

LeRoy (Pat) Patterson '40 Dies at 92. Star Athlete, Longserving Pastor Was Third Wheaton College Chaplain



The Rev. Harold LeRoy (Pat) Patterson x'40 who died on March 13, 2011 just two weeks short of his 93d birthday left a legion of admirers from the three distinct chapters of his fruitful life. He had broken a hip in a fall and slipped away several weeks later.

Schoolmates cheer the most gifted football player—really, an all-around athlete—to wear the Orange and Blue up to Wheaton College's post-WW2 era. Patterson was inducted into the inaugural Crusader Hall of Honor class of 1976.

Several generations of parishioners mourn the passing of their folksy pastor whose practical preaching met the varied needs of six congregations between 1941-72. And to validate that “Old preachers never die and reluctantly fade away!” there were several post-retirement interims.

Wheaton College students between 1973-82 recall the caring, wise chaplain with a listening ear and sensitivity to youthful spiritual concerns.

“He was an amazing man: humble, fun-loving, encouraging, bright, articulate, exhorting,” says Barbara Pritchard ‘75. As a member of the Campus Life Associate Staff, she took some of the African-American students to visit Second Baptist Church in Wheaton. “As we entered it we saw no white faces until down in the front row there was a shiny pale head—Chaplain Pat and his wife.” Those thoughts were echoed by Ann (Sherman) Mooney ’80: “Very open, warm, friendly and inviting.” Co-captain of the football team Art Nitz ’75 cherishes Pat’s “numerous visits to football practice, the locker room and being on the sideline at every home game. If Coach Dewey King had allowed him to suit up, I think Chaplain would have gone in to play to help us out. His helpful devotionals along with thought-provoking chapel messages were words of encouragement over the years. Never a frown, always upbeat.”

And one wag, who shall remain nameless, still grins when thinking of one of Pat’s playful throw-away lines: “I’m humble and proud of it.”

Well, this man *did* have humble beginnings. The middle of three surviving sons, LeRoy was born April 2, 1918 in Altoona, PA and grew up in its blue-collar suburb of Juniata. His father, George William, repaired tenders in the maintenance shop of the Pennsylvania Railroad, just like his father before him. (“For the uninitiated,” explains Pat, “a tender was that part of the locomotive directly behind the cabin which held the coal and water that fed the stream engine.”)

While he is quick to say that “we never thought of ourselves as poor or deprived,” the pangs of the Great Depression hit home when Bill was laid off for a period of time and had to scrabble to feed the family of five. The two bedroom house had no bathroom, just a “rusty toilet in the basement.” No phone or radio. “The obligatory Saturday night bath in the kitchen standing up over a tub of hot water on the floor was crude but effective.” Pat was 14 when his dad bought his first car—a maroon Chevy for \$600 which took three years to pay off. “We were the envy of the neighborhood. To save the expense of anti-freeze in winter, dad would drain the water at night and my job was to refill it in the morning if he was going to drive that day.”

In the 10,000 word autobiography that Patterson penned a couple of years before his death he described a happy boyhood of outdoor games, camping, home-made racing cars, reading books, peach basket on a pole for shooting baskets with homemade balls. And team sports. As one of 90 trying out for the Keith Jr Hi football team, he earned a spot by running a punt back through the entire defenders on his first try. “God had given me the ability to run fast,” he admits...humbly, of course! Later at 3000-student Altoona Hi he was a first-team all-state back playing for the state championship his junior/senior seasons. The Lions outscored opponents 300-27 one year. Pat also won the 440 yard dash and anchored the first-place mile relay at the state meet held at Penn State University who, along with the University of Pittsburgh, offered him an athletic scholarship. A sports-fan alumnus was willing to pay his tuition to Lehigh. “Having never thought of even going to college I thought this would make a good Horatio Alger novel.”

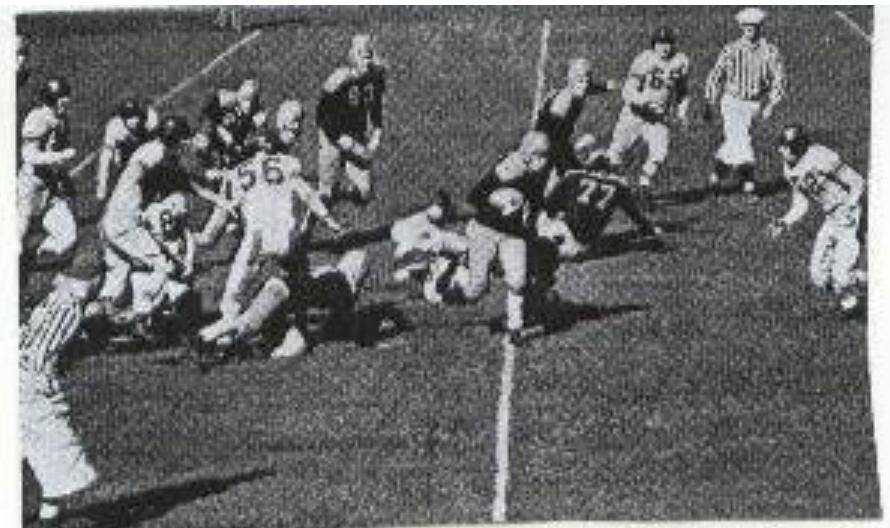
A life-enduring decision intervened. The 18-year old was led to Christ in the home of neighbor Charlie Logan. “I had never given much thought about the Bible or spiritual things. We were not anti-Christian. Just as a family never attended church and grew up ignorant of the claims of the Gospel.” Both brothers and, later in life, parents followed.

Not surprising, Pat had never heard either of Wheaton College before a recruiting letter from Athletic Director Ed Coray ’26 saying no athletic scholarships but guarantee of a part-time job with Building & Grounds: 35 cents an hour. Several days later he received a book in the mail “from an itinerate Bible teacher I’d never met.” *The Silver Trumpet* by Wheaton grad J. Wesley Ingles ’26 was a wildly-popular youth novel about a teenage athlete’s ups and downs at Wharton College (hint, hint). Upon yielding his life to the Lord, the hero lad won the heart of a beautiful co-ed he later married.

“I was too young in the faith to understand the Lord was preparing my future,” says Pat—also a trumpet player-- not the first to be influenced by this specific book. President V. Raymond Edman once told an alumni group how half the freshmen entering Wheaton in 1940 responded in a survey that they had seen through the many clues in the book identifying the real Wheaton College. As late as 1949, entering freshman Alice (Aust) Thompson ’53 acknowledged its impact.

Pat remembers the day he decided for Wheaton. "I came upon a startling statement in Hebrews 11:8: 'By faith Abraham when he was called...obeyed and went out, even though he did not know where he was going...' I felt those words were written primarily for me." Though he sensed his parents' disappointment in turning down a free college education for far off Illinois, Proverbs 3: 5-6 gave him assurance.

Brother Don, having just graduated from the Bible Institute of Philadelphia, decided to join him. When they got off the 'Roaring Elgin' electric train in downtown Wheaton with \$2.50 each in their pockets they were met by football tackles Doug Johnston '37—his Cooper House roommate to be—and Bill Gavin '39. Yes, clippings in the locker room told the team they were coming.



Ballcarrier Pat breaks into the secondary (left) and poses (r) with Coach Fred Walker.

Pat led the freshman team that fall of 1936 in touchdowns and yards gained. As a sophomore moving up to the varsity under Coach Fred Walker (a successful collegiate coach who was a star lineman at the University of Chicago for legendary Amos Alonzo Stagg) triple-threat Pat ran, passed and punted out of the single-wing offense and, of course, played defense. He scored the first Wheaton TD in five years against North Central and was named all-conference for the first of three successive years. Undoubtedly the first great Crusader passer, Patterson, described by teammate Don McDonald '40 also "had the power to break tackles and then the foot-speed to outrun pursuers when he carried the ball. Many of us felt he could have started for any college team in the country." In beating North Central, 7-6, that season, Wheaton came from behind with "fiery Patterson and more Patterson plunging the line". Against Millikin, after not starting and

sitting out the first quarter with a previous leg injury, Pat came off the bench and, reported the TOWER, “tore the Big Blue to shreds. Shaking off five tacklers, he ran 54 yards for the first of his three touchdowns” in a 19-4 victory. The coaching staff sent his name in at season’s end for all-American consideration. Captain Patterson salvaged a mediocre 2-2-4 senior 1939 season by again beating arch-rival North Central, scoring all points over Elmhurst, 13-7, and credited with the stout linebacking that held powerful Illinois College to a scoreless tie. During his four years he accounted for over half of Wheaton’s total points.

He also garnered five letters in wrestling, track and baseball.



Pat goes back to pass as opposing linemen close in. (Right) Three captains Voget, Patterson and Thomas dressed up for awards chapel in 1939-40.

Hmmmmmm. So why didn’t Patterson graduate with his class? Despite working on the college’s plastering crew and painting houses, he earlier had to drop out for a semester to earn money in Chicago. The PE major planning for coaching fell short in class credits. Then as a senior taking Bible from Professor Edith Torrey he delivered an oral book review assignment, after which she called him into her office. “Mr. Patterson, have you ever given a serious thought to a pastoral ministry?” Pat stammered that not only had he not given it a thought but “no sane person of my acquaintance had ever suggested it!” Miss Torrey smiled: “Well, Mr. Patterson, I am perfectly sane and I believe you might have some gifts that God could use in a pastoral ministry. I’d like you to promise that you will at least pray about this possibility.”

(Years later Pat wrote that he had promised his well-meaning teacher. “When you are hurting for a grade you will do almost anything.”)

When Prexy Edman learned of the Dr. Torrey incident he too called LeRoy into his office where added his own encouragement to the point of laying hands on Pat’s head and asking the Lord to give clear direction. Then Patterson’s pal Johnston--after signing a contract with the St. Louis Cardinals and pitching one summer for their Fostoria, OH minor league club—decided to forego a pro baseball career to study for the cloth. Doug—later a Wheaton Hall of Honor inductee--

urged his former roomie to complete his remaining Bible and language requirements at Gordon (MA) College and then apply to their Divinity School. Patterson transferred his credits and graduated with a BA in Theology in spring 1941. (Meanwhile, brother Don, after studying three years at Wheaton degreeed at Juniata College, PA before enlisting in the Army Air Corps where he was a Liberator navigator on 50 bomber missions out of North Africa and Italy in WW2.)

Our own prototype laddie from *The Silver Trumpet* had already met during his sophomore year his own lovely campus co-ed, Inez Peterson '41, and they were married after her graduation in Detroit, MI in September 1941. While in seminary, Pat cut his pastoral teeth in three small American Baptist churches, first one in North Penobscot, ME. He later candidated in Milton Mills, MA and was accepted, feeling "proud (of myself) at the unanimous call." That is until, at the farewell dinner several years later, the chairman of the board innocently said: "I still remember your first two sermons. We all said 'Well, he ain't no Billy Sunday, but he's bound to improve!" In his final seminary year Pat filled the pulpit at Grace Baptist Church in Attleboro, MA, where he had fully expected to serve for a long time.



But it was wartime and he had long felt he had a duty. Only after he earned the required master's degree and served the pre-requisite two years in a church, did the U.S. Army finally commission him a chaplain. 1st Lieutenant Patterson was shipped in June 1945 to France and across to Belgium, then to 3d Army HQ in Bad Wiese, Bavaria in Occupation Germany and finally permanently assigned the Protestant chaplain at 116th General Hospital in Nuremberg. During off-duty, Pat sat in the visitor's section of the courtroom watching the famous war crimes trials of Nazis. "Being there was like seeing an exciting 'Who Done It' movie."

Along the way a former classmate—Chaplain Orville Shick '40—had tipped higher ups that they had an outstanding gridder in their midst. So Pat found himself at age 26 playing football for the 70th Ordinance Battalion team and pictured in the worldwide edition of *Stars and Stripes* as a football playing chaplain! "The publicity didn't hurt my chapel attendance." He only got in two games however before sailing stateside home.

Upon being discharged after two years in military uniform, papa LeRoy was greeted by his 4-year old daughter Patty: "I remember you, you used to spank me in Attleboro," and relished his first peek at Linda, born while he was overseas.

The Pattersons helped grow two Michigan churches over the next eight years, first a non-denominational church in Saginaw. During this time he learned to fly and, with a pilot's license, was able to speak at Saturday night Youth for Christ rallies and still return for his Sunday duties. During the five years they served the Inner-City Bible Church in Lansing, Pat spearheaded the

launch of a Christian elementary school within the church facilities. The arrival of son Dale filled out the family.

The climax of Patterson's pastoral ministry was his 17 years at South Park Church in Park Ridge, IL beginning in 1955 (the same year Dr. Evan Welsh '28 became Wheaton's first fulltime chaplain). That South Park had been previously served successively by two of Pat's classmates—founding pastor Don Hoke '40 and xxxx-- and included alumni in the congregation eased the transition. He saw the building of a new sanctuary, expanded worship services, wrote a weekly column for two local papers and took more grad courses at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. During Billy Graham's two Chicago crusades he served in 1962 on the counseling committee and in 1971 was vice chairman of the area executive committee. He wrote books "Now That You've Said, I Believe" (Tyndale) and "Devotions for Athletes" (Baker Book House.) Bill Hybels was a youth pastor at South Park before founding Willow Creek.

At age 54 Pat was ready for a change. While sitting with businessmen in Florida exploring starting a church in Fort Lauderdale he was interrupted by a phone call from President Hudson Armerding '41 inquiring if he'd be interested in the open chaplaincy post at Wheaton. Two days later, after interviewing on campus, he took the job.

Steve Hoke '71 MA '72 heard about it. "I had my doubts that he would fit, he seemed so old. But he was God's man for the hour," said the son of South Park Church's founder.



Visitors are put immediately at ease once they read Chappie Pat's tongue-in cheek Plaque: "It's hard to be humble when you're as great as I am." What a guy eh?

Well, it was indeed “one of the most challenging ministries of my career,” acknowledged Patterson. It called for planning four weekly student chapels, scheduling special services twice a year, counseling students, working with Student Ministries, joining dorm Bible studies and, when invited, filling local Sunday pulpits. Over the years he conducted chapel services for a number of pro baseball and football teams, including the Chicago Bears. In 1976, at Pat’s invitation, evangelist Graham spoke in Wheaton chapel for the first time since his college graduation here in 1943.

“A whole crew of us from South Park followed Pat to Wheaton. In one Bomber football game we had an all South Park/Maine South Hi backfield of John Swider ‘75, Roger Sauter x’75, John Crosby ‘75 and me,” recalls Bill Jackson ‘75. “Back in junior high, Pat had confirmed three of us along with Sandy ‘75 and Jeannie‘76 Erickson, Steve Amador ‘75 and later Mike ‘77 and Nancy Swider ‘78 and Mark Amador ‘77.” Jackson went on to tell how Patterson brought Rev. Ray Steadman and a team from Peninsula (CA) Bible Church to give students instruction on practicing the ‘body life’ concept introduced in Steadman’s new book. “Pat gave several of us the okay to keep it going, showing he was open to innovation.”

It was Kent Yinger ’71 who now says “Thank you, Chaplain Pat. I can hardly imagine my life without that one encounter with Chaplain Patterson. Upon graduation I wanted to test whether God was really calling to cross-cultural mission work, figuring it would be best to test it in this country before inflicting myself on another country. I asked (Pat) for a city in the U.S. that was different than the Kansas I came from and was also spiritually needy. Without hesitation he said Manchester, New Hampshire, which he knew. The two years I spent working and disciple-making there confirmed my missionary calling and on and on.”

Let’s hear from the winningest head coach in Wheaton football history (with apologies to Harv Chrouser ’34). “Chaplain Patterson,” says Mike Swider ‘77, “more than any other individual, had the single greatest impact on the spiritual growth of my entire family after my mother, with three small children, led us to a Bible-believing church in 1957. I know beyond a shadow of doubt that my father [*former coach at Taft Hi in Chicago—editor*] is in heaven today because of Pat’s life, friendship and ministry. My brother John, sister Nancy and I all gave our hearts to Christ as young children in the Sunday School program at South Park under Pat’s ministry. My Dad committed his life to Christ at South Park while we were in high school. All three of us kids followed Chaplain Pat to Wheaton where we had the privilege of having him continue to impact us. He was a tough guy with a big heart, a man’s man with a heart for God and others.”

Yep, that sounds just like Mike in his legendary after-game team huddles under the goal posts.

Then there was the time that (Bill) Jackson walked into the chaplain’s office and asked how he could talk so well, seemingly without notes. “With a twinkle in his eye he showed me how he

folded up a piece of paper and tied it into his Bible with string. I've copied that now for almost 35 years," admits the Corona, CA reverend.

Turning 65, Patterson retired, somewhat, to Florida where he interimed in two Stuart churches, one where his old teammate McDonald was director of music. Eight years later the couple moved up to Stroudsburg, PA where he filled yet another pulpit before finally settling in Media.

Ending his long autobiography, Pat confesses how much he missed "the love of my life" who passed away in 2004 from complications of Parkinson's. "But I know it won't be too long before I will be joined with her in our Eternal Home with the Lord."

How true, thou good and faithful servant.

by Ray Smith '54

