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A Son of the Smokies: William Clinton Medford

Don Casada May 4, 2023

William Clinton “Bill” Medford was born to Rev. Allen Thurman Medford and Verna Welch Medford on Hazel Creek in January, 1909. His mother Verna Welch was a granddaughter of two notable Hazel Creek couples: Joseph W. & Catherine Proctor Welch and Josiah R. & Sarah Jane Cogdill Bradshaw. Her Welch grandparents are buried in the Proctor Cemetery and Bradshaw grandparents in the Bradshaw Cemetery. Both cemeteries are in the Shehan Branch drainage, just southwest of the former town of Proctor.

Thurman Medford was born in 1888 in Haywood County, but by 1900 was in Swain County with his parents, likely in the Galbraith Creek or Governors Island area, based on the others listed near them in the 1900 census. In 1908, Thurman married Verna Welch; by the time of the 1910 Forneys Creek District census, recorded by Rollins Thomasson, the couple was living in the Hazel Creek area on rented property. They were listed immediately after Verna’s uncle, J.R. “Jim Bob” Bradshaw and his first wife, Lou Seay.

In 1919, Jim Bob Bradshaw sold an acre of land on both sides of Shehan Branch (then called Proctor Mill Creek). It was part of Land Grant 3709, registered to early Hazel Creek settler Moses Proctor in 1884 – two decades after he died! An interesting part of the deed was that it included the right to run a pipe to a spring on Bradshaw’s land. Apparently the Medfords put up some sort of a structure, because they paid Bradshaw \$125 in December, 1919, and sold it back to him in July, 1923 for \$275. In the 1920 census, Thurman Medford was working in the Ritter lumber mill. By this time, there were three children in the home – son Clinton, which is how he was listed in both the 1910 and 1920 censuses, suggesting that’s what his folks called him, and daughters Lola and Edna.

The fact that the Ritter work was winding down prompted the Medfords to move to the Bryson City area. It seems likely that another factor in that move was so that young William – as he was known by 1930 – could attend high school in Bryson City. He was a big boy; in his WW II draft registration, he was listed as 6’4” tall, weighing 212 pounds, with blue eyes, blonde hair and a ruddy complexion. While he obviously filled out some, the photo below of the 1926-27 boys basketball team at Bryson City High suggests that he was near that height by his senior year.

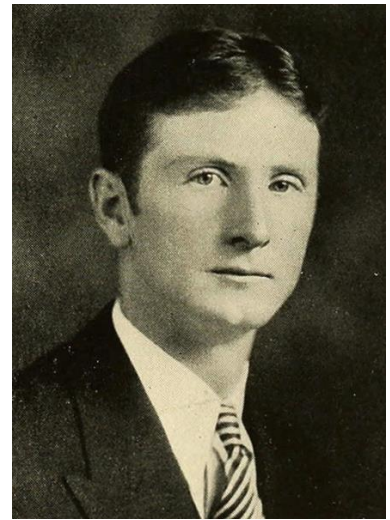


Bryson City High School boys, 1926-27. Kelly Bennett Collection, [Hunter Library Special Collections](#)

Those who have been identified in the photo are (L-R): Jess Warrick (teacher & coach), Commodore Casada, Harry Marlowe, unknown, Bill Medford, unknown, H.H. Welch, Carroll Wright, unknown, Coach Marr and unknown mascot.

Bill Medford completed his undergraduate studies at UNC-Chapel Hill in 1931, finished law school and then practiced law in Waynesville, where he married Jeanette Mock in November, 1940. He was elected to the State Senate for the 1947, 1951, 1955, 1956-57, and 1959 sessions, then was named District Attorney for Western North Carolina by President Kennedy in 1961.

Medford sponsored the legislation to establish the North Carolina Parks and Parkway Commission in 1947. He served as a member, including chairman, beginning in the 1950s until retiring that position in November of 1965. In that capacity, he strenuously objected to an announced plan by National Park Service Director Wirth to charge tolls on the Parkway in 1958 and later proposals for various sorts of user fees on National Park lands. This was one of many attempts by the Park Service to implement fees through legislation. Medford and other members of the Commission, including Kelly Bennett, as well as Western North Carolina Congressman Roy Taylor and Senator Sam Ervin said that the citizens of North Carolina had, in good faith, paid for and donated the lands and rights of way to the Park Service with the understanding that there would be no access or user fees other than for special amenities (such as front country camping). The Park Service relented at the time, in large part due to the scrutiny of Taylor, Ervin and others



William Clinton Medford
1931 *Yackety-Yack*, [DigitalNC](#)

In recent years, instead of approaching fees through legislation, the Park Service has unilaterally implemented backcountry camping fees and more recently, parking fees. Swain County native Bill Medford, his fellow Park Commission member Kelly Bennett, and the many regional leaders like the Bryson family and Jack Coburn, who originally and vigorously supported the development of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and Blue Ridge Parkway, would be thoroughly disgusted with what has transpired.

The Pearsall Plan: Bill Medford as a Metaphor

Medford was one of seven members of a North Carolina Advisory Committee on Education who developed what became known as the Pearsall Plan in 1956. It was so named for the Chairman of the committee, Thomas J. Pearsall, a Rocky Mount farmer and businessman and former Speaker of the NC House of Representatives. The committee was tasked by Governor Luther Hodges with developing a plan to deal with the outfall of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1954, and the Courts ordered deployment of the ruling to desegregate “with all deliberate speed.”

The plan was designed to allow local school boards to work against Supreme Court’s ruling. It was implemented by a series of acts passed by the NC General Assembly in a special 1956 July session.

By delegating the responsibility to, in essence, violate the Supreme Court’s order to the individual school districts, the plan was brilliant tactically. Instead of a single legal proceeding against the state, action would be required on a case-by-case basis at the multiplicity of local levels.

Medford, as the floor manager, actually steered the legislation through the NC Senate. So it was beyond ironic when a court challenge was brought against elements of the laws in a 1966 Charlotte case, Medford, acting on behalf of the U.S. Justice Department, noted his own role in the legislation, but went on to say “This statute and what it was ultimately trying to do is unconstitutional.” He offered that the law softened the shock of immediate desegregation.

His transition from architect and advocate to a position of calling it unconstitutional was, in a sense, representative of a transition of the broader community of North Carolinians. By the end of the decade of the 1960s, school integration was a *fait accompli* in North Carolina. In no way did desegregation eliminate discrimination, but elimination of official state and local sanction was a huge step in the right direction.

Medford’s turnaround was, in effect, admission that the law – and he – had been wrong. Arguments were put forth by many that it was a needful wrong. That may or may not be true; there is simply no way

to know. The example of what the town and community around Clinton, Tennessee went through in the 1956-1958 period could very well have happened in a similar venue in North Carolina – Bryson City, for example – had the court case which forced integration in Clinton taken place here.

On the other hand, the Clinton affair clearly revealed that there were individuals, both black and white, who were unambiguously heroic. The Pearsall Plan provided a mechanism to combat integration, but it did not preclude taking heroic actions to do the right thing.

In the Town of Bryson City and County of Swain – like their counterparts throughout the state of North Carolina – heroes were apparently AWOL. But maybe that's because heroes only become heroes when a battle is raging; the Pearsall Plan acted as something of a shock absorber or flame retardant. Who is to say whether, over the long haul, it was a good or bad thing?

It was almost certainly some of both.

Final connections to his roots

Medford maintained ties in the Bryson City area. He was Attorney-Director of Carolina Wood Turning Company in the 1960s, likely chosen for that position by Aaron Prevost, Chairman of the Board of Directors, and a classmate of Medford at Chapel Hill. But he had a deeper connection to the business. When he left the mountains to study at Chapel Hill, it was with the help of money [borrowed from Miss Jessie Shank](#), daughter of the founder of Carolina Wood Turning's predecessor, Bryson City Pump Works. Miss Jessie herself served as company president after the untimely death of her nephew, I.K. Stearns.

Medford died of a heart attack at his home in Waynesville on April 27, 1969. He is buried, along with his wife, Jeanette, at Green Hill Cemetery in Waynesville.