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### Magazine Clipping - 1959 The State Magazine

Bill Sharpe

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## By **BILL SHARPE**

Adam Sherrill was the first permanent settler to cross the Catawba, and he was too occupied with his immediate problems to consider the historic significance of the journey.

The strong current beneath his wagon must have suggested grist mills to his practical mind. But how was he to even dream that this stream was to be damned in a string of lakes and become known as "the Niagara of the South"? And instead of merely turning grist mills would become the foundation of an industrial empire?

### **Built Piedmont**

Adam Sherrill lived and died without knowing that he carried to the frontier an imponderable element more powerful even than the great river. For he represented the energetic German immigrants who shortly began streaming into North Carolina. From his ilk descended the industrious and prosperous race which built Piedmont North Carolina.

The early Catawba emigrant was described by one writer as a stock "which for morality, perseverance, simplicity and contentment is easily first among the nations."

### **Modern Industry**

That was in 1747, and a little more than 200 years later the descendants of Sherrill and his neighbors are in possession of one of North Carolina's most versatile industrial counties.

In 1957 it had 776 employers under

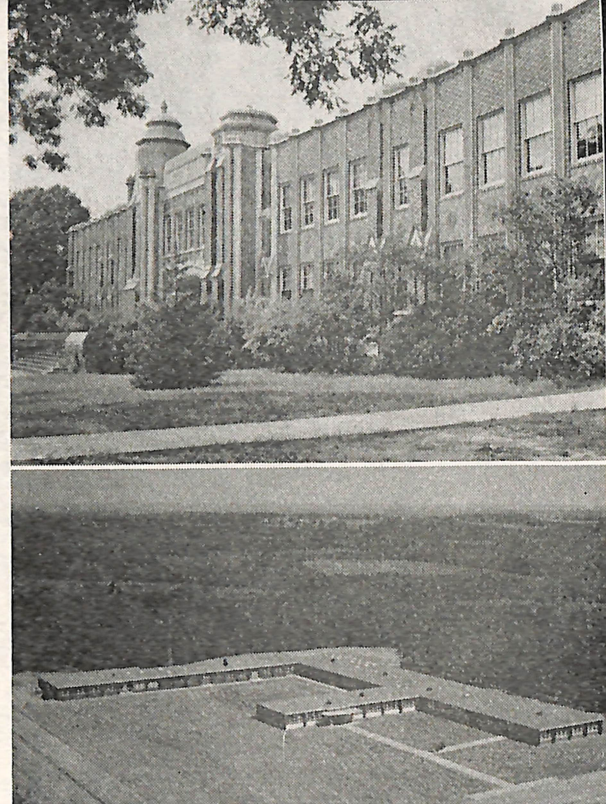
ESC, and these firms employed 25,703 persons. Of the working force, 17,500 are in manufacturing, 3,500 in agriculture. Largest wage-earning group is in textiles (including hosiery), with 11,000. Furniture manufacturing employs about 5,000. The others are distributed among a host of enterprises, and the host of products astonishes a visitor who is hardly prepared to see such a variety. They include gloves, pottery, electric transformers, clotheslines, boats, cables and tools.

### **Dispersed**

Catawba departs somewhat from the pattern of most Piedmont counties. Hickory (1950 population 14,755), is by far the largest town, but Newton is both an industrial center and the county seat. And Conover, Maiden, Catawba and Claremont each are blessed with not just one, but several industries each. Scattered throughout the county are 309 manufacturing plants (1956 figure). The county's population in 1950 was 61,795, with 9.1 per cent non-white.

### **The Setting**

The country which finally stopped the westward moving Sherrill was attractive. On the west side of the river the gently rolling Piedmont was just beginning to build up into foothills of the Blue Ridges, which the pioneers could see from every hilltop. It is attractive topography, about 1,165 feet high, with bold streams cutting deep



Two items of Catawba's fine educational system —Lenoir Rhyne's administration building and the modern Bandy High School, below.

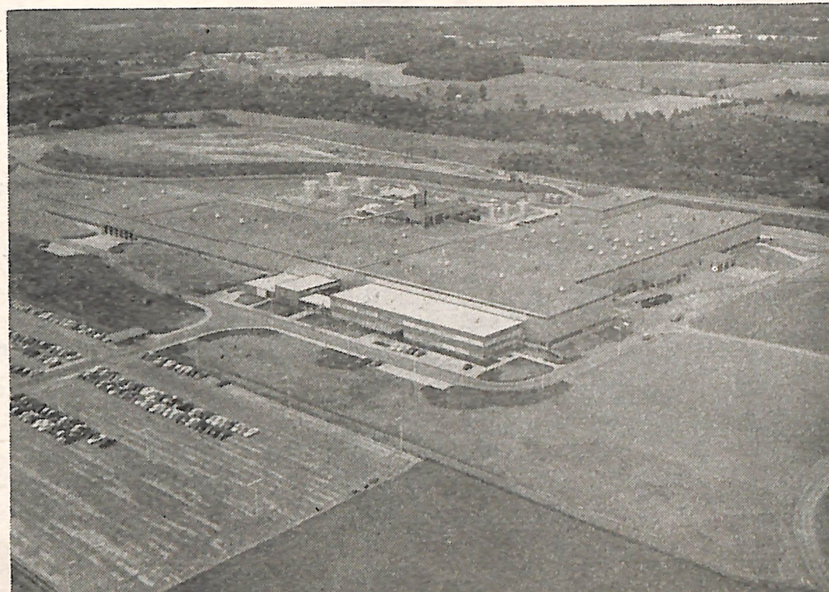
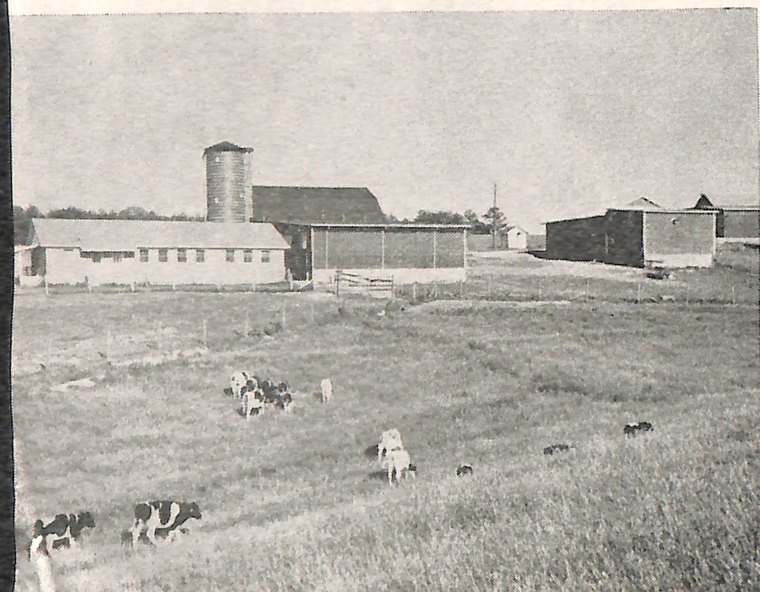
valleys and providing excellent mill sites and drainage. Elevations rise to 1,812 feet in Baker Mountain. The hardwood forests are extensive and suggested the first furniture plants. Even today they sustain a modest lumbering industry which cuts around 10 million feet annually.

The climate is moderate — the altitude just right for mild winters and cool summer nights.

### **Indian Trouble**

Close behind Sherrill (and perhaps in the same party) came Henry Weid-

Twin aspects of Catawba's prosperity—a herd of young Holsteins graze at Oxford Dairy Farm near Conover.—(Photo by Frank Miller.) Right, the new plant of General Electric.







The old Robinson farm house and the remainder of the tree the Catawbans painted red to warn Henrich Weidner that the Cherokees were still on the warpath. The home belonged to the Jesse Robinson family. When Weidner returned from his refuge in South Carolina, he brought Robinson with him.

ner, progenitor of the numerous Whitener family, and then Mathais Barringer, Conrad Yoder, George Wilfong and others whose names are in Catawba's phone books today. Catawba's Indians were friendly, but Cherokee war parties terrorized the frontier. Weidner's brother-in-law and his nephew were killed by Cherokees, and so was Mathais Barringer. Weidner fled

to South Carolina upon advice of his Catawba friends, who told him they would paint a large oak on his farm red so long as the Cherokees were on the warpath. The tree stayed red for two years before Weidner returned to his 10,000-acre plantation.

Nevertheless, the stream of Pennsylvania Dutch came on, mixed now with Ulster Scots, and the wilderness melted under the pioneers' axes.

#### Loyalties Divided

In the Revolution, this was a county almost equally divided between Tories and Whigs, and Catawba had an early martyr — 17-year-old Isaac Wise,

hanged by Tories because, it is said he refused to join their cause.

After the frontier was subdued, immigration increased so that by 1842 the new county was created, cut off from Lincoln after a spirited political campaign.

#### Small Shops

Before and after the Revolution, Catawba was a center of cottage industries. Like the Moravians of Forsyth, the Pennsylvania "Dutch," who were not Dutch at all, were craftsmen and some were talented in several crafts. Blacksmiths, millers, potters, gunsmiths, saddlers, tanners, cabinet makers, wheelwrights, coopers, hatters, distillers, cobblers, tinsmiths, followed their trades, sometimes as sidelines to farming.

Minerals of the area once were exploited. There was an iron forge at Maiden where cannon were turned out for the War of 1812, and gold mining was carried out — with indifferent success — in the east section.

Most of the land holdings were small, and slave owners were not numerous, only about 15 per cent of the population in 1860.

#### Civil War

Nevertheless, when the Civil War came, Catawba was loyal to the Confederacy and sent 1,500 men into service, 300 of them to die. Stoneman and other marauders invaded the county and pillaged Newton, and the KKK was active in reconstruction.

It was not long after this (in 1883) that a couple of northern travelers, Wilbur G. Zeigler and Ben S. Grosscup, visited Catawba and described its revival.

"The new town of Hickory," they wrote "furnishes an illustration of what a little leaven of industry will do in one of these old and rather dead communities. Prior to 1867 there had been

(Continued on page 27)

