Picking green beans out in the field was Melvin Merrill’s first job when he was a freshman at Berry College in 1960. In a 37-year career in the fundraising field at ABAC, he hasn’t picked any beans but he has helped ABAC harvest a lot of green.

Merrill will officially retire from ABAC on Thursday. His work at the college as Director of Development, Chief Development Officer, President of the ABAC Foundation, and Director of Capital Planning will serve generations of ABAC students in the future.

“I have always liked what I was doing,” Merrill said. “It wasn’t necessarily like a job. I enjoyed doing it.”

Honored in 2011 by the Georgia Education Advancement Council with its Lifetime Achievement Award, Merrill was recognized at that time for over 8,600 ABAC constituents contributing in excess of $23,540,000 in support of ABAC programs. He began his ABAC career as Director of Development on July 1, 1978 and later became the Chief Development Officer. During that time, he served as president of the ABAC Foundation for 30 years.

In 2011, ABAC President David Bridges pointed Merrill in another direction as Director of Capital Planning. He flourished in the position, leading the charge on capital projects valued at almost $80,000,000. Those projects included the Historic Front Campus Renovation which changed the entire look of the “front door” of the campus when it was completed on March 1, 2013.

“We had lost all our curb appeal,” Merrill said. “Lewis Hall and Herring Hall had not been used since 1985."

Merrill has been a key player in all the ABAC building projects in recent history but two of them completely changed the western skyline of the college. ABAC Place opened in 2004, and ABAC Lakeside opened in 2007. Both projects were initiated by the ABAC Foundation, and the college now accommodates over 1,300 students in modern housing facilities as a result.

For many ABAC alumni and supporters, Merrill cemented his reputation with ABAC with his coordination of the immensely popular Dollars for Scholars Benefit Banquet and Show. The event actually began in 1972 when Anita Bryant performed on the campus. Merrill picked up the reins in 1979 when Barbara Mandrell came to town.

Dollars for Scholars attracted big name stars to Tifton in the spring time of each year in an effort to raise scholarship funds for ABAC students. Merrill said that due to a nine-to-one federal matching program, the onetime “social event of the year in Tifton” generated in excess of $100 million.

Debbie Reynolds. Roy Clark. Marie Osmond. Ray Stevens. Helen Reddy. Merrill remembers them all. His favorite performer at Dollars for Scholars was pianist Roger Williams.

“He was one of the few performers that we brought back for a second year,” Merrill said. “He was easy to work with, and he

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Georgia Museum of Agriculture Hosts Folklife Festival April 11

Visitors can enjoy a celebration of the rich, rural heritage of South Georgia during the annual Folklife Festival on April 11 at the Georgia Museum of Agriculture and Historic Village at ABAC.

Showcasing South Georgia’s history, art and culture, the event runs from 9 a.m. until 4 p.m. with activities for both children and adults. ABAC alumni will get the best of both worlds since the Festival is a big part of the Homecoming Week at the college.

One of the can’t miss moments of the Folklife Festival will be the ceremonial firing of the Turpentine Still at 11 a.m. for the Historic Village’s annual turpentine distillation. Museum guests will see up close and personal this age old process that is central to South Georgia’s history and culture.

A Civil War memorabilia exhibit in the Museum Gallery titled “Brothers Again” commemorates the 150th anniversary of the end of the Civil War. Visitors can explore how the war impacted several facets of life throughout the United States, the South, and particularly south central Georgia. Artifacts on loan from Fort McAllister along with various pieces from a number of private collectors make up the new exhibit. Many of these artifacts have never been displayed publicly.

The Folklife Festival is all about hands-on activities including tree debarking and hewing, mule plowing and farrier demonstrations. Guests can also try their hand at sheep shearing, wool spinning, weaving, wool washing, butter-making and candle-making.

Everyone at the Museum site can hitch a ride on the 1917 Vulcan steam train, and children will love the face painting booth. Visitors will also be treated to entertainment from the Poultry Palace and its talented show chickens.

Guests can visit with the Little River Wood Turners as they ply their trade at the Variety Works building. Or take a whirl around the dance floor of the Square Dancing Museum. Why not join the Fiddlers Jamboree for a little pickin’ and grinnin’ on the Opry Shelter Stage?

To satisfy every hearty appetite, the Historic Village’s Drug Store will offer delicious lunch options from barbecue and hot dogs to hand-dipped ice cream. Food vendors will also be on hand at the Opry Shelter with sweet treats and selections to tempt your taste buds. Guests can pop into the Country Store and pick up food items including jams, jellies, grits, or corn meal.

The Festival coincides with the seasonal opening of the Wiregrass Farmers Market. Local growers and producers will be offering fresh picked produce from 9 a.m. until noon as well as hand-made goods for sale at the Market located under the pole barn behind the Country Store.

Admission to the Folklife Festival is $10 for adults, $8 for senior citizens, $5 for children 5 – 16 years of age, and free for children under five. For more information, interested persons can contact the Country Store at (229) 391-5205.

Pacesetter Nominations Due Friday!
The Stallion newspaper presents Pacesetter Awards yearly honoring those whose actions and service lead the way at ABAC. Pacesetter Awards honor students, faculty, administration and staff. Take a moment to write a note about those who have made 2014-15 year memorable.

Identify the nominee clearly, write a brief explanation of why the nominee deserves consideration for the Pacesetter Awards, and include contact information for follow-up inquiries.

The awards will be presented during the leadership reception on Wednesday April 22 at 4:30 p.m. in Bowen 100.

Send your nominations Dr. Tom Grant tgrant@abac.edu.

Carry The Load Shirts for Sale

Swing by Lewis Hall or the Tiftarea YMCA and purchase a Carry The Load shirt for only $10. For more information about the Step-off Rally on April 23, visit carrytheload.org/tifton or email tifton@carrytheload.org
Merrill Retires continued from page 1
spent a lot of time with our students. One year he arrived several days early and asked me to bring my boys to dinner. He spent the entire meal talking to them.”

Those two sons, Chris and Mark, are now all grown up with families of their own including five grandchildren for Merrill and his wife, Anita. Married for 48 years, they met at Berry College.

When he graduated from Berry in 1964, he wanted to be a county extension agent back home in North Carolina. The United States Army had other plans. Merrill served six months of active duty and then committed to the Army Reserve program for 29 years until his retirement.

When his active duty at Fort Jackson, S.C., ended, he returned to Berry to work in the development office for 14 years, winding up as Assistant Director of Development. In the meantime, he had completed his MBA degree at Berry.

“T was looking around,” Merrill said of the 1978 job offer as Director of Development at ABAC. “The money was better. I came here for the interview and met everybody from the bank presidents to the ministers at area churches. It was a community thing. They grilled me for two days.”

Merrill accepted what was then a brand new position from ABAC President Stanley Anderson and began an association with ABAC that he will never forget.

“I have had tremendous people to work with,” Merrill said. “They are the ones who made it possible for ABAC to move forward. My real mentors were Bob Reinhardt and Ray Jensen. Both had integrity, talent, and experience. Anytime I had an issue, they were available. That happened from day one until the time they passed away. Both of them were real movers and shakers for ABAC.

“There were many others like Lamar Branch and Bill Bowen. Both of them were excellent ABAC Foundation Board members and really cared about ABAC.”

When Merrill arrived at ABAC in 1978, he said the ABAC Foundation’s value was about $12,000. In 2014, Merrill said the Foundation’s value was $73 million. That’s quite a change. Merrill knows all about being flexible and adapting to change. After all, he has worked for five different ABAC presidents.

“The biggest changes have occurred in David Bridges’ presidency,” Merrill said. “We were building up for change before he came when Tom Call was interim president. There has been a lot of strategic planning in the last ten years. The plan has been supported and implemented, and that has moved ABAC to the next level. We’re not a junior college anymore.

“President Bridges has increased the academic level at the institution, and we expect more from our students. We’re putting these students out there in intern programs that are really paying off. They work for some large and very recognizable corporations around the country.”

Merrill’s first visit to ABAC occurred in 1964 when he was president of the college chorus at Berry. The group made one stop in Tifton on its spring tour.

“We stood on the front steps of Tift Hall and sang two numbers for President Clyde Driggers,” Merrill said. “I never had another thought about ABAC until I returned for the interview in 1978.”

And that’s when Merrill began to carve his name in the ABAC history book.

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Homecoming Shirts Have Arrived

Homecoming shirts are available for pick-up. Swing by the Alumni House on Monday while the shirts are still only $15. Prices go up to $20 on Tuesday. Plan to attend the many wonderful Homecoming events that begin at 4 p.m. on Monday, April 6 with the Homecoming Kick-Off in the Meadows. Hot dogs, chips, dessert, and drinks will be provided by the Stafford School of Business and the School of Science and Mathematics with music played by WPLH. This event is free of charge.
Forty years after their romance at ABAC blossomed into marriage, Laura Groover Whiddon and Darrell Whiddon recently returned to the campus to deliver a special artifact of musical significance to the GMA and Historic Village at ABAC.

Thanks to the two ABAC alumni, a Burdett pump organ which may be approaching 150 years old now resides at the Museum. They donated the organ in honor of Laura’s father, Lawrence H. Groover, who in Laura’s words, “loved Georgia and its wonderful history and ultimately preserved this piece of history.”

Polly Huff, assistant director and curator at the Museum, couldn’t be more pleased.

“The organ is on display in the Museum’s main hall,” Huff said. “Our oldest interpreter, Ferrol Cosper, is one of the very few people in this area who still remembers how to play this instrument, and she happily obliges when museum guests ask her to demonstrate its beautiful sound.”

Huff said the story behind the organ donation actually began when Lawrence Groover spied a rare Burdett solid oak pump organ in disrepair on a family’s carport in Smyrna in 1972.

He purchased it from them after discovering that the family had rescued the organ from a church in Cobb County just before the church staff was about to dispose of it.

“At that time, Atlanta’s downtown Rich’s department store had a large piano and organ department,” Laura Whiddon said. “A gentleman who worked in that department did antique pump organ restoration as a hobby. My father took the organ to him, and he faithfully restored both the interior workings and the beautiful oak exterior to an amazingly like-new condition.”

“After the end of martial law and the harsh penalties of Reconstruction, north Georgia citizens could finally approach a modicum of prosperity which enabled them to divert some of their resources once again to the luxuries of art and music.”

Laura and Darrell Whiddon had the organ further restored before donating it to the Museum. It is now another piece of Georgia history available for viewing by Georgians and visitors from all over the world for generations to come. And if Mrs. Cosper is around, they’ll even get to hear its beautiful sound.

First Bird Banding Class Offered Last Week

Faculty, staff, landowners, and three ABAC students participated in the first ever six-day bird banding course offered in the Tifton area. Taught by master bander Charlie Muise, the primary purpose of this course was to train people who are interested in conducting bird research with valuable skills that are otherwise difficult to acquire.

Students received hands-on experience with handling, extracting, and processing (aging, sexing, measuring) wild birds. All birds were released unharmed with federally regulated identification bands. These bands allow other researchers to identify the bird upon capture, allowing scientists to track the movements and life span of these species. A total of 59 birds banded of 16 species, plus 7 recaptures occurred.

If you are interested in taking this course next year, please contact Dr. Vanessa Lane at vlane@abac.edu

ABAC Alumni Donate Rare Pump Organ to Museum

“This particular organ was manufactured by the Burdett Organ Company sometime between 1866 and 1907,” Laura Whiddon said. “Most likely it would have been purchased by a Cobb County or Atlanta area Protestant church from Burdett Organ Company or was purchased from the company after the 1870s by a local family and donated to the church, since the years immediately after the Civil War left Atlanta area citizens in circumstances that forced them to place all their resources on necessities for survival.”

ABAC BIRTHDAYS

1  Jan Gregus  2  Pedro Guevara  2  Ruth Jackson
3  Joey Johnson  3  Melvin Merrill