

## **SIMPSONWOOD CONFERENCE AND RETREAT CENTER**

It's fitting that as Simpsonwood prepares for the 21st Century, the vision that guided its development began in the first years of this century.

Just as Simpsonwood uses its natural beauty and handsome buildings to teach and to expand the horizons of its guests, so did Anna Louise Simpson devote her life to teaching and to inspiring her students.

With a bachelor's degree earned in 1910 from State Normal School - today the University of Georgia - and later a master's from Columbia University, "Miss Ludie" began a teaching career that spanned 35 years.

Her life was something of a paradox.

Living modestly in rooming houses near the public schools in Atlanta and Gwinnett County where she taught, she relied entirely on public transportation because she didn't drive.

Her hobby, however, was travel - on a global scale. Her teaching was enhanced by trips to China, England and other international destinations.

She retired at the age of 70 and returned to the land of her ancestors, living with her mother in Norcross. Family homestead land around Norcross was never far from her memory even during her teaching years. Weekend visits with her mother to the family farm on the Chattahoochee River kept her ties with the ancestral land constant.

Over the years, she bought from relatives nearby family homestead acreage that had been in the family for 120 years.

Simpsonwood's Chapel stands near the old family homeplace.

Miss Simpson decided in 1971, at the age of 84, to give the 239-acre farm, including a half mile of river frontage, to the Presbyterian Church.

Two conditions were attached to the offer: Build a chapel dedicated to her mother's memory on the homestead site, and never sell any of the land.

The Presbyterian Church balked at the second condition, so Miss Simpson approached the Methodist Church, the church of her upbringing.

After Bishop John O. Smith talked with Miss Simpson, he asked Dr. Candler Budd to visit her and discuss the offer. Within the hour, Dr. Budd was in her home, assuring her the Methodist Church wanted the property - on her terms.

Her vision was keeping the land intact so all people could enjoy God's beauty. During frequent visits, Miss Simpson, Jamie Mackay, Conference Lay Leader and Budd walked the grounds together and focused on seeing that vision implemented.

Momentum for the new land - and for its potential - grew rapidly. By 1973, Annual Conference authorized more people for the committee studying a conference center's feasibility. Within the month, the 239-acre tract was deeded to the North Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church for the sum of one dollar.

By the next year, 1974, the conference went with Jamie Mackay's suggestion to form a non-profit corporation guided by ten key ex-officio leaders and 20 others elected by the conference.

Anna Louise Simpson died April 29, 1975. She is buried with her mother in the Mount Carmel United Methodist Church cemetery in Norcross, Georgia.

Amid the sadness of the funeral, an inspiration to remember her generous gift came to John Wesley Pittman, a volunteer caretaker of the property, who became close to Miss Simpson

in her last years.

"Simpsonwood", a simple but elegant name, occurred to Pittman at her funeral. Pittman has always felt Miss Simpson directed him to the name. Jamie Mackay also thought Pittman's choice of the name was God's work.

It was that year that Pittman's inspirational name became official with a conference resolution.

Much of the 1970's found economic downturns slowing the center's development. Pittman, however, found evidence during those years of the Simpsonwood's earlier inhabitants, like the stone fireplace from 1936 and Native American artifacts.

Construction of Simpsonwood's modern buildings began in 1984, with the Rollins Center, an ambitious project of two 32-room lodges and a dining room and kitchen capable of feeding 240 guests, and two 150-seat conference rooms. The bid of contractor Kelly S. Barge Construction, Inc., also included building small meeting rooms for committee use off the large conference rooms.

While work was underway for the center, Mrs. Mary Watson, the wife of the Reverend Ralph Watson, concentrated on its furnishings, with the help of interior decorator Mrs. Kathy Green. Together they tackled the negotiations for implementing the interior design.

Near the center's construction work, other crews put in the swimming pool and tennis courts.

Consecration ceremonies for the Rollin's Center was on September 21, 1985.

Simpsonwood's growth continued with its first lodge, McDavid Lodge, named for Bishop Joel McDavid, who led the fund-raising campaign for Simpsonwood's construction.

Another of Miss Simpson's covenants for her Simpsonwood gift was for the church to

build an English style field chapel near her family's old home site, with construction not to exceed \$300,000. The chapel is named for her mother, Elizabeth Jane Sanders Simpson, while the chapel's stained glass window is dedicated to her grandparents, Thomas McGregory and Mariah Jackson Sanders.

The chapel's design, construction and funding came from the Knox Family of Thomson, Georgia in 1985. Those gifts were from Mr. and Mrs. Peter S. Knox, Jr., and Mr. and Mrs. Robert E. Knox.

The chapel was dedicated September 14, 1986, by Bishop Ernest Fitzgerald.

A second Simpsonwood lodge was built in 1986 thanks to the contribution of Mrs. Blanche Hagan, who asked for the new Hagan Lodge to be dedicated to her late husband, Mr. Harold Hagan's memory.

McDavid Lodge received a nice touch in 1988, when the gathering room was dedicated to Daniel B. Pattilo, who was honored as the first Simpsonwood Board of Directors Chairman from 1983-1986.

A major addition to the Rollin's Center was the basement level in 1989 - another generous gift of the Rollins family. The new basement was named the Budd-Mackay level to honor the hard work of Jamie Mackay and Dr. Candler Budd in Simpsonwood's early years. Dedication of the new level was on September 21, 1989.

Mary H. Watson, who worked hard on the Rollin's Center interior furnishings during its construction, was honored when the Hagan Lodge's gathering room was named for her. Furnishings for the room were given by Epworth United Methodist Church. The consecration service was December 14, 1991.

Integral parts of any conference center are maintenance and laundry. Those services are

centered today in the Herbert Mullenix Maintenance and Laundry, built at a cost of \$100,667 and consecrated the same day as the Watson Gathering Room. The building honors Herbert Mullenix's leadership as Board Chairman from 1989 to 1993.

A \$1 million donation honoring their parents from Richard and Barbara Hickman began the Hickman-Post Lodge project in 1991. The Hickman-Post Lodge will be part of the new D. W. and Ruth Brooks Complex, which will include two lodges linked by central meeting rooms.

Project architect was Lowell Kirkman, a member of Dalton First United Methodist Church and second Chairman of Simpsonwood's Planning Committee. Swofford Company of Smyrna, Georgia was the contractor.

Groundbreaking for the Hickman-Post Lodge and Conference Room began in April, 1992, with consecration by Bishop James Lloyd Knox on October 20, 1993.