

PEACE IN THE VALLEY

by Brian Steel Wills
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Almost from its very beginning as an educational institution The University of Virginia's College at Wise seemed to suffer from an identity crisis. Originally naming the school Clinch Valley College of the University of Virginia, the members of a special committee in Charlottesville settled few of the future difficulties the College at Wise would face, even suggesting that the word "community" could be added to the title "if it is the wish of those concerned, especially those in the Clinch Valley area."

Of course, a connection to the University of Virginia seemed logical. This was the College's parent institution and the source of its early credibility as an educational entity. But, it did not seem to dawn on anyone in Charlottesville, with the important exception of President Colgate W.

Darden, Jr., that the College was not located in any valley, much less "in the Clinch Valley area." Still, in 1955, Clinch Valley College of the University of Virginia became the official title and the school that was located on what had formerly been the Poor Farm in Wise County was already off and running under that name.

Yet, by the time Clinch Valley made the transition from a two-year to a four-year institution, there was already public grumbling about the College's title. In 1969, the student newspaper, the *Highland Cavalier*, took up the issue in the form of a poll of its readers. Only twenty percent of the respondents favored retaining the name Clinch Valley College, while another twenty percent expressed a preference for "University of Virginia at Wise," which would emphasize the relationship between the two schools. Interestingly, the largest percentage supported "Wessex College" as an alternative.

Nothing came of this exercise beyond debate, however the issue was bound to reappear. By 1990, the impetus clearly rested with the forces advocating a name change. In that year, a student survey suggested "UVA at Wise" overwhelmingly, with 71 percent approving that choice. "Darden College" and "Jefferson College" received support as well, but it would be almost a decade before the long-awaited name change would be effected.

During this period, Chancellor L. Jay Lemons sought to clarify the mission and the identity of the College in Wise. In 1997, with the help of supporters on the CVC Advisory Board, he encouraged the creation of a study that would examine the issue. The following year, the Atlanta-based Winfield Group offered its findings and determined that the name Clinch Valley College was a marketing liability that "generated a number of misperceptions and mistakes, particularly for persons residing outside of Southwest Virginia."

Just before the fall session opened in 1998, Lemons, Advisory Board Chair William Sturgill and Board of Visitors member William Crutchfield released a letter to the academic community in Wise. It pointed out that debate over the College's name had been longstanding and that a marketing study had been completed that indicated a change was in order. Citing theories as to how the name Clinch Valley College emerged in the first place, that choice seemed to bear few dividends beyond nostalgia for the College's alumni.

The letter opened the door for wide-ranging discussions on the subject within the ranks of faculty, staff and alumni. As part of the campaign to convince these constituencies that

the time for a change was at hand, Lemons' office produced a list of erroneous names, including the alliterative "Clinch Valley Community College" that the 1955 U.Va. committee had offered to slip into the title.

Numerous prominent figures, including the popular long-time Chancellor "Papa Joe" Smiddy, sent expressions of support for the name change and in December 1998, with the groundswell for a name change growing, the CVC Advisory Board called upon President John Casteen and the Board of Visitors to authorize the change to "University of Virginia—Wise."

The University's student newspaper, the *Cavalier Daily*, endorsed the call for a name change enthusiastically, noting, "Without a reason to reject CVC's proposal, and with a number of reasons to accept it, the Board's decisions [sic] should be a simple one."



The entrance to the College before July 1, 1999.

Unhappily, that simplicity failed to register with the Board. Simultaneously considering a new branch campus in the Middle Eastern nation of Qatar, the Board demonstrated a reluctance to endorse a title for any branch that would hyphenate or otherwise appear to diminish the University of Virginia name. Rector John P. Ackerly III related that young alumni of the University in particular were incensed at a move they saw as detrimental to their beloved institution. Quickly a war of words developed as public expressions, especially in the form of newspaper editorials, moved heavily in favor of the change and chided the University for the appearance of elitism.

The solution to the impasse came in early 1999, generating in Wise a strong sense of déjà vu in the process. Just as the College had benefited in moving from two-to-four year status from a strong delegation in the Virginia General Assembly, so it would again with the name change in the 1999 legislative session. Driven by a united, bipartisan Southwest



During the College's Name Change Celebration on June 30, 1999, Chancellor Emeritus Joseph C. Smiddy, left, and then Chancellor L. Jay Lemons ceremoniously removed a Clinch Valley College banner.

Virginia team, the effort moved through a legislative subcommittee intact. The bill's patron in the Virginia Senate, William Wampler, Jr., called the vote "a major victory" and prepared to steer it through the full body successfully as well.

The course would prove easier in the House where Delegate Terry Kilgore's identical bill received unanimous approval in committee after the Board of Visitors signaled the end of its opposition. "Thank you for the vote," Kilgore observed to his colleagues, concluding, "now there can be peace in the valley."

The University of Virginia's College at Wise emerged from all of the choices and possibilities concerning the name change after the final legislative approvals and with the governor's signature. June 30, 1999, marked the final day for Clinch Valley College, except in the history books and the memories of alumni and friends. A new name would adorn the institution as it embarked on the celebration of its 50th Anniversary and took another step in its storied history.

No Ordinary College, history of UVa-Wise published

The history of The University of Virginia's College at Wise is unique in higher education. In *No Ordinary College*, Brian Steel Wills chronicles the uncommon life of the College, which was founded on a poor farm and has evolved to become one of the nation's top public liberal arts colleges.

"It was Chancellor Emeritus Joseph C. Smiddy, the man who guided the College through most of its development, who observed that Clinch Valley was "never an ordinary College," said Wills. "Indeed, it was with this in mind, that I sought to tell that extraordinary story. It is my hope that previous, current and future generations of students and alumni, faculty and staff, friends and supporters of The University of Virginia's College at Wise will be able to use this book to better understand and appreciate that story."

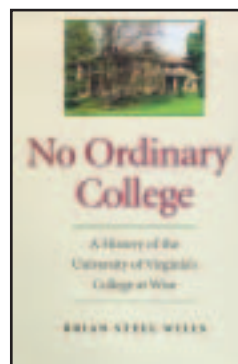
Published for the College's 50th anniversary by the University of Virginia Press, *No Ordinary College* is essential reading for the College's alumni, faculty and staff, and anyone interested in a heroic chapter in the history of public higher education in Virginia.

Chapter titles hint at the interesting stories contained in *No Ordinary College*. "From Poor Farm" to "The College on the Hill;" "The Barnyard Disappears;" and "Peace in the Valley" are just a sampling of the stories inside.

"The narrative is well-known in Southwest Virginia, of the fateful meeting on a blustery evening in the Colonial Inn at Wise, of the three Wise men who traveled to Charlottesville to meet with University President Colgate Darden, of their race to Richmond to secure \$10,000 for the first biennium from the Virginia General Assembly, and of a community of people who labored to renovate and outfit the building that became known as Crockett Hall after the first director of

the College, Samuel R. Crockett," Wills said. "These efforts brought higher education to the coalfield region and changed the lives of so many students forever."

A nationally recognized Civil War historian, Wills is the author of two books, *The War Hits Home: The Civil War in Southeastern Virginia* and *A Battle From the Start: The Life of Nathan Bedford Forrest*, along with numerous scholarly articles, essays, and book reviews. Additionally, he is a weekly columnist for the *Kingsport Times-News*. Wills' latest work, an examination of the Civil War in film, will be published in 2005.



No Ordinary College is available in the UVa-Wise Campus Bookstore for \$29.95.

The Kenneth Asbury Professor of History, Wills is the 2000 recipient of the Outstanding Faculty Award presented by the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia. He also received the UVa-Wise Outstanding Teaching Award in 1998 and the Outstanding Research Award in 1995.

"In many ways completing the history of The University of Virginia's College at Wise has truly been a labor of love," Wills said. "I came to the institution, then known as Clinch Valley College in 1992, after being absolutely taken by the place and its people in the interview process that previous spring. I was fortunate to find a home in a department that still called upon the services of campus stalwarts like Edward L. "Buck" Henson and Stanley Willis. Much of my affection for the school came from the stories I heard from those individuals, and from Joe Smiddy, the most amazing man it has been my pleasure to come to know."