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Minni Pearl, Brooks Hays--  
Two Friends Who Finally Met

By James Lee Young

NASHVILLE (BP)--Minnie Pearl of Grand Ole Opry fame and Brooks Hays of Southern Baptist and U.S. Congress fame were simply "friends who just never met before," in his words.

They met here for the first time during a star-studded banquet of more than 900 leading persons from Nashville's music industry, business, civic and religious community. The event sponsored by the Nashville Chapter of the National Conference of Christians and Jews, was the Fourth Annual Brotherhood Award Banquet.

Such famous persons as country music king Roy Acuff and country musicians Pee Wee King, Eddy Arnold and Danny Davis of the Nashville Brass attended. They joined former Tennessee Governor Winfield Dunn, the master of ceremonies, in applauding Hays' homespun humor and the many and outstanding contributions to the "brotherhood of man under the Fatherhood of God" of Mrs. Henry Cannon (Minnie Pearl).

Minnie Pearl was given the Christian-Jewish conference's Annual National Human Relations Award for advancing brotherhood and championing social and economic justice for citizens of all religious beliefs, racial, economic and cultural backgrounds.

This was her night. The guests came to pay tribute to Miss Pearl, a United Methodist.

But Hays, a former U.S. congressman from Arkansas and a former two-term Southern Baptist Convention President, made the event more memorable with his anecdotes and warm manner.

Hays' stories prompted Miss Pearl to say, "You are probably one of the funniest people in the world."

He told about his appointment to the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) directorship by the late President Eisenhower in 1959, prompting a Mississippi editor to write, "Baptists now have access to the world's largest baptismal pool."

Hays' said his father was once asked whether he would prefer his son to be president of the United States or of the Southern Baptist Convention. The former congressman's father said he preferred his son be President of the United States since "He's not smart enough to be president of the Southern Baptist Convention."

Noting the time allotted for his address, Hays commented, "If I was in charge, I'd give Minnie Pearl her award, sing the Doxology and go home."

Seriously, Hays said in today's world, "there is no immunity for any of us. We need a prayerful approach to life that God will protect us all. We must recognize evils and acknowledge our humanity and exalt a common faith."

Citing the nation's bicentennial, Hays said Americans ought to recognize their Judaeo-Christian heritage and admonished, "If we don't raise our voices as religionists, the voice of religion will be ignored," during the nation's birthday celebrations.

Hays, a board of directors member of the National Conference of Christians and Jews, then paid tribute to Mrs. Cannon--Minnie Pearl, saying they "were friends who just never met before."

Minnie Pearl was introduced by former Governor Dunn and opened with her world-famous "Howdee." Holding Minnie's hat aloft, Mrs. Cannon noted that Minnie Pearl has "no prejudices and no bitterness."

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She became involved in WMU in Henderson, Tex., where she was first elected ~~president~~ of the local congregation's women's organization.

From there, the sky was the limit, as she eventually became one of Southern Baptists' most recognized and respected women. Her list of credentials reads like a "Who's Who of American Women." In fact, she is listed in that volume.

Her more recent accomplishments include serving as WMU president (national) seven terms from 1956-63. Then she joined the WMU staff in Birmingham, 1963-69, as promotion division director.

She did such a good job as WMU they again elected her president in 1969, where she has served to date.

A widow, several years, Mrs. Mathis has a daughter living in Dalhart, Tex. and has two grandsons and a granddaughter. She was born in Bellevue, Tex. Her first name is Marie.

The daughter of the late Mr. and Mrs. T.D. Wiley, has done her parent's proud. She is currently president of the Women's Department of the Baptist World Alliance (BWA) a position she has held five years.

Mrs. Mathis is the only woman to ever serve as program chairman for the BWA, holding that position when the Alliance met in Tokyo in 1970.

A few years ago, she was nominated for the SBC presidency but was defeated. Her attitude toward Southern Baptists and the women role is positive.

She doubts that a woman will be elected president of the SBC in coming years. "This is because of our Southern culture," she said.

She does not feel this is wrong, but feels instead that women in the SBC have plenty of opportunities for leadership.

Whatever the feelings of other women in the SBC, Mrs. Mathis has been given more honors and vital tasks in the convention than almost any women in recent years.

She served as second vice-president of the SBC in 1963 and vice-president of the BWA, 1965-70. Among her many credentials are terms served on the Executive Committee, SBC, the executive board of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, the SBC Foreign Mission Board, Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs and others.

Mrs. Mathis is a life member of the executive board of Texas WMU. And she received the highest knighthood degree in Liberian Humane Order of African Redemption in 1968.

She has two honorary doctorates and was the first woman to receive such from Hardin-Simmons University (doctor of laws) in Abilene, Tex., Mary Hardin Baylor College (doctor of literature) in Belton, Tex.

As president these many years, Mrs. Mathis said she feels the greatest achievements of WMU have been in mission support, through the Cooperative Program unified budget of Southern Baptists.

"We have supported missions by teaching the meaning of the Cooperative Program in our churches because of this.

"Then, I feel our other great accomplishment is the growth of the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering (for Foreign Missions) and the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering (for Home Missions).

"I was present in Birmingham, in a meeting of the executive board (of WMU) when the first \$1 million goal was set for the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering... Next year, the goal will be \$24 million."

Mrs. Mathis in the last five years has traveled on five continents in her various roles. She has "no regrets", sees no "great changes" in WMU work for the future, with the exception of the increasing role of the younger women, and expects to continue work "backstage" with the BWA and WMU, as she is needed.

"I have plenty to do right here at Baylor University (Waco)," where she is full time director of the Student Union, Mrs. Mathis noted.

She will preside over the WMU annual meeting in Miami Beach, June 8-9.

Though leaving office for the time, it may not be the last time. WMU and Southern Baptists have long recognized the able leadership of Mrs. R.L. Mathis.