

Western Piedmont dedicates Ervin Library



Former U.S. Senator Howard Baker peruses a book in WPCC's new Ervin Library

Photo by Mark Hannan

By LETA PARKS
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Burke County residents turned out in droves Wednesday for the dedication of the Senator Sam J. Ervin Jr. Library at Western Piedmont Community College.

The library is a replica of the late senator's library in his home at 515 Lenoir St. in Morganton.

During the ceremony, former U.S. Senate Majority Leader Howard Baker kept the crowd chuckling as he told of his early days in the Senate, and how he first came to know the senator from Morganton.

The former Tennessee senator ended up serving with Ervin on the committee which investigated the Watergate scandal in 1973.

"Working in close quarters with such a man was one of the most rewarding and constructive experiences of my life," he said.

Ervin's first official act as chairman of the committee was to do away with tradition by nominating Baker as vice chairman of the committee.

"It was a departure from the norm," said the Republican who was appointed by Democrat Ervin.

"It signaled that the undertaking needed to be broad-based and bi-partisan," Baker said.

The members of the committee performed their "odious duty" as men of the Senate, not bound by partisan politics, but by standards of statesmanship, said Baker.

In describing Ervin's attitude as he chaired the committee, "He had little tolerance for tomfoolery and none at all for betrayal of the public trust," Baker said.

But he also produced giggles in the audience as he told of the lighter side of the investigation.

"I use to count the number of times his eyebrows twitched while he was interrogating a hostile witness," Baker said.

Also speaking at the ceremony was WPCC President Jim Richardson, who thanked the Ervin family for the donation of the library to the college.

"It is a fitting tribute to a great man whose unselfish devotion to public service stands as a model to all of us," Richardson said.

"There is a great need in our county, our state and our nation to reflect upon and study the Constitution," he said of the collection which contains extensive material for research.

Claude Sitton, chairman of the college's trustees, described Ervin as a scholar and a historian who was a public servant with "keen insight, inspired leadership and unerring instincts."

"It is very fitting for his personal home library to be housed on this campus — an institution whose mission is the advancement of knowledge,"

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Sifton said.

The library will be used as a base for historical research and Constitutional lectures, he said.

Richardson described an educational endowment fund which has been formed in Ervin's honor to provide money for a seminar on Constitutional issues each spring. The first of the seminars is scheduled for the spring of 1991.

Also recognized at the ceremony were Lee Pruett and George Curtis, the carpenters who worked on the replica of Ervin's home library. Curtis also did some renovation work on the shelves in the original library in the home on Lenoir Street.

The library replica is so close to the original grandson Jimmy Ervin described it as "almost spooky." The grandchild of the late senator said he knew where the books had been placed because he used to go into the library and borrow books.

Several members of the Ervin family were in the audience at the ceremony.

"If there ever was a person who loved books and loved reading it was granddaddy," said Jimmy Ervin. "If you take a look at those books they're used; they have marks in them. I don't know if he read all of them, but he read an astounding number of them."

Judge Sam Ervin III described how important it was to have the library in Burke County.

"Dad would also be pleased that it is here in Burke County," he said. "I remember when we would take trips on the road and when we got to the Burke County line, he would always roll down the windows and take a deep breath and try to convince his skeptical children that there was something better about the air here."

Located in the Phifer Learning Resources Center, the library houses more than 7,500 books.

"I heard mother wonder aloud whether it was really necessary for Dad to surround himself with all the law books he did, but mother never convinced him otherwise," said Sam Ervin III.

In addition to the thousands of books, the library contains furnishings, doors, windows, rugs and other items which are located in the same positions as they were in the original library.

Visitors can also see memorabilia from Ervin's home, and the desk which he used as a member of Congress.

The main purpose of the library, though, is to serve as a resource center for students, the community and the rest of the nation, college officials have said.

In the library researchers can find an extensive collection of materials on the United States Constitution, legal and U.S. government history and the history of North Carolina.

Winston Lear, dean of the Learning Resources Center, unveiled for the audience a painting of Ervin done by artist Marcus Blahove in 1983.