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TWO INSTALLMENTS (both in this file)

Part 1: 1068 words

Part 2: about 1125 words

*This memoir is dedicated to the memory of  
Betty Googe, who originally asked me to write  
it for a history of Valwood that was not completed.*

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## **Confessions of Valwood's First Computer Geek (Part 1)**

by Michael Covington

*Michael (Mike) Covington has just retired from being associate director of the Artificial Intelligence Center at The University of Georgia and is now an independent consultant, doing research on computer processing of human languages. He has degrees from Georgia, Cambridge, and Yale and is the author of Dictionary of Computer and Internet Terms and other books. He would be glad to hear from Valdosta friends at mc@uga.edu.*

In September, 1970, on a bright sunny day on which the heat of summer had at last begun to abate, so that Valdosta was merely hot and not sweltering, I arrived at Valwood's old red brick building as a new ninth-grader. I was the kind of person who would nowadays be described as a nerd or a computer geek – but in those days we didn't have those terms, nor the computers, nor the notion that such people are valuable because they can make the computers work. So there I was, bookwormish, socially isolated, scientifically inclined, and hoping only for a school that wouldn't actively interfere with my education.

Valdosta in 1970 was about two thirds its present size. Personal computers, Wal-Mart, K-Mart, compact discs, HBO, CNN, and even running shoes were still in the future. "The Mall" was the perpendicular part of Brookwood Plaza. Cable TV brought us three Atlanta stations, plus Albany, Thomasville, Waycross, and a local channel on which the camera panned back and forth across some clocks and barometers.

Valdosta had no Mexican or Chinese restaurants, and even pizza was new on the scene. Cars didn't have outside mirrors on the right, and highways didn't have the little reflectorized bumps that help show us where the lanes are. And the entire world smelled like stale cigarette smoke; smoke-free indoor air was found only in classrooms and churches.

Valwood was then in its second year of operation. The ancient brick building was not air-conditioned, but neither were any other schools in those days, and the high ceilings kept the classrooms surprisingly cool. Built in 1906 as Valdosta High School, the building had been a middle school and then Central Elementary School. The staircases were built for small children; I normally climbed the steps two at a time. Upper- and middle-school classes met upstairs. The main floor housed the office, lower school, and school library. Behind it and lower down was the lunchroom, which did double duty as an awkward auditorium. A small room off to one side, presumably the old kitchen, had been turned into a well-outfitted chemistry lab. At the very bottom of the stairs were the rest rooms and a rambling, partly unexplored basement known as the catacombs. (I'm not the only one who called it that; its official key, which I saw hanging in the office, was labeled, "Catacombs.") The small schoolyard served as a playground and parking lot. For P.E., the boys walked to the Valdosta Boys' Club, a few blocks to the north; the girls used the lunchroom as a gym.

In this less-than-luxurious setting, Valwood gave me a surprisingly pleasant, worthwhile educational experience. The first year's courses included Biology with Mrs. Selph (with lots of emphasis on DNA, whose importance was just being realized); Algebra I with Miss Williams (later Mrs. Cooley); Latin I with Mrs. McClure (which quickly became my favorite subject); English with Mrs. Bridges; and an unusual but interesting social studies class with Coach Jennings (who also taught boys' P.E. and coached all the boys' sports from basketball to billiards).

The social studies class used a pair of textbooks that would now be considered a classic example of 1970s flakiness; they consisted of readings on various subjects, each from many different points of view. One of the topics happened to be South African apartheid and its inevitable collapse, which was still in the future, so we had the rare experience of studying history before it happened. Another topic was schizophrenia, including R. D. Laing's sadly mistaken notion that it isn't an illness, merely a form of mysticism. All this was exciting stuff for a ninth-grader; it sparked my interest in several areas of study that I didn't know existed.

The athletic program at Valwood was all-inclusive. I was one of the few upper-school students who didn't actually play basketball. To get me involved nonetheless, Len Carter persuaded the team to elect me manager. That meant I got to travel with them, go to all the games, and do basically nothing. I remember keeping a few trivial records and studying an NCAA rule book, just to see if it would tell me anything useful. Our teams were called the Valiants, and I wondered if the

name was inspired by the sign on Smith Motors across the street. If it had been a Dodge instead of a Plymouth dealer, would we have been the Darts?

At the time, Valwood had no gymnasium, so we usually rented the gym at the National Guard Armory. We also traveled to other schools, chartering a bus from The Action Trav'lers (with whom I went to Mexico in 1972). The first overnight basketball trip was to Athens, where in February, 1971, the Valiants were soundly defeated by the Athens Academy Spartans. The most obscure destination was probably Tift Area Academy, at a gymnasium (probably not their own) in the great city of Ty Ty, Georgia.

Soon, though, I had something else to do at basketball games – photograph them for Valwood's first yearbook, *Prospectus '71*. I was one of three or four students who developed film and made prints in the school's first darkroom, improvised in an upstairs janitor's closet, with a hose running through a hole in the wall from the faculty men's rest room. By my junior year, I was running the photographic operation, assisted by Frank Bird III, who was in middle school.

The first *Prospectus*, in its brown cover, came off the presses in October 1971. It began with an evocative poem that I later learned was a slightly altered version of Joni Mitchell's song, "The Circle Game." Highly appropriate, but did someone think that a few changes to the words would get them out of the copyright? I have no idea.

The next two *Prospectuses* tracked the fast growth of a new school. In them you can also observe the growth of my hair, which started out as an Air Force-inspired crew cut (not uncommon in the late 1960s) and gradually reached normal length (still rather short for the 1970s). You can also see that I gradually developed a knack for getting into funny situations. In *Prospectus '73* are pictures of Rebecca Blackburn, on an art class field trip, painting a moustache on my face. My real face, not a picture of it.

*Coming in Part 2: School newspapers, emergence of school spirit, and how I became a computer geek.*

## Confessions of Valwood's First Computer Geek (Part 2)

by Michael Covington

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Besides *Prospectus* (the yearbook), Valwood was also the home of *Whempit*. That name was pinned on our school newspaper by Robert Cork for obscure reasons in the fall of 1970. I don't remember seeing an issue of *Whempit* in 1970-71; maybe it never actually came out, but the school newspaper was revived under my editorship in 1972-73 and kept the same title. I have always wondered if *Whempit* meant something derogatory, but if so, I've never been able to find out what. It is a word still unknown to Google.

Besides the editor, I was also the printer; the school had been given a Multilith offset press, which we used for a short time before concluding it was too expensive. So for a while I was the Ben Franklin of Valwood. In the spring of 1973, *Whempit* started selling ads – nobody had ever tried that before – and quickly raised enough money to have the printing done commercially.

One of the things I enjoyed most about Valwood's early years was watching a new high school develop its culture. We didn't have a good graphic symbol for the Valiants, but the school coat of arms included, among other things, a knight's helmet. Al Milton started sketching this helmet on chalkboards and posters, it caught on, and I understand Valwood now exhibits some full suits of armor. (What's next – varsity jousting?) Another graphic symbol was the butterfly, which began as a bright-colored poster in Mrs. Bridges' classroom and was quickly adopted by the literary magazine (*Metamorphosis*, 1971 or maybe 1972) and the photo essay at the beginning of the first yearbook. Apparently, unlike suits of armor, butterflies are no longer part of Valwood's collective consciousness.

The athletic program was built around enthusiasm rather than strength, which is as it should be. We lost most of our games, but we had fun. I think that because we weren't a superpower, we had a more genuine kind of school spirit. What brought that home to me was watching Valdosta High School lose a football game, the first it had lost in seven years, around 1973. By sheer happenstance, I was there, helping Robert Winter III photograph it from the sidelines. In the middle of the game, as the tide turned against Valdosta, I saw a change come over the cheerleaders. Suddenly,

they were like Valwood cheerleaders. They were actually trying to spur their team to victory rather than just celebrate a foregone conclusion.

What I liked best about Valwood academics was the low pressure and the relaxed setting. Some schools assume students will do nothing worthwhile unless they're forced to, and that the school's job is to force them to do as much as possible. Harvard and Yale work that way, and their students are proud of how hard their teachers make them work. But Valwood in 1971 was a much lower-pressure environment. It reminds me of people's descriptions of high school in the 1940s, before the conformism of the 1950s set in. Everybody was an individual and had a certain amount of freedom to pursue personal interests. Precisely because I wasn't burdened with busy work, I found time to learn two years' worth of Latin and about three years' worth of mathematics in one year. Later, I was delighted to find that Oxford and Cambridge work more or less the same way. Students there work very hard, but it's by choice, not because of tough taskmasters or heavy course requirements. And nobody claims that Oxford and Cambridge are second-rate universities.

This freedom led to my becoming Valwood's first computer geek. In 1973, Dr. L. R. Howell of VSC (whose daughter Elizabeth was at Valwood) taught an experimental course in computer programming for high school students. I was invited to participate and took to it like a fish to water, learning BASIC out of Kemeny and Kurtz's classic textbook.

In those days, there were no microcomputers or personal computers at all. Computers were rooms full of electronic equipment and cost millions of dollars. At VSC, we did our programming by sitting at a teletype machine (that is, a keyboard with a built-in printer) that was connected by telephone lines to a Control Data Corporation mainframe computer at The University of Georgia in Athens. The data rate was 110 bits per second. (Home Internet connections today are about 3 million bits per second.) That meant I could type as fast as the computer could; there was actually a mechanism in the teletype to keep me from typing too fast, and when the computer had several pages of output to send back, it took several minutes.

What's more, the lines were noisy, leading to frequent transmission errors – almost every time I typed a line of input to the computer, one or more letters would be left out or would arrive incorrectly. So I had to type every line of the program several times to get it right. Output coming back from the computer was just as likely to be garbled here and there. It's amazing I got anything done at all, but I taught myself two more programming languages during the summer and developed an abiding interest in computer processing of human languages, which has been my career.

After Valwood, I went to The University of Georgia (where I didn't have to endure 250 miles of noisy lines to use the computers!), then graduate school at Cambridge and Yale, a postdoc at Southern California, and back to Georgia as a faculty member.

In fact, as I write this, I'm sitting in a UGA library less than 50 feet from where those computers were back in 1973.

Did Valwood prepare me adequately for a big public university? Definitely! Although large, The University of Georgia is not overcrowded – at least, not in the parts I've dealt with – and not at all impersonal. From Valwood to Georgia was a surprisingly easy transition because at both institutions I was treated as an individual. I think the impersonality of a large public high school might not have prepared me so well. As a college teacher, I've seen students get into trouble by expecting all their decisions to be made for them by impersonal systems of rules. Valwood taught me to pursue opportunities on my own, and that was a good thing.

In retrospect, my first year at Valwood was the beginning of my adult life. I wasn't an adult then, of course – I was just 13 years old – but that was when I started taking responsibility for my own education and career. Things started in motion on my first day at Valwood that have continued ever since. Looking back on decades in academia, I have to admit that whatever I am today, I got part of it from Valwood, quirks and all.

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