

## WHAT GREATER LOVE?

What greater love and trust than to co-sign a mortgage with your friends? That's exactly what about 125 families did for Mountain Brook Baptist Church. In 1965, it was time to start building the Sanctuary complex. Cost was estimated at close to one million dollars, including windows and organ. Less than \$150,000 was available. A committee of Deacons prepared an elaborate request for a loan. The document presented a list of every money-earning member of the church, with address and place of business. Heads of several major corporations were listed, along with some promising young entrepreneurs. The lending institutions were not impressed. It was one thing to see names on a membership list. Lenders wanted to see names signed at the bottom of a note.

An arrangement was worked out with Birmingham Trust National Bank, which offered five-percent interest with full repayment by 1991. Deacons built in a lump sum payment of \$66,000 into the next year's budget. Annual payments of this size should retire the loan on time. The bank wanted a better guarantee: lots of co-signers on the loan. So each willing member was presented a legal-sized sheet of paper entitled "Guarantee of Church Loan." The bank would be induced to hold a \$700,000 mortgage, with the undersigned guaranteeing a stated portion of the repayment. Each co-signer could state the amount he or she was willing to guarantee. The amounts varied between \$100 or \$500 or \$10,000—there were an amazing number of \$10,000 signers. Remember that at the time, a nice house in the vicinity of the church property might be bought for \$25,000, and many members were already carrying mortgages. Appended to the back of the stack of co-signed documents is a list of 10 students, mostly from Samford. Their typical guarantee was for \$5—like Clarence E. McDanal Jr., who was headed for medical school. Some merciful banker wrote a note at the bottom of the student list: "Do not include these."

Apparently some women in the congregation protested that all the guarantors were men. Many women's names were tacked on as donors in their own right, while some names were hand-written in beside their husbands. Even if they were housewives without personal income, they wanted to stand with their husbands and their church. The co-signer list tallied more than \$350,000 in guarantees—enough to satisfy the bank. Space prevents us from printing the entire list of guarantors. Any church member today would recognize at least some of the names and would be awed. Some who could promise relatively modest amounts in 1966 went on to become incredibly wealthy in just a few years. Only a half-dozen of the guarantors are still alive today. Many of them left children in the church to bear the legacy. The awesome generosity and cohesive spirit of Mountain Brook Baptist Church arose from that mortgage. In this 75th anniversary year, everybody needs to know the loving risk embedded in our fellowship. The note-signers lived in sensitive appreciation of each other, and prayerfulness multiplied.

The historic roll call of the faithful note-signers is safeguarded today in the office of Mountain Brook Baptist Church. At that time in 1966, the names were known only to God, the bank, and a small trustworthy committee. The co-signers did not expect to breathe easy until 1991. But with the dynamic blessings of God, the church retired the entire debt on May 31, 1981—ten years early. The paid-up document was presented to Dr. Dotson M. Nelson Jr. as a retirement gift. Since May 31, 1981, Mountain Brook Baptist Church has not carried any debt to lending institutions.

*This photo was published in the Birmingham News on March 11, 1967 under the title "Looking to the Future," as Mountain Brook Baptist Church prepared for the Sanctuary dedication on Sunday, March 26, 1967. (The original photo was purchased recently from an online vendor.)*



MARCH 10, 2019

WE'VE A STORY TO TELL  
75th Anniversary Memories of Mountain Brook Baptist Church

## FROM BROADWAY TO HOLLYWOOD TO MONTEVALLO ROAD: TOMMY DIX AND MOUNTAIN BROOK BAPTIST CHURCH

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From the early 1950s until the early 1960s, my family lived next door to Tommy Dix and his family on Montevallo Road. These were wonderful times; I probably spent more time in their house than in ours! During the 1950s, Mountain Brook Baptist Church had the privilege of having a Hollywood star as the assistant choir director. Tommy Dix is an amazing person; this was reinforced by my lengthy phone conversation with him on February 23, 2019. Tommy is 95 years old and sharp as a tack. We talked for a long time. I asked him lots of questions and he answered every one of them, and this conversation revealed much of this information about his life and his many achievements.

Tommy's singing career began in the Trinity Church choir in New York City. People were amazed at the maturity of his rich baritone voice. At this time, Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia started a high school that provided training in the performing arts. New students were required to try out for a spot in this school; Tommy Dix earned a four-year scholarship. As his reputation grew, Tommy began to perform on radio talent shows and in churches from Harlem to the Bowery. Tommy's big break came when he sang for President Franklin D. Roosevelt's mother at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York City. Within a year, Tommy auditioned for a part in a Broadway musical called "Best Foot Forward" and was chosen to sing the show-stopper song "Buckle Down Winsocki."

The play opened on October 1, 1941, at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre. "Best Foot Forward" ran for 326 performances. The musical was choreographed by a young Gene Kelly and the songs were written by Alabama native Hugh Martin. That same year, Tommy recorded the hit song "Buckle Down Winsocki" with Benny Goodman and his orchestra.

This play was so successful that MGM bought the rights to the play and made a motion picture based on the play. Naturally, some of the plot lines were changed; the song "Buckle Down Winsocki" was also moved from the middle of the play to the end of the movie. But there was one thing that they did not change—Tommy Dix would play the lead and sing the finale. Tommy had some famous co-stars in this movie: Lucille Ball ("I Love Lucy"), June Allyson, Nancy Walker, and Harry James and his orchestra. The movie version of "Best Foot Forward" was a smash hit grossing over \$2.7 million dollars, which was a huge amount considering movie tickets were only a dime in 1943.

It was during this time that a series of events began which would lead Tommy to Birmingham, Alabama and to Mountain Brook Baptist. After filming of the movie ended, Tommy joined the Army and was sent to basic training at Fort Benning in Columbus, Georgia. Tommy Dix was one of the finest baritone voices of the World War II era; while Tommy tried to hide his show business career from the Army, the top brass at Fort Benning found him out. They thought he could best serve his country by raising money on the War Bond circuit. One of the fundraising events happened to be in Birmingham. It was at this event that Tommy met Maggie Grayson and the rest, as they say, is history. Their courtship blossomed into marriage and Maggie accompanied Tommy on his travels.

After the war was over, Tommy began to perform on the radio and in nightclubs. One of his first appearances was on "The Ed Sullivan Show" which gave a big boost to his popularity. Tommy was soon performing at all the top clubs and theaters in the country. Within a few years, Tommy and Maggie welcomed a son. They soon realized that the gypsy lifestyle that show business demanded was not the best way to raise their young son, so they decided to return to Birmingham.

It was during this time they began to attend Mountain Brook Baptist Church. Naturally, Tommy began to sing in the choir. During my recent phone conversation with Tommy, one of the first things that he wanted me to know was how honored he was to serve as the assistant choir director. This gave him the opportunity to sing and to share his musical knowledge. During his time as a nightclub and theater performer, he always ended his performance by singing "The Lord's Prayer." The version that he sang every night was written by Albert Malotte.

Albert's brother, Stan, was one of Tommy's friends and also played the "Mighty Wurlitzer Organ" at the Alabama Theatre. Tommy told me that he always loved performing at the Alabama Theatre because he liked to sing with his friend Stan. A few years later Tommy's good friend Hugh Martin returned to Birmingham to produce the play "Best Foot Forward" for Town and Gown. Once again, Tommy played the lead role.

Up until this point in our conversation, I had been calling Tommy "Mr. Dix." He reminded me that he is 95 years old and that I am 70 years old and that it is time that I started calling him "Tommy." One of the things that impressed me was how much of his time and talent he gave to the Birmingham community. He would sing to raise money for everything from the Civic Ballet to the Miss Alabama Pageant. He gave concerts in Woodrow Wilson Park and even out at Legion Field, all to raise money for charity. I have vivid memories of Tommy singing "The Lord's Prayer" in the Chapel and after the song was over, there was total silence for what seemed like a minute. Our conversation over the phone that February day went on for nearly an hour. Naturally we talked about things he remembered and other things that I remembered.

Several years later, Tommy and Maggie divorced. Tommy moved to Florida where he started a successful real estate development company. As we ended our conversation, Tommy told me to tell all of you that Mountain Brook Baptist Church had always been a special place to him and his family, and that Mountain Brook Baptist Church played a large part during the happiest times of his life.

This will not be the last time I talk with my former neighbor Tommy Dix.

*Richard H. Compton Jr.*

*Tommy Dix joined Mountain Brook Baptist Church by baptism in 1953. When serving as the volunteer assistant choir director, he managed children's choir productions and sang solos in the small adult choir. For more information about Tommy's career, visit the website [www.tommydix.com](http://www.tommydix.com).*



*Tommy Dix with co-star Lucille Ball in "Best Foot Forward"  
(Photo courtesy of [www.tommydix.com](http://www.tommydix.com))*