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In Cleveland County's Early Days

BY MAMIE JONES

April 18-1947

(Editor's Note: Following is the third in a series of articles dealing with life in Shelby in the '80's and based on an interview with Benjamin Baxter Suttle.)

Mr. Suttle tells the story:

"With the possible exception of nine, I watched the erection of every brick building in the town. The nine that antedate my recollection are: The Tom Wells (or A. I. Hardin) home on South Washington St.; the Sam Green home, formerly used as a Key Club, which was built by David Froneberger; the Old Ross building, also referred to as the Shelby Female College, which was torn away to make room for the present City Hall; the First National Bank Building; the "old Dr. Williams" house, torn away to make room for Central Methodist church. The lower portion of this old house was of stone. I hauled this stone to my farm. The freight building at the S. A. L. depot which was built before the war, and was used during Yankee occupation in 1865 as barracks for Yankee troops; the Bill Love building located where the Webb Building now stands;

the Webb theatre which was formerly the Central Methodist church; and the Crawford Durham hotel building where Sterchi's now is.

"In 1880, according to the census, the population of the county was 13,700 white people and 2,871 Negroes, making a total of 16,571. The population of Shelby was approximately 900.

Business Boom In 1884

"I was just a little boy in 1884, but I have been told that about that time business seemed to take on new life and much building was done.

"The corner-stone of the former Masonic Temple on North Lafayette street, where Cohen's store now is, bore the date "October 1884." I watched with a little boy's interest the erection of this building, and about the same time the erection of the brick building directly across the alley, now occupied by A. V. Wray & 6 Sons. Blanton's Hall, which was a part of this latter building, was described as being one of the finest opera houses in Western North Carolina at

that time. It measured 52 x 110 feet and seated 1,500 people.

"As I have just said, I watched the construction of these two buildings. Water for making mortar was drawn in buckets from the well on the Courtsquare, and rolled in barrels across the street to the job. There was no pump, no hose. Building was just a matter of muscle.

"There were four public wells on the Square, one in front of each of the Courthouse doors. By each of these wells there was a watering trough for horses and other animals.

"My grandfather, D. D. Suttle, for many years sheriff of this county, was a man of considerable property and political importance. He lived on North Morgan street, in the house now called "The Old Homestead" (Mrs. Paul Webb's antique place). Directly in front of this house, on the other side of the street, was his tobacco factory. Here he manufactured a really good quality of plug tobacco. He had sent to Virginia for Jack Nance, an experienced tobacco man, to manage the factory. Mr.

(Continued on Page 5, Col. 3)

Early Days

(Continued from Page One)

Nance brought with him a capable Negro assistant.

Tobacco Factories

"There were four tobacco factories here. The first one was established in the years just following the war. This was operated by Jesse Jenkins, John Stephens and Baxter, in a building located where the George Blanton, Jr., residence now stands. D. K. Humphries & Company had a small factory; and so did J. F. Bland at Mooresboro. Bostic Bros. & Wright manufactured smoking tobacco, numerous brands of plug, and nine brands of cigars. Their best cigars were rolled by hand, using the whole leaf.

"A pamphlet boosting the county, published in 1884, says that some of the finest grades of leaf tobacco sold here that year for \$1.50 a pound. It says further that in 1883 approximately 25 acres of tobacco were planted in the county. But that in 1884 500 acres were planted, which resulted in a yield of 100,000 pounds of leaf tobacco. I do not know whether these figures are correct or not. The pamphlet was published for advertising purposes, and stated that Shelby had 1,500 inhabitants. Just as we say now it has 20,000.

"I do know that the section

produced an excellent quality of leaf tobacco. But 14 cents was about the average price for it. The manufactured plub tobacco, when sweeted with cheap liquorice and molasses could be sold at three plugs for a quarter.

Tobacco Center

"A number of wagons carrying the product of these various tobacco factories peddled tobacco throughout the country. Shelby became a tobacco center. But the tax was so very high that it cut deeply into the manufacturers profit. Some very clever operatives could bootleg tobacco and avoid paying the tax. Only then could the manufacturer realize a real profit. There were several big tobacco barns. The building now occupied by the Kendall Medicine Company was built for a tobacco sales barn, and there used to be a tobacco barn where the Cleveland Cloth Mill now stands.

"But gradually cotton replaced tobacco. Farmers found it easier to produce. And today only a little burley is raised in the county, and that for home use.

"With the coming of the Carolina Central (S. A. L.) Railroad in 1875, Shelby became the center of a large trading area. I recall that there was a line of wagons reaching from the Court Square almost to the Carolina Central depot, loaded with cotton waiting to be weighed. These wagons were so close together that a man could walk on top

a punctured or slowly leaking flat, when within reasonable distance of a 90 per cent of all flat tires have leaks so suffice, the new inflator will eliminate half the air from the spare, and a few necessary. Women drivers, especially,

of this cotton for a distance of several blocks. In fact, Gus Stephens used to do this as a prank.

"This cotton sold for 7cents to 10 cents a pound. Charlie Carroll had charge of the hauling; Will Carroll sampled and numbered the cotton, and Jim Mallard did the weighing. It was then shipped over the Carolina Central Railroad to waiting markets.

(Continued Next Week)

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