers.[31]

The Rhodes Report activated a mad scramble to get ready for the change to an independent community college system. July 1, 1967 marked the official date of change and the start of a new fiscal year. The new programs—still unwritten—required new equipment and more teachers. As July 1 approached, Dr. Dana Hamel was selected to be the Director of the VCCS. On August 24, 1967, professor and original faculty member J. Wade Gilley assumed his new role as the first president of WCC.[32]

This was not the only major change to occur. Admission was now open to all, regardless of what level of education the incoming student had achieved. Wytheville Community College reduced tuition by more than half, cutting the cost from $330 to $135 per year and from $110 to $45 per quarter. The college offered occupational and technical programs for the first time, as well as "foundations" courses for those in need of basic education. A new emphasis on counseling and guidance helped new students recognize where they were educationally and explore how to achieve their goals.[33] The Office of Continuing Education provided opportunities for students to continue their education beyond the community college. It offered seminars, workshops, and courses designed to appeal to the interests of those served by the college.[34] Even though plans were made for existing staff to be kept at WCC, students worried that the new teachers would not be up to VPI standards. They feared that without VPI influence, the quality of their education would drop and they would be unprepared to transfer or enter the workforce. However, that was not the case. An unidentified student remarked later that he was "dismayed...that we would lose the quality of teachers we had under V.P.I., [but the new system] was the greatest thing that has happened to

31 Lawrence E. Gladieux, "Federal Student Aid Policy: A History and an Assessment," *Financing Postsecondary Education: The Federal Role - October 1995,* U.S. Dept. of Education Website, accessed on 11/25/2014, https://www2.ed.gov/offices/OPE/PPI/FinPostSecEd/gladieux.html.

32 Gilley, *The First Ten Years,* 7–8.

33 Gilley, *The First Ten Years,* 9.

34 Gilley, *The First Ten Years,* 15; John DiYorio, interview by the author, Wytheville, Virginia, 1/30/2014.

higher education in Virginia."[35] WCC's admissions doubled that first year under VCCS control, proving the student right.

As enrollment climbed, the school's need increased for a Financial Aid Office separate from the Counseling Office, which had overseen the disbursement of aid up to that point. When tasked with finding someone to set up an organized and expanded Financial Aid Program, Lucien Johnson knew just whom he should call.[36]

Earl K. Cherry had worked in Beaufort for over two years on one of the War on Poverty programs, building houses on Daufuskie Island for some of the most impoverished people in the nation. Nixon's election as president signaled the end of this program. As he pondered going back to Atlanta, perhaps to work for his brother Jim at DeKalb Community College, his phone rang. Lu Johnson, a friend and colleague from his days as principal at Lyerly High School in Georgia, told him of the new opportunity at Wytheville Community College. Cherry had done similar work in Atlanta, just before his move to Beaufort. Cherry paused on the phone before he asked the inevitable question: "Lucien, where in the hell IS Wytheville, Virginia?" Johnson responded, "Take 21 north, and run it 'til you hit Virginia and the top of the mountain."[37] Cherry followed his friend's directions and met with Wade Gilley, the president of Wytheville Community College. When Gilley asked how soon he could start, Cherry said he would be there the first day of December. He found a place to rent and made a quick tour of Wytheville. He packed up his family and moved from Beaufort over Thanksgiving week. On December 1, 1969, Earl K. Cherry walked onto the campus of Wytheville Community College for his first day as Assistant Professor and Financial Aid Counselor. Neither his life, nor that of WCC, would ever be the same.[38]

Earl Cherry created a financial aid program as comprehensive as the college itself. He used every resource available to pay the way for those unable to afford enrollment even with reduced tuition. Cherry created a model that combined federal grants, work-study, scholarships, state funds, private grants, and private contributions.

---

35 Vaughan and Puyear, *Pursuing the American Dream*, 59–60.

36 Gilley, *The First Ten Years*, 13.

37 Rachel H. Cherry, interview by author, Comer's Rock, Virginia, 11/18/2013.

38 Rachel H. Cherry, interview by author, Comer's Rock, Virginia, 11/18/2013; Mary B. Kegley and William F. Snyder, *The Second Ten Years: A History of Wytheville Community College 1973–1982* (Wytheville, Virginia: Wytheville Community College, 1982), 48.

His model came to be used system-wide. He worked with colleague Jim Presgraves to develop programs of higher education for those who had only the most rudimentary schooling. These foundation courses provided people with little or no education with the necessary skills to begin a college-level program of study.[39] With these two final pieces in place, the VCCS truly made education accessible to all, regardless of race, gender, financial means, or prior educational level. The community college system came too late for the former slaves of the pre-Depression South like Cherry's neighbor Mr. Aleck. However, the generation influenced by their stories guaranteed that their descendants had the opportunity to pursue a better life through higher education.

By 1972, the Financial Aid Office was off and running and Earl Cherry saw a broader opportunity to help his community. When offered the position of Director of Continuing Education, he immediately accepted.[40] Up to this point, the Continuing Education department had mostly offered transfer courses with little outreach to the community. Earl saw a chance to carry the college into the community by involving as many people as possible with WCC. Cherry visited local industries to see how college could improve the skills of their workers.[41] Factories across the region started to offer vocational classes in varied subjects tailored to individual factory needs, such as machine tool technology and sewing machine operation. Cherry also worked on countless projects with community leaders, helping them secure funding for desperately needed infrastructure. He collaborated with other colleges and localities to set up regional emergency medical service, training programs for emergency medical technicians, and a practical nursing program. He convinced Rachel Hall Cox, a cardiac and respiratory trauma nurse, to work for Wytheville Community College's nursing program. Due to Cherry's knack for developing needed, timely, and interesting classes combined with Cox's low-key style of teaching that allowed students to grasp difficult concepts, the nursing program at WCC reached full capacity.[42] Noted cardiologist Henry J. L. Marriott came to Wytheville for a WCC workshop on advanced electrocardiography

39 Kegley and Snyder, *The Second Ten Years,* 18–19; Rachel H. Cherry, Interview by author, Comer's Rock, Virginia, 11/18/2013.

40 Kegley and Snyder, *The Second Ten Years,* 48.

41 John DiYorio, interview by author, Wytheville Virginia, 1/30/2014.

42 Rachel H. Cherry, interview by author, Comer's Rock, Virginia, 11/18/2013.

as a supplement to the basic electrocardiography classes the college already offered. Raymond Moody and Elisabeth Kübler-Ross spoke to students about their research into death and dying.[43]

James H. Hinson Jr., another Georgia boy, took over as Chancellor of the Virginia Community College System in the 1980s. He and Earl Cherry had another connection, besides their Georgia roots: Hinson had just left the presidency of DeKalb Community College.[44] He worked under Jim D. Cherry at DeKalb until Mr. Cherry's retirement in 1972. Jim Cherry left his mark on Hinson and therefore on the VCCS. Hinson recognized his new job as a responsibility to "[make] it better for faculties to teach and for citizens to learn."[45] Hinson worked to further adult education through the foundations programs and to ensure that the community college system helped citizens meet their goals and benefit the community. Shortly after his move to Virginia, Hinson and Earl Cherry each made an unfortunate trip back to DeKalb County on account of Jim Cherry's death. Jim David Cherry passed at the age of 69, just after a trip to Virginia to visit Earl, Rachel, and their young son.[46] Upon their return to Virginia, both men focused on carrying on Jim Cherry's legacy. At a conference in September, 1980, Hinson, Wade Gilley—by then the Secretary of Education for Virginia— and other officials of the VCCS called for a redefinition of community service. They asked those developing the classes "to define those things that are in the area of community development, as opposed to those things that are in the area of individual enrichment."[47] Earl Cherry formed many individual enrichment classes, but he also had more community development classes in the works. Jim Cherry would have been proud of both Hinson and Earl for committing themselves to give their communities what they truly needed: equal access to education.

Over the next several years, Earl Cherry worked toward those same goals of equal access and community enhancement by expanding and improving Wytheville Community College. He expanded classes in local factories to include more academics. This allowed factory

43 Kegley and Snyder, *The Second Ten Years,* 18.

44 Johnnie R. Simpson and Darrel A Clowes, eds. *Virginia Community Colleges in the Eighties* (Blacksburg: Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 1981), 7, 53–65.

45 Rachel H. Cherry, interview by author, Comer's Rock, Virginia, 11/18/2013.

46 Rachel H. Cherry, interview by author, Comer's Rock, Virginia, 11/18/2013.

47 Simpson and Clowes, *Virginia Community Colleges in the Eighties*, 60.

workers—unable to travel to campus because of their work schedule—to attend class at the end of their shift. He worked with local school divisions to establish evening college classes in high schools across the region. His Summer Scholars program gave high school students the chance to take college classes prior to graduating, which moved them closer to a degree after graduation. Outside the academic realm, Cherry helped with the formation of a local Meals-on-Wheels program. He also raised funds for an oral history recording program. In 1983, Cherry decided that after almost 35 years in education it was time to retire. He wanted to spend more time with his wife and two young sons. Effective September 1, 1983, Earl K. Cherry Sr. retired from WCC. James Hinson also left in 1983 to take over the presidency of Florida's Tallahassee Community College.[48]

Through the course of his career as Director of Continuing Education, Earl Cherry involved over 137,000 people in the Continuing Education programs and gave out over 5,000 Continuing Education credits. He developed hundreds of classes to enrich the individual student and further Hinson's ideas for community development.[49] Successive Directors of Continuing Education expanded the programs he established at Wytheville Community College. Many WCC, VCCS, and community programs trace their lineage to a program developed by Cherry's Continuing Education Office. Meals-on-Wheels, which provides transit services to the underprivileged and elderly, became the District Three Governmental Cooperative. The Summer Scholars program became dual-credit classes that allow students to graduate high school with an Associate's Degree. The evening classes Cherry started in Wythe County factories and high schools became satellite campuses in the service region. Through Cherry's pioneering work at WCC, the Continuing Education program evolved into Workforce Development. Even after retiring, he urged others to get involved with education by confronting issues within his local public school system, convincing many to return and finish their schooling, and convincing others to begin their education. He requested classes for residents at his retirement home—addressing educational needs of others right up to his death in 2011, at the age of 90.[50]

These achievements in education would not have been possible

48 Rachel H. Cherry, interview by author, Comer's Rock, Virginia, 11/18/2013.

49 Kegley and Snyder, *The Second Ten Years*, 18–19.

50 Personal recollections of the author.

without the great sense of community that existed at WCC and within the VCCS. The community of faculty, staff, and students created an atmosphere where ideas flourished and spread across the junior college system. WCC instilled a general belief in working together for the benefit of the students, the community, and staff. The faculty made sure the students earned their education. For example, Earl Cherry once asked for a professor of Foundations Chemistry to reconsider failing a nursing student who had just barely missed her mark. The professor would not let her slide—he noted that the failing grade was not due to her efforts, but stemmed from her failure to grasp the class's concepts. She did not pass and dropped out of the nursing program. The college community worked together to help her find a field of study that suited her. She went on to become very successful in that field.[51] Cherry and the rest of the college administration developed ideas for the college community through the Faculty Wives' Club, floating weekend poker games, fishing trips to Claytor Lake, lunch in the Fincastle Hall Snack Bar, or over a cup of coffee from the vending machine—Cherry's favorite way to discuss issues.[52] This "collegial community" included everyone at WCC. Cherry provided this encouraging and positive community with a sound footing through his financial aid program and increased enrollment through the Continuing Education program, and he helped keep WCC viable.[53]

This sense of fellowship pervaded schools throughout the Virginia Community College System. However, this fellowship seemed to be more departmentalized. For example, at New River Community College, the community consisted of separate factions. The academic departments clustered together and the occupational and technical departments formed a separate clique. There was no animosity of any kind between groups, however, and they interacted a great deal. The community members at NRCC, for example, interacted with each other based more on shared interests and studies.[54]

A sense of community existed between the colleges as well. Joint-sponsorship of events such as the Elisabeth Kubler-Ross lectures enabled Wytheville Community College to collaborate with Southwest Virginia Community College on maintaining quality

51 John DiYorio, interview by author, Wytheville, Virginia, 1/30/2014.

52 Personal recollections of the author.

53 John DiYorio, interview by author, Wytheville, Virginia, 1/30/2014.

54 Charlie White, interview by author, Wytheville, Virginia, 2/5/2014.

education and serving their respective communities.[55] First shared among members of individual college communities and then between colleges in the greater VCCS community, principles of collaboration eventually became system-wide policies. The open interaction between people throughout the community college system turned their ideals into influential principles.[56] The sense of community, carried over from the common ground shared by educators and legislators, enabled Virginia to establish a truly open and accessible system of higher education.

Wytheville Community College began as a VPI branch and became part of the Virginia Community College System. The efforts of a generation concerned with the importance of education broke down barriers and removed obstacles for people previously excluded from higher education. The defeat of Massive Resistance and the integration of public schools emphasized the great need for affordable, quality education open and accessible to all people—regardless of race, color, gender, financial means, or prior educational background. The Virginia Community College System enabled truly open education for the first time in Virginia history. The fruit of the higher education tree was finally ripe and available to anyone willing to reach out and take it. A community of educators, legislators, and witnesses to the injustice and detrimental effects of a lack of education and state-sanctioned inequality increased educational opportunity on a local level. Their efforts resulted in the Virginia Community College System, which enhanced local communities by offering comprehensive educational programs. The junior colleges bettered the lives of those who took advantage of opportunities offered through classes on campus and out in the community. The same principles established by the "collegial community," consisting of a generation of forward thinkers like Earl K. Cherry Sr., still guide the VCCS today.[57]

55 Kegley and Snyder, *The Second Ten Years,* 18–19.

56 Rachel Cherry, interview by author, Comer's Rock, Virginia 11/18/2013.

57 John DiYorio, interview by author, Wytheville, Virginia, 1/30/2014.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Gilley, James Wade. *The First Ten Years: A History of Wytheville Community College, 1962–1972*. Wytheville, Virginia: Wytheville Community College, 1972.

Gladieux, Lawrence E. "Federal Student Aid Policy: A History and an Assessment." *Financing Postsecondary Education: The Federal Role - October 1995*. US Dept. of Education Website. Accessed on 11/25/2014. https://www2.ed.gov/offices/OPE/PPI/FinPostSecEd/gladieux.html.

Hershman, James H., Jr. *Encyclopedia Virginia*. s.v. "A. Linwood Holton." Richmond: Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, 2014. Accessed on 11/25/2014.http://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Holton_A_Linwood_1923-#start_entry.

"History." *Online College Catalog*. Georgia Perimeter College, 2014. Accessed on December 5, 2014, http://www.gpc.edu/catalog/history.

Kegley, Mary B., and William F. Snyder. *The Second Ten Years: A History of Wytheville Community College, 1973–1982*. Wytheville, Virginia: Wytheville Community College, 1982.

Randolph, J. W. *The Virginia Report of 1799–1800, Touching the Alien and Sedition Laws, Together with the Virginia Resolutions of December 21, 1798*. Philadelphia: C. Sherman, 1850.

Rhodes, Eric. *A Proposed Master Plan for a Statewide System of Community College Education in Virginia*. Richmond: Commonwealth of Virginia Press, 1967.

Roche, Jeff. *Restructured Resistance: The Sibley Commission and the Politics of Desegregation in Georgia*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998.

Simpson, Johnnie R., and Darrel A. Clowes. *Virginia Community Colleges in the Eighties*. Blacksburg: Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 1981.

Vaughan, George B., and Don Puyear. *Pursuing the American Dream: A History of the Development of the Virginia Community College System*. Richmond: Virginia Community College System, 1987.

Wallenstein, Peter. *Cradle of America: A History of Virginia*. 2nd ed, Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2014.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Earl K. Cherry Jr. is a senior at Virginia Tech, pursuing degrees in both history and classical studies, with minors in Latin and political science. His main focus is on the history of education and educational equality and opportunity, although he has done some research into the frontier of colonial Virginia, and is currently working on a project highlighting the Peruvian Civil War of 1856–57. He is also presently researching early Christian texts. He resides on his family's farm in Comer's Rock, Grayson County, Virginia, with wife LuAnn, and children Bruce, Lucy Kate, and Emeline, and works part-time as a substitute teacher in Grayson County Public Schools.