

James Penland

By Sandra Mazza

The town of Hayesville in Clay County, NC, has a history stretching farther back than its incorporation in 1861. It was home to the Cherokee Indians, then home to pioneers who crossed the Blue Ridge Mountains seeking fertile land for farming and the kind of tranquility that beckoned settlers in turbulent times. Newcomers found the land abundant with timber for housing. Rich bottom lands bordered streams and small rivers teeming with fish. The forests were populated with deer, elk, bear, small game, and birds. Families settled on nearly self-sustaining small farms and the affairs of commerce, government, and religious worship, also settled into place. Thus it was that Clay County, newly carved out of Macon and Cherokee Counties became an entity of its own. In time, the county seat was established at Hayesville and became the political, agricultural, and commercial hub of the new county. Churches and schools flourished along with the agrarian economy. Anchored by farming enterprises, communities grew up in the rich bottom lands adjacent to the streams, creeks, and the Hiawassee River. These communities had one-room schoolhouses where children learned the three R's. Brasstown, Warne, Fires Creek, Tusquittee, Elf, Shooting Creek ---each radiated from Hayesville, the settlement closest to Fort Hembree, former gathering place for the dispossessed Cherokee in their long trek to Oklahoma on the Trail of Tears.

As the town settled into its role as county seat, the need for a permanent structure to house the various offices and departments of justice, land ownership, and taxation was addressed. A stately two-story brick courthouse was erected. Coincidentally, in that same year, 1888, one of the most prominent of Clay County's citizens was born. James Penland, called Jim, was born into the Newton and Margaret McClure Penland family on April 11, 1888. Along with his parents and many siblings, Jim lived a typical farm family life with never-ending chores and the closeness borne of living, working, farming, faith, and

school-- when it was in session. Like most farm boys, James learned to care for animals, to make a garden, to construct outbuildings, to put up hay, to plow and harrow and dig potatoes and slaughter pigs and wring the necks of chickens for Sunday dinner. The year Jim turned ten, his father, Newton Penland, contracted typhoid fever and died. His death left Margaret a widow with ten children to rear. A hard life became harder!

With his brothers, Jim roamed the woods and hunted small game. The outdoors was one huge playground. On one hunting foray into the woods when James was eleven years old, a chip of wood became embedded in his left eye. James did not tell his mother right away. Likely, he was not supposed to be on the hunting expedition with his brother. By the time the eye was attended to, infection had set in. Without antibiotics, the eye became so badly diseased that it had to be removed. Sadly, the infection had spread to the right eye and the physicians made the fateful decision to remove Jim's right eye, also.

Each of these traumatic medical procedures had been performed in Atlanta, GA, a long train journey from Murphy, NC. So, at the age of twelve, James Penland became blind. Much speculation has been made as to the consequent path of James Penland's life. If the tragic accident had not occurred would he have become the businessman, the humanitarian, the politician, and the community focused man he was?

It was the end of the 19th century. For a blind boy from the head of Shooting Creek, the future could have been bleak. But, 350 miles away in the state capitol, Raleigh, a state school for children with visual and hearing disabilities had been established in 1845. From founding documents, the county paid \$75.00 in tuition per child from the county that was enrolled in the school. James was enrolled in 1901 and completed his formal education there, graduating in 1908. Exactly how Margaret McClure Penland learned about this school is unknown, but what is known about the journey is that, accompanied by an

older brother, 12-year old Jim made the overnight trip to Murphy to board the train. From there, he travelled unaccompanied to Raleigh making changes in two railroad stations.

During his years at the boarding school in Raleigh, Jim studied a varied academic curriculum including history, math, grammar and physical education. There was an emphasis on musical performance and theory. Jim learned to play the piano and played the tuba in the school orchestra. He learned the art of piano tuning, as well as piano and organ repair. Later, Jim would earn money as a piano tuner. Because it was a preparatory boarding school, there was great emphasis on learning such skills as piano tuning, broom-making, mattress-making, shoe-making, carpentry. Each of these skills could be used by the visually impaired person as a vocation. Later, having knowledge and expertise in these varied skills would stand Jim in good stead as he lived his life in the sighted world and became a rehabilitation vocational counselor for the blind.

Jim and his schoolmates learned a writing/reading system of raised dots known as New York Point. Later, Jim learned Braille, a more widely used system of reading and writing that also used raised dots. Having lost his vision at age twelve, and even understanding the value placed on education in the Penland family, it remains astonishing that as a teen-ager, Jim had acquired the ability to communicate in three related, but separate, language systems!

Although it was a boarding school, students did not attend classes during summers and holidays. At the ends of terms, Jim returned to Shooting Creek and the bosom of his family on the farm. While a student in Raleigh, Jim experienced a different, perhaps more comfortable way of life. Central heat, inside plumbing, and telephones were part of his everyday experience. The trips back and forth and time at the school quickly taught him the skills needed to navigate in a sighted world. No doubt, having the gift of sight for 12 years made his adaptation to sudden disability different from those who had been blind from birth. He could remember living in a sighted world.

Iola Phillips, a visually impaired girl from Madison County also on her way to the State School for the Blind in Raleigh met Jim in the Greensboro train station during a stopover. The story goes that Iola offered James an apple plucked from her father's orchard. It might be called Love at First Bite, for their seven-year courtship, eventual marriage, and life journey began there!

And what a journey it was—from an adventure filled weekend wedding in Macon County to a wedding night at Rainbow Springs and a sojourn with family in Shooting Creek to setting up housekeeping and a business in the Elf section of Clay County –for starters! At Elf, Jim and Iola kept a country store and Jim was appointed postmaster—a job he held until the inspector discovered Jim was blind! Iola became the postmistress and held the job title until 1911 when the Elf post office was closed. In addition, Jim also operated a flour roller mill that burned down, and then a grist mill on Shooting Creek. The family that included two children by this time, moved to Madison County and James sold a line of household goods employing salesmen who went door to door. With Iola accompanying him, James worked a three county territory travelling by train to oversee the salesmen.

After a two-year absence, Jim, Iola, and the children returned to life at the foot of Chunky Gal Mountain. James undertook a rolling store enterprise with a horse-drawn wagon, a driver, and merchandise from entrepreneur, John Tiger. Travelling from farm to farm, bringing the necessities and notions of life to the isolated farm families, Jim often picked up fresh poultry and eggs and produce as bartered payment. A consequence of this was that Jim built his reputation for integrity and business acumen in many parts of the county. When Jim successfully ran for political office in 1914, he easily won the election and became Clay County Treasurer, a position he held for more than a year.

With the new position, the family left Shooting Creek and moved into Hayesville. Their house was across the street from the present-day Moss Memorial Library. Perhaps it was experiencing the invention of the telephone from his years in Raleigh coupled with the months he spent travelling from

one isolated farm to another, or Jim's penchant for all things mechanical and the convenience of face-to-face communication, or the wonder of the modern telegraph system. Whatever the impetus, James Penland was a visionary who understood what a life-changing invention and instrument for commercial progress the telephone would mean to the folks in Clay County.

At this time, just a few homes and businesses in Hayesville were electrified. Power was generated from a dynamo on Shooting Creek at a site now under the waters of Lake Chatuge. There was one line from Murphy to Hayesville where the only phone—a slot, or coin phone—was available in the Commercial Hotel. It was most often used for long distance, mostly telegrams.

In 1876, Alexander Graham Bell received his patent and made the now famous phone call, "Mr. Watson—Come here—I want to see you" in metropolitan Boston, MA. Hard as it is to believe, just 41 years later the first phone call from the Clay County Telephone Company was made from James Penland's home in Hayesville to Willie Price's home in the Jarrett Road community at 7:00 in the morning. The year was 1917 and the town of Hayesville had a telephone company because of the expertise and vision of a 29 year-old blind man. Just think, in Hayesville there were few cars, and the trip from Hayesville to Murphy was considered arduous, but there was telephone connection from Brasstown to Tusquittee, to Shooting Creek to West Hayesville and back to Hayesville Central!

For those of us who carry world-wide communication in our pockets and are never out of touch, the idea that James Penland had to sell anyone on the value of telephone communication is incredible. But, that is the case. Having obtained a franchise from the young town, incorporated in 1913, Penland sought and received financial backing from leading citizens. Shares in the company were sold, with Penland himself President of the Clay County Telephone Company. He was owner and operator. The telephone land and property within the town limits belonged to the Clay County Telephone Co. Outside of town, local companies were formed that were responsible for maintenance of the line that was

owned by the party lines. Individuals on the line owned their phones. Each party was responsible for poles and line necessary to reach the next neighboring party. So, phone service was both sustainable and affordable linking farm families to the town and its businesses, doctors, government agencies, and residents.

To build the fledgling telephone system, the Clay County Telephone Company sold the wire, insulators, and the phones. The poles were easy to come by, and sold for \$1.00 apiece. Blighted chestnut trees—straight and tall were readily available in the nearby woods. The story is that Penland worked all night, with the assistance of his son and brother, to install the Westinghouse bell switchboard he had purchased in the front room of his home. The switchboard that is on display in the Clay County Historical and Arts Museum is the original switchboard. The entire enterprise was a family affair with his wife, Iola, and daughter often manning the switchboard and his sons climbing poles, installing phones, trouble-shooting, and maintaining the entire system.

The Westinghouse switchboard had banks of bells that rang signaling the operator when someone wanted to use the line. The operator made the necessary connection and the conversation, business or social could proceed. Over time, Penland modified the switchboard adding to the capacity. Individual customers had individual rings, combinations of “longs” and “shorts”. When a customer’s phone rang, the listener could discern his own ring by the combination assigned to him or her. For instance, the ring might be two long jingles followed by one short jingle! There had to be hundreds of combinations, because there were hundreds of customers. Amazingly, “Blind Jim” Penland could distinguish by hearing alone which bells were ringing. Although the bells were advertised to be identical, with his uncanny hearing he could discern the tiny nuances among them.

After several years of successful operation, in 1921, Penland moved the switchboard to his new facility on Main St.—a two-story structure with an apartment for Miss Cora Harden who was hired to be the night operator and bookkeeper. The first floor of this building was given over to a hardware store and the second comprised the telephone office, an apartment and an additional office. About the same time, James Penland built, with little assistance, a new family home on the road to Murphy near Town Creek where the family grew to include two daughters and five sons. Unfortunately, neither structure exists now.

The late 1920's saw additional changes to the town of Hayesville. Both water and sewer were available to town residents by the fall of 1928. Reportedly, the sewer system greatly enhanced the air quality of the town! The water tank 100 feet above Hayesville on Town Mountain, provided 85 lb. of pressure that, along with the 2000 feet of newly purchased fire hose and equipment could help protect the town's homes and businesses from devastating fires. I have been told that some of the town boys availed themselves of the ready-made swimming pool for some mischievous recreation. What that did to the town water supply is unknown!

By the time water and sewer came to Hayesville in 1928, the Clay County Telephone Co. boasted of 400 telephones—one of the highest concentrations of the modern devices in the country. In 1927, Penland installed new equipment that enhanced the clarity on the lines. In July of the following year, there was a devastating summer storm that wreaked havoc on buildings in the town of Hayesville and caused extensive damage to the poles and lines of the telephone system, especially toward Elf. Penland promised to get the repairs completed quickly, and he did. In just a few years, the worth of a telephone system had proved itself. According to an early newspaper article, in 1926, there were 73-million telephone calls made in the United States. With 400 phones in Clay County, a large number of those calls were connected through the Clay County Telephone Company.

Rates were low, and Penland kept them low despite criticism of this practice by other telephone companies. Hard cash was scarce, so payment for service was often made in produce, meat, services, or other barter. The party line rate for customers in the town limits was \$1.00 per month. A private line was \$1.50 and a business line \$2.50 a month. Those outside the town who owned their phones, lines, and poles paid a rate of \$5.00 a year.

During the years Penland ran the telephone company, he pursued other interests and served his fellow citizens in many capacities. He was elected to the NC State Legislature from Clay County and served two sessions. At that time, he introduced and saw passed legislation that guaranteed North Carolina blind students free tuition and readers at state supported colleges.

Also in the 1930's Penland installed and owned a telephone company in Robbinsville. It was organized along the same blueprint as the Clay County Telephone Company. The operation of the Clay County Telephone Company passed to several successive managers after 1938, and was eventually sold, along with the Robbinsville Telephone Company. Together, these phone companies were purchased in 1950 and became part of Wesco.

As a father of seven, it is easy to understand why Penland served on the school board for six years and why he founded the PTA in Hayesville Schools. He was often a presence in the school as a featured speaker in assemblies. He was also instrumental in founding the Sunday School Association in Clay County. He attended the Methodist-Episcopal Church and was an ordained local minister of that denomination.

The family lived in Hayesville, but had farm animals, a garden, and chopped wood for heating and cooking. Penland never used the assistance of a seeing-eye dog, but did use a cane navigating his town-- the various businesses, the church, the courthouse, and offices he frequented. If he was visiting an unfamiliar place, one of the children was drafted to accompany him as guide. Observing Penland on

his solitary walks, it was easy to forget that he was blind for he did not hesitate, nor make a misstep, but seemed to have a highly developed sense of kinesiology—awareness of one's position in his environment. He did not bump into objects or people as he walked. It was also reported that Penland's senses were so keen that he often greeted friends and acquaintances by name before they greeted him.

Among his many selfless service interests, Penland was Chairman of the Clay County Chapter of the American Red Cross from 1931-1938. From his building on Main Street, this organization distributed food, clothing, and medicine to those in need during the years of the Great Depression. He was a member of the Clay County Board of Public Welfare and was the Chairman of the NC League of Crippled Children. In 1934, he was Chairman of the Better Housing Administration.

Over the years, Penland had many jobs. He was an entrepreneur, he sold life insurance, real estate, pianos, and, of course, the telephone system. In 1936, he received the call from Raleigh to become a Rehabilitation Counselor for the Blind. Preparatory to working in this position, Penland completed graduate studies in counseling at the University of North Carolina.

With his work history and life experience, and his sense of social commitment, he was eminently qualified for this position. He began with a 7-county territory, but later expanded to a 20-county field of operations. The intensity and scope of his work as a rehabilitation counselor made living in Hayesville impractical. In 1938, the family re-located to Asheville.

With the assistance of a driver and a guide, Penland sought out and counselled blind citizens--steering them toward a life of independence and productivity. Many clients established and ran their own businesses, such as concession stands handling snacks, newspapers and magazines. Others worked in Lions' International sponsored facilities that produced high quality mattresses, brooms, and cane-bottomed chairs.

During the WWII war years, as part of the domestic war effort, Penland and several other counselors were sent to factories near Washington, D.C. to demonstrate to the owners that blind workers were capable of performing many jobs in manufacturing that were in need of workers. Among the factories were a candy factory and a bakery. After brief instructions, the blind counselors set to work. They demonstrated that they were perfectly capable of completing the assigned tasks. The five-week course covered more than 270 skills in twenty different manufacturing facilities. Following this on the job training, the counselors had acquired a whole new set of skills to teach their clients. The war years brought about huge changes in industrialization in the USA. Along with women notoriously becoming Rosie the Riveters, an entire cadre of blind workers greatly expanded the available work force and proved their mettle in private industry.

Mica, a mineral mined in Western North Carolina was a critical component in war materiel. The unrefined sheets of mica had to be sorted by thickness to the thousandth of an inch before they could be used in batteries, radar equipment or communication devices. Blind workers, who were accustomed to making fine discriminations by finger touch (think reading Braille) were trained to fulfill this industrial role. James Penland's wife, Iola, who had been by his side since their earliest Raleigh school years proved to be an excellent sorter and became the trainer of this specialized group in a Lion's International workshop.

In 1945, the governor of North Carolina appointed James Penland to the Board of Trustees of the North Carolina School for the Blind. He was the first blind person to receive this honor and to serve on their Board of Trustees. This institution is now known as the Governor Morehead School. It is still a boarding school whose mission is to educate visually impaired students from age five to twenty-one. One need look no further than the head of Shooting Creek where a youngster suddenly became blind at age 12 to assess the value of this facility. This youngster, one of the most distinguished alumnae of this

school was recognized by the institution when, in 1965, a new housing facility was named the Penland Cottage in his honor.

Penland continued as a rehabilitation counselor, counseling blind clients, assessing their needs, arranging for training, and placing them in jobs until his retirement in 1960 at age 72. In all of his many enterprises, and his social and political commitments, James Penland was a kind, pragmatic, energetic, loving father to his seven children. Education was stressed and achievement was expected from each child. The seven children were loved and respected by their parents. In turn, the children adored their parents and appreciated their commitment to strong values and to their fellowmen.

After his retirement, Penland stayed connected to world events and issues by reading magazines in Braille and listening to the radio. His workshop contained wood-working tools, hand and power. He used these tools to build and finish bookshelves that have become prized possessions to his loving children and grandchildren. Capitalizing on the skills learned at the NC School for the Blind, James Penland created lasting mementos and demonstrated in his life that lost vision did not make him blind or dependent.

Retirement years were brief for James Penland. A heart attack during the summer of 1965 and a stroke in December of that year ended his life. A grandson who was living in the Asheville home with James and Iola Penland remembered the emergency techs wrangling his grandfather onto the gurney, down the stairs, and into the ambulance that would carry him to the hospital where he died a few days later on December 17, 1965. Iola, now blind herself, had been by his side from the beginning of their courtship in 1901. Together they worked, reared children, served their community, and lived by their strong Christian principles. James Penland is buried at Green Hills cemetery in Asheville. After the committal service returning the remains of James Penland's body to the earth; after the gathering of the family and friends to exchange condolences and to break bread together amidst the sadness, from a

shadowed corner of the familiar room, the blind widow in barely audible tones whispered, “He loved me.” All present acknowledged that it was so.

Perhaps the essence of one’s worth is measured in the knowledge of one’s value to those who survive. To leave a legacy to the greater population is remarkable and should not be forgotten. Iola Phillips Penland, beloved wife of James Penland passed away in 1980 and was laid to rest next to him.

James Penland was a charter member of the Clay County Lion’s Club and a dedicated member of Lions International. By living a life filled with service, he exemplified their motto, *We Serve*. Through his many years of service, James Penland changed the lives of the citizens of Clay County and the lives of the visually impaired across North Carolina.

This is part of a series of articles about historical gems in the Old Jail Museum and the interesting stories behind them. The museum is closed for the winter, but we hope to have made many improvements when it opens for the summer season.

The Clay County Historical and Arts Council is currently seeking to raise funds for the repair and restoration of the Old Jail Museum. To donate you may visit our website clayhistoryarts.org or mail your check designated for Old Jail Museum Restoration Fund to CCHAC, P. O. Box 5, Hayesville, NC 28904

