

# THE HENDERSON CRUSADE

a memoir

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Henderson, Kentucky

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## Foreword

**I**n 1982, Henderson, Kentucky, is quite a different community from that which is described on these pages. It is a progressive, public-spirited city governed by responsible officials who have the welfare of the people and the reputation of the community as their major concerns. Law enforcement is above the average for a city of its size. Indeed, many of the most respected office-holders and public leaders are the children and grandchildren of those whose activities prompted the establishment of the Henderson County Good Government League.

The local newspaper, the *Gleaner*, is one of the best in Kentucky. Its ownership and management changed hands several years ago and has done much to foster the new spirit which is evident in all aspects of community life. Rather than side-stepping community issues, it not only deals with them but does so in a responsible manner, oftentimes courageously, especially in regard to controversial issues which affect the welfare of the people.

When, with some reluctance, I left Henderson in 1952 I did not anticipate my returning to live here in retirement nearly thirty years later. Three years ago, during an educational leave from my post as regional minister of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in North Carolina, I wrote the "Henderson Story" in fictional form, submitted it to a New York literary agent who suggested that I rewrite it as a memoir. I did so, but I did not seek to have it published because my life situation had changed and I was then making plans to retire and live in Henderson. My decision was based on my concern for the feelings of the descendants of the principal persons who were involved in the rackets.

Upon returning to Henderson a number of residents asked me about the "crusade" and my involvement in it. They seemed to be fascinated with the events of those days, but knew little about them. Some persons said that because the community had changed so much for the better as a result of the clean-up, that "someone

should publish the real story because it is an important part of our history." When I told them I had written such an account, they encouraged me to have it published. Since I, too, upon returning to the community, had discovered that the 1951-52 effort had changed the community so much, I decided that I should publish the memoir although I have concern for the feelings of the families involved. At this writing I still have that concern.

During my life, however, I have learned that every person is responsible for his or her own behavior, and no one else is responsible for that. I know that some family members may be angry with me for telling the story; others will be happy that the story is told, because they have encouraged me to tell it. In doing so, I may risk the loss of the friendship of many members of those families and of former associates of those who were involved. I trust, however, that those of us who love Henderson and feel that it is a model community will understand that it is that kind of place today because a few people in our city were willing to risk much more to make it so. That is really what this memoir is all about. It is for them that this story is written.

Charles E. Dietze

## Preface

**W**hen I was a student at Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky, I majored in history. The head of the history department was Dr. F. Garvin Davenport, a keen young professor who instilled in his serious students the desire to study the past in order to enable us to find some meaning in the present. On more than one occasion, in class and out, we fantasized about what history would be like if most of it had been written by persons who were involved in the events about which history is written. We talked about the necessity for objectivity on the part of the historian and expressed doubt that one involved in events can be objective. On the other hand, we thought that although objectivity is important, one who experiences events has something to offer, too – the subjective feelings that accompany one's involvement in events. We concluded that we need both objective, dispassionate history and subjective reminiscences of biographers and writers of memoirs in order to understand what has really happened in the past. Garvin suggested that keeping a journal during momentous events would enable us to recall more accurately what happened to us and how we felt about it at the time it happened.

I wish I had taken his advice. Although my wife, Mary Nettie, and I kept a scrapbook of newspaper and other clippings during the events about which I have written here, neither of us kept a journal.

I'm sure that such a journal would have been helpful in recalling some of our feelings about what was happening at Henderson, Kentucky from August, 1951 through June, 1952. In carefully reading the clippings, however, I have identified some of the feelings which I had at that time. Other feelings, I am sure, have escaped me. In discussing the events, Mary Nettie shared some feelings which she had at the time but did not share them with me then.

My chief regret is that although the pastoral reminiscences I have recorded are true and continue to be meaningful to me, I am not

certain that they were experienced in the order in which I have written about them. Perhaps their order of occurrence is not as important as the memory that they really happened and that my life has been molded by the persons with whom I experienced them.

The facts about the Henderson "crusade" are as accurate as I am able to record them from newspaper accounts, my conversations and correspondence with persons involved and from my memory.

I have written this account partly for myself because it represents an important part of my life. I learned much that has been valuable to me as a person, as a minister, as a husband and father.

I believe that what we so glibly refer to as the "American way of life" and "social action" are much more important than our use of the phrases imply. Our freedom of assembly and of the press are invaluable to our way of life. What was accomplished at Henderson could not have been accomplished without them. The investigative reporting of Harry Bolser and Harry Shaw of the Louisville, Kentucky, Courier-Journal and their willingness to testify at the hearings gave more credibility to what transpired and helped create a climate for change not only in Henderson but throughout the state of Kentucky. The host of other reporters-Arthur Kasey, Edna Folz, Robert Flynn, Dottie Rutkin, Ruth Ann Gregory and Fred Foster of The Evansville Courier, The Evansville Press and the The Sunday Courier and Press – as well as their editors; the editors of The Courier-Journal and The Louisville Times, along with their correspondents Hugh Morris, Allan M. Trout and Gordon Englehart – all kept the issue alive and made it exciting. I deeply appreciate the permission of these newspapers and the Henderson Gleaner to quote from them.

In these days when religion is characterized, for many persons, as mainly an individual search for piety and salvation I trust that the story of the Henderson "crusade" will serve to remind us that there are times when individuals and churches must step forward with courage to be catalysts for changes in society as well.