

The end of an era

Bible Bill's college closes for good

His ministry began with a small Bible study group at Calgary's Westbourne Baptist Church in the early '20s. But it wasn't long before crowds of 1,500 or more were flocking to the Palace Theatre auditorium every Sunday afternoon to hear William ("Bible Bill") Aberhart's fiery two-hour sermons, which were then broadcast via radio across the West. In quick succession, the man who

Ernest Manning, who succeeded Aberhart as both premier of the province and president of the college, had a falling out with the school's principal, the late Cyril Hutchinson, over who should exercise ultimate control. In 1948, Hutchinson was eventually removed from his post and responded by taking most of the students and staff with him and founding Berean College on a residential campus on the

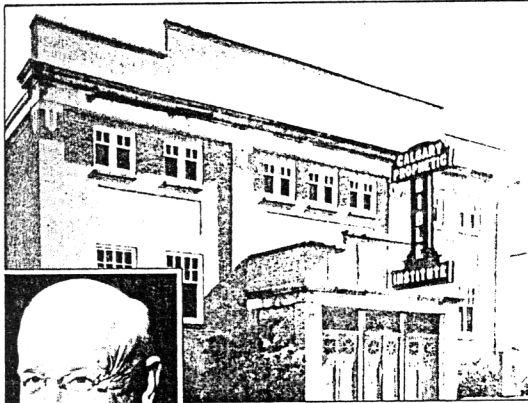
outskirts of Calgary. The conflict was doubly injurious since Mr. Hutchinson also served as bishop for the college's associate church. By the mid-1950s, however, the two men had patched up their differences and the institute's school and Berean College decided to work together. Mr. Hutchinson went on to broaden the college's scope to include overseas missionary work.

More recently the college has met student demands for a generalized liberal arts program with an emphasis on religion. Currently, for example, only a quarter of its graduates plan to enter the ministry. In 1983, the

college moved again to a leased elementary school building and adopted the name of Foothills Christian College.

But as early as 1976, the school began dipping into its \$300,000 reserve fund to meet operating costs and to borrow against the value of its campus property. Not wishing to go further into debt, the college launched a last-ditch fund-raising effort this spring. The plan was to meet its \$600,000 budget with \$400,000 in donations, \$100,000 in tuition fees and the rest from the sale its former campus holdings. But when the June 2 deadline arrived, only \$125,000 had rolled in.

College business manager Roger Laing, 28, blames the non-denominational school's demise partly on increased competition from other charities and church groups at a time when money is tight. At the same time, many of the students who would have previously attended the college are taking bachelors' degrees at public universities before entering a seminary or doing divinity work. David Elliott, 37, a 1969 graduate of Berean College and now an instructor at Grande Prairie Regional College, who specializes in the religious



GLENBOW-ALBERTA INSTITUTE

The original school; (inset) Aberhart

would soon become Alberta's first Social Credit premier established his own

church, a correspondence Sunday school and a Bible college. Although the institutions have since gone their separate ways, each managed to survive—until now. At the end of this month, cash-strapped Foothills Christian College (successor to Aberhart's Calgary Prophetic Bible Institute) will close its doors for good, ending a remarkable 59-year experiment in private Christian education.

Founded in 1927, the Calgary Prophetic Bible Institute was housed in a spanking-new downtown building bought through donations and \$60,000 in bonds from Aberhart's radio listeners. It relied on volunteer staff, mostly teachers and retired ministers. In the early years, high school graduates from farms and small towns throughout southern Alberta came to the college to prepare for the ministry. Aberhart himself taught Bible studies until his election as premier in 1936. 35

Following the death of Aberhart in 1943, the school faced some rocky times.



history of the 1920s and '30s, cites another problem. As it expanded its liberal arts program, the college abandoned certain practices such as its exclusive reliance on the King James version of the Bible. This, says Mr. Elliott, upset some of the old-timers on the college board and perhaps lost it some financial support.

For his part, retired senator Ernest Manning, 76, one of the school's first graduates and a member of its teaching staff for five years, refuses to believe that the institution is gone for good. "It's not dead," he assures. "It's just going through bad times."

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