

Lowrys were passionate about music

by Scott Bigelow

Ira Pate and Reba Lowry's Bell Tower once again serenades the campus of the University of North Carolina at Pembroke, and it has brought back special memories of the couple. The Lowrys originated the idea of a bell tower and contributed \$20,000 of the \$45,000 cost – at a time when this sum of money represented much more value than in today's world. The tower was formally dedicated May 10, 1981.

The bell tower had been in disrepair since the mid-1990s until it was refurbished and updated during the summer of 2003. Lawrence Locklear, a descendant of the Lowry family, was named bell master. (He is also the university's web publisher.)

"The Lowrys were very involved in music and campus life," Locklear said. "They were so passionate about their college, that in 1941 Ira Pate wrote the music to the College Alma Mater, and his wife wrote the lyrics." (The college became part of the 16 member university system in the early 70s.)

Locklear said playing "Hail to UNCP" at noon and 6 p.m. daily has given the school song new life, something that would have pleased the Lowrys.

Hard times

"The creation of the Alma Mater in 1941 came at one of the lowest points in the university's history," Locklear said. "There is no question in my mind that hard times were the inspiration for the song."

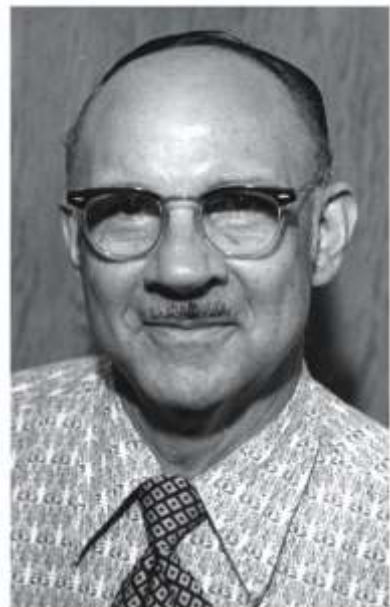
The college nearly had to close its doors during the war years because so many young men went to war instead of college. Professor Lowry spun a little magic to keep the university going. He organized a food cooperative for students to bring food from the farm to the cafeteria in order to offset student and administrative expenses. Years later, administrators remembered this as the heyday of cafeteria food at UNCP.

But music was Lowry's real passion. He was UNCP's original "music man." Coming to the

university in 1935, he founded the music department and nurtured it through good times and bad.



Reba Lowry



Ira Pate Lowry

Reba Lowry

Ira Pate's life partner, Reba Milsaps (1906-1980), was born near Maryville, Tenn. She graduated from Maryville College, earning a Bachelor of Arts degree in modern languages. She received a Master of Arts in languages from the University of Tennessee.

Reba served UNCP for 40 years in a variety of capacities. She was an instructor and chair of the foreign language department, advisor to the yearbook, *The Indianhead*, the first Dean of Women, director of the drama club, The Pembroke Players, and women's basketball coach.

A pioneering force for the university's fledgling foreign language department, Reba led an international movement on campus. She organized the first student exchange program in 1969 and a Foreign Language Festival on campus. She also introduced Spanish classes to Pembroke Elementary School.

She was the first female member of the Chancellor's Club, an elite group of supporters and contributors to the university. For her good works, she was the recipient of the Alumni

Association's Distinguished Service Award. When she died in 1980, her husband created an endowed scholarship in foreign languages in her honor.

Ira Pate Lowry

From the Elrod community south of Pembroke, Ira Pate Lowry (1906-1992) earned an academic scholarship to Dakota Wesleyan University in Mitchell, S.D. He majored in pre-med and music, but music won out.

Following completion of a Master of Arts degree in music from Ohio State University and further study in voice and piano at the Juilliard School of Music in New York City, Lowry returned home. A man on a mission, he organized the university's music department and served as chair from 1935-57. Among his many duties, he was band director for the college.

Of the Alma Mater, Lowry said the music came to him in the middle of the night, and he wrote down the notes at 2 a.m. The Alma Mater has been modified only slightly over time to reflect the university's name changes, most recently to UNCP.

Like his wife, Ira Pate joined the Chancellor's Club and was honored with the Alumni Association's

Distinguished Service Award. There is a music scholarship in his name.

The Lowrys lived less than a block from campus, thoroughly enjoying university life in their retirement years. Reba Lowry had said, "Our first interest is in the university. If there is anything we can do as a service to the university, we are happy to do it."

Still they found time to be a part of the larger community. Ira Pate was music director for his church, a Pembroke town councilman for 17 years and a member of the board of directors of Pembroke's First Union National Bank.

The bell tower is the couple's tangible legacy, though, sadly, Reba died a year before it was dedicated. Other projects that seem an extension of their goals include a new degree in Spanish and new student and faculty exchange programs around the globe. And, this fall marked the return of the marching band program that was an integral part of the music program during Ira Pate's day.

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Bell tower in 1981



Bell tower during renovation