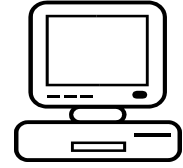




Faculty Forum



You Cannot Conceive The Many Without The One
-Plato-

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**“Everything I Needed to Know, I
Learned at Salkehatchie”
 (“well....*ALMOST* everything”)**

By
M. Ron Cox, Jr., Ph.D.

It was almost a year ago that Dr. Mary Hjelm asked me if I would be a featured speaker for one of the events commemorating USC Salkehatchie’s 40th anniversary. Even as I accepted the invitation, however, I realized that I did so with mixed feelings.

Of course I considered it an honor just to be asked. USC Salkehatchie’s forty years of service to the citizens of Allendale, Colleton, Barnwell, Bamberg, and Hampton Counties is an achievement worthy of recognition, and I am most thankful to Dean Ann Carmichael, Dean Jane Brewer, Dr. Mary Hjelm, and all those involved in the planning of these ceremonies for allowing me the opportunity to “come home” and play a small part in the celebration. I am also grateful to the Colonel Joseph Glover Chapter of the South Carolina Daughters of

the American Revolution for sponsoring this event, and for all the work they did in preparing the reception. (I am enough of a realist to know that most folks show up to these events because of the food, and I cannot say that I blame them. When Dean Brewer told me that Miss Nell Simmons was going to be in charge of the reception, I knew that everything would be first-rate.)

Still, for all the warm and fuzzy feelings, I have to admit that the evening was somewhat bittersweet. Most homecomings are, I guess. I believe most of us like to think that in our chosen careers and professions we are irreplaceable — that the worlds we inhabit truly revolve around us. (This tendency may be especially high among academics.) But as I visited the Walterboro campus that warm Wednesday afternoon, as I walked around Marvin Park, roamed the halls of the main building, talked with students, faculty, and staff — even as I stood and delivered my speech, I was confronted with the reality that in the four years since I left, USC Salkehatchie has moved on, has continued to grow and thrive, has continued to live up to its mission of excellence in teaching, scholarship, and service — all without me.

It was a most interesting experience, a curious mixture of sadness and pride that I cannot accurately describe. Perhaps it is like the feeling you get when you hear that your best friend has won a full scholarship

to a university on the other side of the country. Or maybe it is similar to the feeling parents have as they watch their children grow and become more independent, until they finally move out and get on with their own lives. I do not think that is a very good analogy, though, because let there be no doubt – USC Salkehatchie was the parent, I was the child.

I therefore decided to center my speech around that theme. Originally, when Dr. Hjelm invited me to speak, she told me that I could talk about *anything* I wanted to. (This alone should have been enough to scare the hell out of Ann Carmichael. Experience teaches you quickly not to give me *carte blanche*.) If memory serves, I told Dr. Hjelm that since my tenure at Salkehatchie was exactly ten years to the day (16 August 1992 through 15 August 2002), I would talk about my experiences there, both as an instructor and as an administrator.

As the time for the speech approached, however, I altered my focus somewhat. But make no mistake – my speech was – and this article is – going to be very personal in nature. I do not claim to offer any lofty analysis of higher education; no in-depth dissection of the regional campus system, no brilliant critique of the University of South Carolina system. Rather, what I want to share are some stories (since it is well known that we Southerners are natural born storytellers), a few selected glimpses into my experiences as a part of USC Salkehatchie and how my association with this campus affected and influenced me as an academic, a citizen, and a human being.

Therefore, with apologies to Robert Fulghum, I entitled my presentation: “Everything I Needed to Know, I Learned at Salkehatchie” – with the subtitle,

“Well...ALMOST everything.” So here we go:

1. The Presbyterians are right – Things happen for a reason.

This is the story of how I ended up working at USC Salkehatchie. It was the summer of 1992. I had just finished my master’s in history at USC Columbia and was about to enter the doctoral program that fall. Engaged to be married, I knew that my graduate assistantship of \$6000 was not going to be enough to support myself and my bride-to-be. (Although I had learned that it is possible for a human being to survive on a diet consisting of peanut butter and Rama Noodles, I knew I was going to have to do better.)

The market for history majors was not exactly booming, and I had spent several weeks badgering the folks at Midland’s Technical College to hire me as an adjunct – anything to bring in some additional income. The prospects for a career in academia, however, were not bright.

In my efforts to economize, I had given up many luxuries, including my subscription to *The State* newspaper. It had probably been six months since I had purchased a copy. But it was a Sunday morning in June. I awoke around 9:00 a.m., showered, dressed, and went to church (Shandon Methodist – apparently God did not mind that I drove right by Shandon Presbyterian to get there). After church, as I was driving back to my house (a basement apartment I was renting), something – to this day I cannot tell you exactly what – told me to stop at a convenience store and to buy a copy of *The State*.

I grudgingly forked out the \$1.00 – it was a Sunday edition, after all. I got

home, changed clothes, fixed some peanut butter and Rama Noodles, and after I read through all the important sections – comics, editorials, sports – and after I had clipped the coupons for Hamburger Helper and Rice-a-Roni (two other staples common to every graduate student’s diet), I looked in the classifieds.

And there it was – an advertisement seeking an “Instructor in History. Master’s Degree Required. Dedication to teaching excellence essential. Apply to Director of Human Resources, USC Salkehatchie.” I remember thinking to myself, “Now where in the hell is Salkehatchie?” I actually had to get a South Carolina map and locate the river. Then I found the towns of Allendale and Walterboro. I composed a letter of interest, and apparently the folks reviewing the applications saw something that caught their attention, because a month later I was called down for an interview.

This was the first job interview I had ever had, and I was so excited that I left Columbia at 6:00 a.m., even though my interview did not start until 10:00 a.m. I was already sitting in the hallway of the Old Classroom Building when the Academic Dean, Dr. Frank Shelton, arrived for work at 8:30 a.m. If memory serves, I went into the student center and shot about a dozen games of pool while waiting for the interview to begin, trying to calm my nerves.

That is how I first arrived at USC Salkehatchie. My interview, however, brings me to the next important thing I learned. This one is going to sound very familiar to Dean Carmichael, because it reflects a conversation she and I had on many occasions:

2. A Person’s Strongest Asset Can At Times Be His Greatest Liability

In this case, I refer to my own mouth. Most people who know me know that I have a pretty quick wit – that is one of my strengths. Unfortunately, I have on many occasions allowed my tongue to run out WAY in front of my brain, only to wish that I could recapture the words that I had just uttered.

I demonstrated this during my interview for the instructor’s job at USC Salkehatchie. I was talking to the search committee about my philosophy of teaching, attempting to explain how I try to relate different historical events or themes to something local, something students would be familiar with. Since the job would involve teaching HIST 101 (Early Western Civilization), I illustrated my explanation by comparing Neanderthal Man to folks in modern-day Gaffney. (After all, I was in Allendale, far away from the upstate. I figured I was on safe ground.)

Immediately, however, I sensed a tension in the room. After an uncomfortable silence, which seemed to last forever, Dean Shelton peered at me over his glasses and said, “I came to USC Salkehatchie from Limestone College in Gaffney.” (Don’t tell me God doesn’t have a wicked sense of humor.)

At that point, I did the only thing I could think of. I stood up, grabbed my jacket, and thanked them for having met with me. I assumed the interview was over. Thankfully, the search committee members were able to look beyond my remark and see something of worth, and they still offered me the job. God looks out for fools and children.

I wish I could say that this was my only instance of “open mouth, insert foot”

during my tenure at Salkehatchie; but, alas, I was a slow learner.

One time when I was teaching HIST 112 (U.S. History Since 1865) and we were discussing the Ku Klux Klan. During the lecture, I expressed an opinion about how silly I thought it was, the idea of grown men going around dressed in sheets calling themselves “Grand Dragons” and “Cyclops” and such.

After class, a student came up to my desk and said, “I enjoyed your lecture today. I would have made some comments, but I’m not allowed to talk about these things.” Jokingly, I responded, “Why? Are you in the Klan?” At this point, she (yes, she) opened her purse and removed a card showing her membership in the KKK. For the remainder of the semester, I fully expected to come home and find a cross burning in my front yard. Thankfully, that never happened – I guess my comments were taken as the ramblings of a “nutty professor.”

I like to think that Salkehatchie helped me mature in this respect. By the time I entered administration, I had learned, at least on most occasions, to think before I speak. And bless her heart, Dean Carmichael and I had an understanding that I could say anything to her, as long as I said it “in house.” I think she viewed it as a sort of safety valve, figuring that if I said outlandish things to her (and I often did), I would be less likely to say them in public. (I do take a lot of the credit for reducing her tendency to blush so quickly. Her immunity to my comments increased dramatically over the years.)

3. College Faculty are a Different Breed.

One of the great strengths of USC Salkehatchie is its faculty – the dedicated

men and women who have taken their God-given talents and committed themselves to teaching others. At the same time, it is also safe to say that USC Salkehatchie has one of the wildest assortments of characters I have ever encountered. I make this statement without malice, and I do not mean to express anything other than the most sincere of admiration for them. I was always proud – and I still am proud – to count myself among the lunatics.

So many of the students we encounter on the regional campuses have very limited personal experiences. Often they have never met anyone of a different religious faith, or from a different country, or even with different political or social views. Diversity among the faculty, as much as anything else we do, helps to prepare our students for dealing and working with individuals from all walks of life – a skill which becomes more vital every year as the world grows smaller and more interconnected.

Sometimes, of course, it may seem like some faculty members take their individual eccentricities to extremes.

I remember, for example, the first time I heard a student tell about Dr. Arthur Mitchell removing his shirt in class while providing a very personalized demonstration about the theory of evolution. I also recall countless conversations with students, angry about Dr. Mitchell’s “putting down the South” and “teaching things from a Yankee point of view.” I explained to them that what he was trying to accomplish (at least I hoped) was to make them think, respond, and defend their perspectives in class.

I also remember the first time I heard students talk about Dr. Hussein Zeidan, whom I grew to respect as one of the most up-front and forthright individuals I

have ever met. You never have to wonder about what Dr. Zeidan is thinking, because he tells you openly and without apology. One of the earliest conversations I held with him was one afternoon during my first semester at USC Salkehatchie. We were on the Allendale campus, and I had just returned from my “circuit riding preacher” duties, which had me traveling each day to four different high schools and teaching HIST 101 in the concurrent credit program.

I arrived back in Allendale around 4:00 p.m. and there was Dr. Zeidan, standing outside the science building, drawing deeply on his cigarette. As I got out of the van, he walked up to me, re-introduced himself (we had only met once or twice before), and then he asked me, “Ron, the students you get in the high school classes – what kind of students are they?”

I explained to him that these were mostly accelerated students, students who had been recommended by their teachers or their counselors to take the course for University credit, so that they tended to be more motivated and more involved than the typical college freshman.

Hussein took another deep drag on his cigarette, looked at me, and said, “Yeah, so many of the students I get in my classes – they such d.... little s....”

Now I admit that at first, I was taken aback by his abrupt candor, but I soon came to realize that he was not being dismissive of the students. Rather what he was criticizing was the general lack of preparedness with which so many of them had entered college – a problem not unique to Salkehatchie, USC, or South Carolina. And I also soon came to realize that Dr. Zeidan, along with the other dedicated teachers at USC Salkehatchie, looked at this lack of

preparedness as an opportunity to do what they love to do – to teach, to instruct, to educate – to make up for students’ lack of preparedness by going above and beyond, and seeing to it that, by the time they graduate from Salkehatchie whether they are continuing their education or entering the workforce, they were prepared.

If Salkehatchie’s professors have to be a little crazy, a little controversial, a little off the wall or nuts in order to get students to learn, they do it. Sometimes we may question their methods, but I dare anyone to question their motives or their dedication. A different breed, indeed. God bless ‘em.

4. Sometimes God Takes Good People Away Too Soon

When I think about my experiences at Salkehatchie, it is impossible to do so without thinking of the people there who touched my life most who are no longer with us. I would like to tell about two of them.

Marion Preacher. For those who knew her, no introduction is necessary. For those who did not, Marion was a fixture on the Allendale campus from its founding. Officially she taught sociology, but I discovered very early that she did much more. Her house was located on Spruce Street, directly across from the Old Classroom Building, literally in the middle of the campus. It was impossible to tell where the campus ended and her yard began. The same could be said of Marion’s life. There really was no separation between her personal life and her professional life as a member of the Salkehatchie faculty.

She was long-since officially retired when I joined the faculty in 1992, but you would never have known that from talking

to her. Her love for USC Salkehatchie and its students was expressed in practically everything she did. At the same time, however, she was a true faculty member – definitely one of the “different breed” to whom I referred earlier. Many an evening I would get home from work (I lived three houses down the street from her) and no sooner was I in the door than my phone would ring. It would be Marion, whom I strongly suspected had been watching the street to see when I arrived.

“Have you had supper yet?” she would ask. “No ma’am,” I’d reply. “Well then come on down,” she would say, her tone indicating that refusal was not an option. “I’m fixing pancakes and Canadian bacon.” So off I would go, down the street to have pancakes and Canadian bacon with Marion. I soon learned, however, that there truly is no such thing as a free meal. Supper came with a price. After we had finished eating, Marion would disappear for a few moments and return with a pile of board games in her arms – everything from *Password* to *Boggle* to *Balderdash* – and for the next few hours, we would sit at her table – sometimes just the two of us, sometimes with her daughter and son-in law or other conscripted guests – and we would play games.

Marion was a unique blend of conflicting characteristics. She could be hospitable and charming – she was the first person in Allendale to ask me to attend Church with her – and in the same breath she could be completely irrational, irritating, and on occasion, totally inappropriate.

There was the time, for example, during one of the gaming sessions, when there was a lull in the action. Never shy about initiating conversation, Marion looked over at me and asked, “When your

fiancé comes to visit you on weekends, do you sleep in the same bed?”

I sincerely thought Beanie Brunson (Marion’s daughter) was going to have a stroke right then and there. Her eyes grew as big as saucers as she yelled “mama!” in abject horror across the table. Marion looked at her with an expression of total innocence, and replied, “Well I didn’t ask him if they did anything.”

Marion died in December 2003, while still teaching for USC Salkehatchie, and although she lived a full and long life, I cannot help but look back and wish that I had had some more time to get to know her even better.

Then there was that awful day – August 12, 2003. By this time, I had been away from Salkehatchie for almost a year. I was in my office at USC Lancaster, preparing for that day’s freshman orientation, when my office phone rang. It was Larry West. I remember his voice sounding almost mechanical as he said, “Ron, Wayne died last night.” My first response was “Wayne who?” The possibility never entered my mind that he could have been talking about Wayne Chilcote.

Wayne was more than a colleague, more than a friend – in many ways he was a kindred spirit. Curmudgeonly at times, easily agitated, often exasperating when you disagreed with him, he was also one of the most passionate teachers I have ever known. Wayne taught me so many things in the years we worked together – the joys of hitting a golf ball, the exquisiteness of a good single-malt scotch, the raw beauty of American bluegrass music. He also taught me that compared to some people, my political views are moderate – even conservative.

If Wayne and I ever attended a University function and arrived together, he would often comment that the appropriate song to announce us would be “Send in the Clowns.” (Looking back, it dawns on me that no one ever seemed to disagree with this statement.)

Not too long ago, I was going through my home video collection and I came across a copy of the USC Salkehatchie Talent Show from 1999. I decided to walk down amnesia lane, and did so easily until all of a sudden, there we were – Wayne, Duncan McDowell, Dale Dittmer, and I – attempting to sing, barber shop quartet style, in Walterboro Room 111. I managed to control my tears (for the most part, anyway) and I let the tape continue playing. But there was no holding back when I reached the segment of the tape that showed Wayne with his daughter Emma, playing a duet on their violins. Wayne’s face throughout the performance is fascinating to watch, because you can see clearly the intensity and his determination as he plays, while at the same time he is absolutely beaming with pride as he watches his daughter.

Back in 1997, Wayne, Larry West, and I team-taught a course on “The Search for American Identity.” It was a multidisciplinary approach, with each of us presenting a single topic from three different academic perspectives – history, economics, and geography. I probably learned as much in that course as I did in any graduate class I ever took, and it was not only the academics. I learned much about my colleagues and friends. One of the most interesting little tidbits that we found out was that the three of us were born on consecutive days – September 10 (Larry), 11 (me), and 12 (Wayne) – and we were each 11 years apart

– 1945 (Wayne), 1956 (Larry), and me in 1967.

It has been nearly three years since Wayne’s death, and yet to this very day, when I walk into the classroom building in Walterboro, I still expect to smell pipe tobacco (Vanilla Cavendish) in the lounge, or to hear the sound of a guitar or a violin. When I go to a faculty Senate meeting, I still expect any minute to see Wayne coming through the door, complaining about his truck having delayed his arrival.

Wayne Chilcote was so much a part of the USC Salkehatchie campus, and although I know I should be thankful for the 11 years I knew him, I still can’t help but feel that he was taken far too soon.

5. Take What You Do Seriously, But Don’t Take Yourself Too Seriously While Doing It

I imagine that almost every one of us has at some time or another known someone who took himself far too seriously. I think this is particularly true in the academic world, where seemingly normal people attain so much education that they begin to look down upon those who have not reached such lofty heights (or, as the late Jerry Clower would have put it, those who “have been educated beyond their intelligence). Having grown up in rural Williamsburg County, where fewer than 1 in 20 have earned a bachelor’s degree, I probably was well on my way to taking myself far too seriously. After all, I had earned not only a bachelor’s degree, but a master’s, and later a doctorate.

I believe that teaching at USC Salkehatchie, becoming a part of the communities it serves, was the best experience I could have had in countering this tendency

to overemphasize self. I quickly discovered that although I might know some things about history, my colleagues, my students, the staff, and people in the community knew many more things in many different areas than I did.

I learned to listen. I learned not to dismiss someone simply because they were not educated in the same fashion as I was, and I learned that there are a whole lot of important things to know that you do not find in a book or in the library. These are but a few examples:

- From Gene Davis, I learned that with a little common sense and a lot of elbow grease, you can take an ugly hole in the ground and turn it into a beautiful fountain.
- From Larry West, I learned that not all Republicans are neo-fascists, and, yes, maybe there are some redeeming characteristics of capitalism. I also learned that a Chevy S-10 is a great investment, but beware of asking directions from anybody who's "looking for a guardian angel."
- From W. A. Duggin, I learned that with enough practice, you can listen to an engine running and tell what part is not working as it should be. I also learned that some people can spit tobacco juice out of a truck window at 60 mph and not get a single drop on the side of the truck. (It is a gift, I am told) W. A. also taught me that there are some men who look worse in a dress than I do.
- From Terrie Summers, I learned that a laugh and a smile can go a long way in getting you through a tough day at work, or a tough evening at home.
- From Marge Berryman, I learned that running a bookstore and business office is as much about dealing effectively

with people as it is about dealing with money and inventory.

- From Ed Merwin, I learned that a good pun can be a source of much amusement, and that a bad pun....I mean a *really* bad pun....can have the same effect as fingernails on a chalkboard.
- Kathy West taught me that "Bend over and I'll show you" is oftentimes a good response to any question involving the word "Where?"
- Sue Keith and Theda Coker taught me that there are some people who have even less shame in public than I have. And they do not hesitate at all about bringing you down with them.
- Miss Anna Lou Marvin taught me a whole lot I did not know about plantations in the Lowcountry. She also taught me that next to vinegar-and-pepper barbecue, a roasted Bluffton oyster is just about the closest thing to heaven on earth that you are going to find. (At the same time, though, I learned to stand clear of her while she is shucking those oysters, because she gets serious with that oyster knife.)
- Miss Betty Black and Miss Nell Simmons taught me that I need not worry about Southern culture and manners disappearing – not as long as either one of them have anything to say about it, at least. They also reminded me daily of the importance of continuing to learn throughout my life.

All of these folks, and countless more that I could mention if I had the time – souls I encountered during my decade at USC Salkehatchie – they all reminded me that even though I may have the letters "Ph.D." after my name, that does not give me the right to think more of myself. I learned far more from each of them than they ever could learn from me, and I will forever be in their debt.

Do you see why I said earlier that Salkehatchie was the parent and I was the child?

There are many other “things I learned” that I wanted to write about, but this article is already too long. If I had unlimited space, some of the topics would have been:

Yoda (from Star Wars) was right – size matters not. If you do not believe me, spend a day negotiating with Ann Carmichael. Within that petite frame resides the spirit and determination of a giant. And yes, the Force is with her (but beware the Dark Side!).

If I Am Ever in a Fox Hole and Under Enemy Fire, I Want Jane Brewer’s Cell Phone Number. During my first years at Salkehatchie, when I was dealing primarily with high school students and going through the trials and tribulations of being a new professor, rare was the week where I did not end up in Jane’s office with some crisis or other. The patience she showed in working with me, her ability to get me to calm down and think through my dilemma – without her guidance I would not have survived the experience. I hope I am half as good a Dean of Students for USC Lancaster as she has been for USC Salkehatchie.

A Pink Flamingo Adds Character to Any Setting and also makes a great Conversation Piece. Take my word for it. Keep in mind, however, that landscape architects do not have a traditional sense of humor. Enough said.

It’s Okay to Talk About Cooters and not Laugh. Although an occasional snicker is understandable.

Graduate School Does Nothing to Prepare You for Administration. Chlorine gas vapors, children stuck behind drink machines, meltdowns in the microwave oven, dead trees, live snakes – yes, there are

true stories behind each of these, and no, I do not have the time or space to write about them. Maybe at the 50th anniversary.

I hope that through the humor I have attempted here, you can see the great respect and admiration – I do not think that “love” is too strong a word – which I have for USC Salkehatchie. I said it many times while I worked here, and I believe it just as firmly today – This institution is a blessing not only to the communities and to the people it serves, but also to all of us who have (or had) the privilege of working here. I am proud to have been a part of its history. For one quarter of its forty-year existence, I had the privilege of walking these halls, of teaching in these classrooms, and of working with a fine group of men and women who gave much more to me than I can ever hope to repay.

I will always think of USC Salkehatchie as “home” and I will always be grateful for the chance they took, whether it was in hiring an untried instructor in 1992 or an untried administrator in 2000. They saw in me the potential to contribute and make this a better place, and I earnestly hope and pray that, whatever my shortcomings and failings, I did not disappoint.

Back in 1993, in my younger and wilder days, I wrote a song which I had hoped might one day be adopted as the Salkehatchie campus song. (There was a big controversy, with some in Columbia thinking I was trying to replace the USC alma mater. Sometimes it is amazing that I ever received tenure.) But the words of that song seem an appropriate ending for an article such as this, and since I am now, in fact, tenured, I will close by sharing it. To me, it seems an appropriate tribute not only to Salkehatchie’s forty-year history, but also to its “better and brighter” future. The tune is

Haydn's *Austria*, but the words and sentiments are mine:

Near the banks of Salkehatchie
Shining bright and graciously
Proudly stands our alma mater
Serving true and faithfully.

Quest for learning, wisdom yearning
As is now, 'twill always be
Fount of knowledge; hail, our college
Salkehatchie, hail to thee!

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