

Albemarle Ends Operation of Scottsville High School

By Evelyn Edson

The front page of the Charlottesville newspaper, *The Daily Progress*, made this announcement on May 19, 1967, following a stormy School Board meeting. Up to the last minute it looked as though the school might be saved, but now it was final. A collision of forces brought about the decision. Baxter Allison Pitts, Class of 1964, says, "They kept talking about closing the school in our day. We hoped it wouldn't happen."

Although the oldest accredited public high school in Virginia, Scottsville was, by 1967, one of the smallest. Pressures on schools to raise standards, require more preparation for teachers, and to offer a greater variety of courses leaned heavily on small schools. The School Board noted that eight teachers were teaching courses in physical education for which they were not qualified. Tom Allison, the principal, had not completed his Master's degree, a recently added requirement for principals. He offered to resign, if this would save the school.



Scottsville 5th grade student reenacting Daniel Boone in 1967.



Scottsville High School, ca. 1950

At the same time the federal government was pushing Virginia to desegregate. "All deliberate speed" had been going on for more than a decade with weak results. While several black children attended Scottsville School in the lower grades, their parents having petitioned the School Board under the "Freedom of Choice" policy, the high school was still all white. Black high school students from the area went to Jackson P. Burley High School in Charlottesville. The decision was reached: to close Burley and Scottsville High Schools and transport all students to Albemarle High School, west of Charlottesville. Scottsville's school would continue as a grade school and junior high through ninth grade, while students in grades 10 through 12 would get on the bus for an hour's ride north.

At the School Board meetings, the issue of educational quality was raised. Scottsville High School alumni indignantly maintain that they received an excellent education and that the small size of the school guaranteed individual attention for struggling students. About half the graduates in each class went on to

college, mostly within Virginia.

A number of the teachers lived right in town. Students were all too aware that their parents would hear what had gone on at school, even before they arrived home. Some had the same teacher who had taught their parents. Former students recall Gladys Daniel with her dramatic reading of the "Miss Minerva" books; Laura Branham, "strict but fair," who taught math and retired the day after the school closed; and Hazel Dorrier, the Latin teacher, who also coached forensics and drama. The 1967 *Scotty* yearbook was dedicated to her.



Laura H. Branham, SHS Mathematics; Hazel Dorrier, SHS Latin and English. (L to R, 1963 *Scotty*)

When the school closed, the impact on the town was profound. "The school and the community were one," says Baxter Pitts. Everette Sturm, Class of 1968, adds, "The school brought the community together." At lunch hour and after school, students swarmed out of the school into town, ordering "frosty mugs of root beer" at The Churn and cherry cokes at Bruce's Drug Store's soda fountain. High school basketball and baseball games drew crowds of townspeople as well as students. Pep rallies would be held before games, and "if we were playing Fluvanna, the gym was packed." Now the games would be played at Albemarle High School.

Cenie Re Moon Sturm, Class of 1968, was looking forward to her senior year at Scottsville, but found she would be boarding a bus instead. "Everyone was very upset," she says. "We just thought it was terrible. Big is not always better." She eventually moved in with family in town so she could participate in after-school activities. Some classmates, including her future husband, Everette Sturm, dropped out rather than make the long journey to AHS.

At the large high school, the Scottsville students "became nobodies." Instead of a class of 28 people they had

known all their lives, the Seniors found themselves in a class of 300 plus strangers. At Scottsville everyone could play sports who wanted to do so, but in the first year the students from Scottsville were not allowed to play on the teams at Albemarle. "They called us James River rats," reported one student, "We had more in common with students from Burley than we did with those suburban kids at Albemarle." There was no distinction between rich and poor in Scottsville in the students' opinion, as all had grown up together. At Albemarle, class distinctions were more apparent.

The closing of Burley, a much larger school, and the dispersal of its students between high schools in Charlottesville and Albemarle, was not without sorrow. The description in *The Daily Progress* of the final athletic banquet at the school had Albert Moore, the coach of the Burley Bears, choking up as he recalled the number of athletic triumphs in the school's short history. Coach Moore was quickly snapped up by Albemarle, where he went on to coach both football and basketball.

In Scottsville, town and school activities were intertwined. Students recall the float for the Fourth of July parade

made by the Future Homemakers of America club, and the contestants for "Miss Scottsville" were drawn from the Senior Class. Marie Cobb Melton (1968) described the lavish Prom her junior class made for the Seniors of the last graduating class. The theme was Mardi Gras, and photographs in the yearbook show Spanish moss dripping from the rafters. "We had Bourbon Street, everything—it was just wonderful," said Marie. As for the Prom in her Senior year at Albemarle, Marie said, "I didn't go."

Social life in town revolved around the churches as well as the school. The Methodist Church had a particularly active youth organization. There were trips to the drive-in movie theater in Fork Union, and expeditions to Fluvanna Lake, where there was square dancing as well as swimming. After the Scottsville Pool was built, some students were lifeguards there. On Saturday nights the boys would cruise in their cars along Main and Valley Street. Less advisable were drag races on Route 6. Everybody claims to have heard of these but nobody says they were involved. Students traveled to Charlottesville to movies and to weekend jobs (at the hospital and the department stores).



Boys' varsity basketball team at Scottsville High School, 1963.

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Some students had cars or borrowed their parents' cars, and hitch-hiking was an option for the boys.

The town itself provided for most other needs. Yearbook ads from 1967 show a furniture store (Parr's), two clothing stores, three food markets, a florist, two insurance companies, a restaurant, a Chevrolet dealer, Bruce's Drug Store, a dry cleaner, two hardware stores, two plumbers, a bank, Mowbray's taxi service, several gas stations, and Thacker Brothers' Funeral Home. A town map of Scottsville in the 1950s, recently drawn by Pat Pitts, adds the Dew Drop Inn, the pool hall, Dr. Moody's office, a barber and several beauty parlors. Scottsville today has some amenities that were lacking then: an art gallery, more restaurants, a brewery, an antique store, and a yoga studio. Still for the needs of fifty years ago, Scottsville was pretty well equipped. After Scottsville's high school closed, students remember many shops closing and the owners moving away

At the School Board meetings, which were packed with Scottsville parents and citizens, Mayor Raymon Thacker had defended the location of the high school. He pointed out that Scottsville was establishing a new water and sewer system, building a new bridge over the James River, and was being considered as the site for the new community college. After the high school was gone, he offered a tribute to its history and its teachers, available on the Scottsville Museum website. A letter from S. B. Rittenhouse to *The Daily Progress* on May 24, 1967, lamented "the death of one of the first accredited high schools in the state of Virginia," and called it "a tragic event for many people in southern Albemarle" He went on to say, "For the students who have worked hard to raise money for future activities within the school, for those who are denied the opportunity to ever participate in extra-curricular activities, this is a tragedy. This loss is shared by those parents who consider these things important to a well-rounded education, and who count the



The Prom at Scottsville High School, 1967



Officers of Scottsville High School Class of 1967

Front Row: Larry Shifflet, President.

Second Row (L to R): Tommy Stargell, Vice President; Mary Curtis Conrad, Historian; Jane Dawson, Treasurer.

Third Row (L to R): Jim Baber, Secretary; Martha Alice Golladay, Reporter.

long hours spent on the longest bus rides in the county as detrimental to this goal."

"The school was the anchor of the community and, when that left, it just left a big hole in the entire community," says Edna Anderson, Class of 1948. Gene Harding, Class of 1959,

adds, "It was the downfall of the town."

But Scottsville did not die. Members of the last graduating class are planning a fiftieth reunion for Saturday afternoon, June 10, 2017. It will be held in the gym of the old school at 2 p.m. Larry Shifflet, Tom Stargell,



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Scottsville, VA 24590

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Cenie Re Sturm, Wanda Kucera-Eksteen, Lloyd Barnes, Eddie Payne, and George Goodwin are members of the reunion committee. Please contact any of these committee members to reserve your place at the event, or e-mail:

SHS67Celebration@yahoo.com

Thanks to the alumni of Scottsville High School shown below and at right, who provided the oral histories which were a major source of information for this article!



Edna Tapscott Anderson



Lelia Baxter Allison Pitts and Edward Patterson Pitts



Marie Cobb Melton



Eugene "Gene" Harding



Cenie Re Moon Sturm and Everette Sturm

