

ANDREW AVERY
(1901-1990)

Andrew Avery retired from his long service in the schools of Bainbridge and Decatur County, Georgia, in 1948. From beginning teacher at Bell-Dixon School in 1923 to principal at Mount Pleasant School to Decatur County School Superintendent for 16 years, Andrew Avery served the children and citizens of Bainbridge and Decatur County in an untiring, distinguished and honored manner. After he retired at the end of 1948, Mr. Avery continued to serve his community, region and state as an untiring promoter of Georgia agriculture and involved citizen until his death in 1990.

The Educator. During his youth Andrew Avery attended several one-room schools in the Northeast section of Decatur County for brief periods of time when teachers were available. He crossed the Flint River to attend the new Pine Hill School during the 1922-23 session.

During the summer of 1923, Mr. Avery attended a teacher training course at Hopeful Normal School in Mitchell County. He then took the county-state teachers' exam in Bainbridge and earned his "first grade license."

Desiring to complete high school, he returned to Pine Hill School in the Fall of 1923 with a wagon load of hams and syrup for tuition. A couple of days after he and his father finished unloading the wagon, Decatur County Superintendent of Schools Roland Bower went to Pine Hill and offered him a teaching position at Bell-Dixon School. Mr. Bower took him that same day to Bell-Dixon where he taught the school year. He taught and coached the basketball team at Bell-Dixon for the annual salary of \$600.¹ Back at Pine Hill School, the students and teachers enjoyed the supply of ham, sweet potatoes, and syrup Mr. Avery had left behind!

Mr. Avery attended Summer school at the University of Georgia in 1924. He returned to Bell-Dixon as school principal for the 1924-25 school year.

Mr. Avery returned to the University of Georgia for the Summer session of 1925. He had been inquiring about the possibility of other colleges more suited to his limited financial resources. Mr. Avery wrote Dr. Joseph A. Sharp, President of Young Harris College near Hiawassee. Dr. Sharp quickly replied

that Grady Miller,² Dean of the College, was also attending classes in Athens for the summer and suggested Mr. Avery contact Miller.

Miller persuaded Mr. Avery to enter Young Harris College in the Fall of 1925. With journalism experience with the Bainbridge's *The Post-Searchlight* and *The Camilla Enterprise*, Mr. Avery and other students began a campus newspaper, the *Enotah Echoes* during his first year. His second year he was Editor of the campus newspaper, was selected as a Champion Debater, and was President of Phi Chi (Literary Debating) Society. As one of the top ten students at the college, he was a Commencement speaker and spoke on "Citizenship and the Flag." He graduated from Young Harris College in 1927.

Mr. Avery returned to Decatur County and taught the 1927-28 school year at the Mt. Pleasant School in Vada. He taught in the new brick structure built after the wooden school was destroyed by fire in 1923.³

In 1928, Mr. Avery sought election to the office of Decatur County Superintendent of Schools. He often borrowed his brother-in-law A. E. White's automobile to campaign throughout the county. When he did not gain the position of Superintendent,⁴ Mr. Avery returned to Athens to complete his university degree. He worked at a millinery store near the University to earn money to support himself. Mr. Avery graduated from the University of Georgia in August 1929, with a Bachelor of Science in Education. He later pursued studies at the University of Georgia, Stanford University (Palo Alto, California) and Florida State University.

When he returned to South Georgia, trustees at the high school in Whigham asked Mr. Avery to serve as superintendent. He accepted the position and also taught courses for the 1929-30 term.

After purchasing his first automobile in May, 1930, Mr. Avery drove the roads of southern and central Georgia "hunting for a bigger job." He decided to accept the position of superintendent at the high school in Hahira in Lowndes County for the 1930-31 term.

When the opportunity came to return to Decatur County and serve as principal of the new consolidated Mt. Pleasant School that had been completed in 1930, he eagerly accepted the position for the 1931-32 school year.

Mr. Avery was the successful candidate for the office of Decatur County Superintendent of Schools in 1932. He was re-elected for three additional terms, serving for 16 years until his retirement at the end of 1948.

Andrew Avery was recognized as making unusual and extraordinary contributions to public education in Georgia. In addition to serving the boys and girls of Decatur County, Mr. Avery was active in state and national education activities. He spearheaded the drive for free textbooks and rural library services in Georgia. In 1938, M. D. Collins, Georgia State Superintendent of Schools, presented Mr. Avery to the annual meeting of the National Education Association in New York City as the "man who has given free textbooks to the children of Georgia and library service to the rural children."⁵

Mr. Avery served three terms as a vice-president of the National Educational Association traveling extensively lobbying for federal financial aid to education, especially vocational agricultural education. State Superintendent Collins said of Mr. Avery, "He has responded to every call which came to him. He did not wait for the call. He has paid his expenses to Washington several times, in behalf of legislation furthering the educational opportunities of the children and teachers thruout [sic] this nation."⁶ Federal moneys targeted to Georgia for vocational agricultural education were used to develop model programs at each of the schools in Decatur County.

On one of his trips to Washington, D. C. in 1937, Mr. Avery represented the State Department of Education before the House Committee on Education of the Seventy-Fifth Congress in support of the Harrison-Black-Fletcher Bill that was aimed toward providing federal funds to the states for education.⁷

Mr. Avery served as chairman of the Suwannee River Council Boy's Scouts Court of Honor from 1934 to 1938.

In 1939, Mr. Avery was back home organizing the Decatur County Exposition first held in West Bainbridge in May of that year. One purpose of this effort was to allow the "city folk" to see what the "country folk" had to offer. S. M. Griffin, Editor of Bainbridge's *The Post-Searchlight*, editorialized that the exposition which Mr. Avery organized was "about the finest thing which has ever been held here."⁸ That same year brought the consolidation of the Bainbridge City School System with the Decatur County School System under Mr. Avery's leadership.

In the late 1930's and early 1940's, Mr. Avery spearheaded a legislative initiative that resulted in the Georgia General Assembly establishing the State Retirement System for teachers in public schools. He was present when the General Assembly passed the bill. He was the only person Speaker of the

House Fred Hand called to the podium to recognize for his efforts in support of the bill establishing the state retirement system for teachers.

Upon his retirement, the Board of Education on December 31, 1948, commended him for "sixteen years of faithful, progressive, professional, and effective service" being "at all times helpful and considerate in the discharge of his multiplied duties." They noted that he "has administered this school system during the years of depression, and the war period and the high cost of operation which followed the war and each budget of operation has been managed on a pay-as-you-go basis with a high degree of efficiency..." They added that "Ample qualified teachers and bus operators with good equipment are in service. Extra cash appropriations have been made and future supplies and building materials purchased to comply with requests of local school officials, plus substantial cash balance left on hand for future operation." They declared that "Decatur County Schools are now in excellent financial condition and providing a comprehensive training program for our future citizenship." By Resolution the Board did "commend Andrew Avery for these splendid achievements for all the people of Decatur County."

The Farmer. Andrew Avery was an untiring promoter of Georgia agriculture. He was recognized as making an unusual and extraordinary contribution "in removing the lowly peanut, on which so much of our economy depends, from the class of just another snack food and elevating it to that of a viable, nutritious and very versatile food product."⁹ Mr. Avery was instrumental in the establishment of the Georgia Agricultural Commodity Commission for Peanuts. In 1968, the Commission awarded him their most honored award, the Distinguished Service Award, and cited him for "his diligent, enthusiastic, and energetic interest in producing and promoting Georgia peanuts, thereby creating a significant impact on Georgia's Peanut Industry." Some years later former Governor and Publisher of Bainbridge's *The Post-Searchlight*, S. Marvin Griffin wrote, "My old friend, Andrew Avery, has given away at least 10,395,842 packages of Georgia peanuts sponsored by the Georgia Peanut Commodity Commission, during the past 40 years, and every one of them had tasted like a Georgia pinder should taste."¹⁰ After Mr. Avery's death his family was presented with a special memorial plaque from the Georgia Agricultural Commodity Commission for Peanuts "In appreciation for his unselfish giving of his time and talents to Georgia's Peanut Industry."¹¹

Mr. Avery was instrumental in organizing the Decatur County Farm Bureau and served as President from 1956 until 1964. He traveled often to Washington, DC and other cities throughout the nation promoting the interest of Georgia agriculture. Mr. Avery received numerous honors and awards for his service to agriculture including the 1964 Georgia Farm Bureau Distinguished Service Award for the Second District of Georgia.¹²

Always the active "one-horse farmer," in 1968 Mr. Avery earned membership in the Money Maker Peanut Club by harvesting 4582 pounds per acre. He won First Place in his district and Second Place in the State of Georgia.¹³ In 1969 Mr. Avery harvested Georgia's top peanut yield producing 4588 pounds per acre.¹⁴

The Citizen. Andrew Avery was a committed promoter of the things he believed would benefit his posterity. He was often recognized for his unusual and extraordinary contributions to his community and his fellow citizens of Georgia. In 1988, the Decatur County Board of Commissioners presented Mr. Avery, at the age of 86, a Certificate of Appreciation in recognition of "his tireless and spirited efforts in promoting Civic, Educational and Farming interests of Decatur County over a span of more than sixty years." The Commissioners recognized that "rarely does one emerge from any community who has contributed more of their time, talent and financial resources for more worthy causes. His only reward has been the satisfaction of knowing that he was about a noble mission to enhance the lives of all in Decatur County."

In the early 1930's, Mr. Avery purchased a small hand-sized Bell & Howell 16mm movie camera. He produced and filmed "Footsteps of Progress in the Flint River Valley," a silent black-and-white/color motion picture featuring agriculture, education, business and religion. This historic collection of film has its permanent home in the Andrew Avery Home Movie Collection at the University Libraries of the University of Georgia.

When Mr. Avery died on October 5, 1990, at the age of 88, he was proclaimed to have been "Strong on Living." The editor of Bainbridge's *The Post-Searchlight* went on to say, "When Andrew Avery died this past Friday, Decatur Countians lost their senior and most active booster for the things which are typically ours.

"Whether it was agriculture, education, church, children or the preservation of the old-time crafts and traditions which make up the rich South Georgia heritage, he was an undaunted booster--a promoter and an enthusiast.

"He ground juice from acres of sugar cane at his farm over the years so younger generations could experience this traditional evolution of rural Georgia--and so older generations wouldn't forget.

"He began recording the passing scene in Decatur County with his personal movie camera many years ago, and these valuable insights into our past are now available to the public in the regional library.

"And the tons of peanuts and peanut products he personally distributed to promote this wonderful crop are legend.

"He loved his native land, its heritage, its people and the fruit of its fields; and he spent his life sharing the celebration of these rich gifts with family, friends, and neighbors."¹⁵

The Walter J. Brown Media Archives and Peabody Awards Collection thanks Mr. Daniel Avery for providing this biography of his father, Andrew Avery.

Notes

- ¹ *The Post-Searchlight*, Wednesday, April 8, 1987, page 5B.
- ² The father of former Georgia Governor Zell Miller.
- ³ *The Post-Searchlight*, Wednesday, September 20, 1989, page 2A. A photo of the wooden Mt. Pleasant School in Vada.
- ⁴ Prior to 1939 the city and county had separate school systems, each with its own superintendent. When the results of the 1928 election were in, Avery had a majority of the votes cast in the county. Primary officials, however, included city residents in the voting for the county office. The incumbent had a majority when votes in the city were included. Avery supporters contested the election on the grounds that only county residents should vote in the election for a county office. The Supreme Court of Georgia found in the favor of Avery but too late to assume office for that term. See *The South Eastern Reporter*, Volume 152, April 3-May 29, 1930. St. Paul: West Publishing Company, 1930, pp. 239-242.
- ⁵ *Proceedings of the 76th Annual Meeting of the National Education Association*, Vol. 76: 729.
- ⁶ *Proceedings of the 75th Annual Meeting of the National Education Association*, Vol. 75: 750-1.
- ⁷ Avery, Andrew. "Statement on Harrison-Black-Fletcher Bill H.R. 592 Before the House Committee on Education," *Georgia Education Journal*, Vol. 29, No. 9, May, 1937, pp. 13-17.
- ⁸ *The Post-Searchlight*, Thursday, May 11, 1939, Second Section.
- ⁹ Personal letter from J. Clifford Dollar, Chairman, Commissioners of Decatur County, September 1, 1983.
- ¹⁰ *The Post-Searchlight*, Wednesday, October 28, 1981.
- ¹¹ *Georgia Farmer*, March 1991, page 16.
- ¹² *The Post-Searchlight*, 1964; also, *The Albany Herald*, 1964.
- ¹³ *The Post-Searchlight*, April 3, 1969, page 13.
- ¹⁴ *The Post-Searchlight*, March 1970; also, *The Peanut Farmer* newsletter.
- ¹⁵ *The Post-Searchlight*, Wednesday, October 10, 1990.