1949-03-04

1949, March 4

Mamie Jones

EVELAND TIME

A Part Of The Life Of Cleveland County - - "Your Home Pap

SHELBY, N. C., FRIDAY MORNING, MARCH 4, 1949 Published

Courtsquare Scene At The Turn Of The Century

This photograph, taken between 1908 and 1910 by Will McArthur, shows the lithia water fountain which then stood on the courthouse square. The Dr. Williams house stood in the right background. (See story below.)

Dr. Williams Recalled

Life In Cleveland County's Early Days

By Mamie Jones

When the Shelby Hospital was built 25 years ago, there were those among the older citizens who wanted to call it the Tom Williams Hospital in honor of Dr. Thomas Williams, Shelby's first physician and surgeon who, one hundred years ago, operated a very small hospital on the first floor of his home, the quaint two-story building shown at the right in the above picture, which was among the very first houses built in Shelby.

(The building in the foreground in the picture was known as the lithia fountain, about which I have heretofore written at length.)

In the Charter issued to the town of Shelby by the Legislature in 1843, Dr. Williams was one of the five members of a self-perpetuating Board of Commissioners appointed to organize and supervise the government of the town.

From the early records, it appears that Dr. Williams was quite civic-minded. We find that he was always working to advance the interests of the little village. In 1858, he and John F. Stephens gave land—9½ poles—for a cemetery.

Recently I wrote Miss Hattie Stephens, who now lives in Muscogee, Okla., asking that she write me some of her recollections of early Shelby. I print below a portion of her very gracious reply:

"I am sure you would take pleasure in telling the readers of the Times about one of Shelby's outstanding men; the most outstanding man of his time, in my estimation: Dr. Thomas Williams.

"He did many deeds for people who really needed help during th Civil War, not only for necessities, but aided in other ways as a capable physician. I am sure widows and orphans always remembered his timely help and regretted his passing.

"There used to be a tombstone in the Shelby cemetery telling about a young relative from Georgia, whom he went for and brought to his home and was, with the aid of his wife the former Miss Amelia Elliott, bringing up as an adopted daughter. But death claimed her before she reached maturity.

"His home was on the corner of North Washington and East Marion Streets where Central Methodist Church now stands; and was (I think) the only home ever erected in Shelby whose cornerstone was laid with due solemnity, containing a copy of the Bible and other articles that go in corner stones, which must have been preserved when the house was torn down about 1918, to make way for the progress of the time. As I recall, Judge James L. Webb owned the old house and would have preserved the contents of the cornerstone, if found.

"I can remember going with my younger brother, Alex, up to the third story with Dr. Williams to 'see dead men's bones work', while he pulled the proper strings connected with the skeleton to make the fingers and toes wiggle, and laughed in great glee at our fear.

"The young people of Shelby must have loved this good man who always had a pleasant word for them. When the young men needed help in their studies of Latin and Algebra they never found Dr. Williams too busy to help them.

"He and his friends were great Bible readers, and loved to argue certain questions on which they differed. He for immersion and they, "the sprinklers" for their views. The Baptist church had in him a devoted and faithful member."

No Wire Screen

During the years when Dr. Williams practised medicine, the average life span was less than thirty years. Today it is more than twice that much. Then, the people of this section knew nothing of germs and had not much idea about sanitation as related to health. Dead animals and refuse were piled on vacant lots, and left to decay there. Flies carried poisons from the decayed matter to the food on the table. Wire screens on doors and windows were unheard of.

(Continued on Page Eight)

Early Days

(Continued from Page 1)

Nobody suspected a fly or mosquito could carry disease. True, everybody knew flies were filthy pests and nobody wanted a fly to light on food; and to prevent this at the dining table some member of the family—or a servant— kept the flies shooed away with a turkey-wing fan, or with a small leafy green bough from a nearby bush, or else used a "fly brush" made of fastening a folded newspaper to a cane stalk about four efet long, cutting a portion of the paper in inch-wide strips, then crimping the strips, so that the fly brush when waved over the food would create wind, therby shooing the flies away.

There was a great deal of typhoid fever in those days. Conditions were very much as described by one of Kipling's characters: "My privy and well drain into each other, after the custom of the Christendie. Fevers and fluxes are wasting my Mother. I wonder why God has afflicted me."

Today, we have taken measures to purify our water supplies and to keep flies away from food, and there is comparatively little typhoid fever in this section, and not nearly so much sickness as there used to be. People are realizing that it is not God who sent the typhoid fever, but that they were victims of their own lack of knowledge.

Until more recent years folks were reluctant to believe in germs, although they knew many "diseases were catching." I am reminded of a conversation between a contractor and a lady. Said the lady: "Mr. Contractor, aren't you afraid that when tearing down so many old buildings you will become ill by reason of germs left by former tenants?" Said the contractor: "Lady, I been tearing down old buildings for 25 years and I ain't never seen one of them germs yet."

Black Velvet Coffins

Funerals, during the early days of the county, were not nearly so expensive as funerals are today. There were no nearby stores where coffins could be bought.

Mrs. O. P. (Virginia Ann) Elliott tells me that when she was a little girl her father, Frank Stockton, was a carpenter and that they lived near Polkville. She said that when there was a death in that community Mr. Stockton would make the coffin, frequently working all night to finish one. She says the most expensive coffin he made sold for $5.00. This was made of thoroughly seasoned lumber he kept on hand for such purpose and was

covered on the outside with black velvet, supplied by the buyer. The inside of the coffin and the lid were padded with hand-carded cotton and the slip was of white bleaching. Cheaper coffins were painted on the outside with lampblack. There were no facilities for embalming so the dead body could not be kept for any length of time.

In those days of black velvet covered coffins, funerals were quite diferent from those of today. The funeral service probaly did not begin until perhaps an hour after the time set. The procession moved very, very slowly on the way to the cemetery. If the relatives did not "take it hard" by weeping long and loudly at the grave-side, it was thought they did not love the deceased. Today convention demands that, notwithstanding a very deep heartache, the bereaved show as little emotion as possible in public.

One Hundred Years Ago

A century ago the average Cleveland countian ate his peas — and the greater part of his food — with his knife. Probably the reason for this was that he did not have four-tined forks as we have them today. I have been told that no forks were manufactured in the U.S.A. until 1814, and folks had to learn to eat with forks. Many poorer families used eating utensils made of wood.

In those very early days our forebears drank their coffee—if they had coffee — from a saucer. This saucer was made to hold nearly a teacupful. Those folks who did not have much money probably drank a beverage made of parched rye and sweetened with "long sweetening" which was another name for molasses. I am not sure just exactly when the mustache cup, that is a coffee cup made with a band of china across the top of the cup to keep the very long mustache out of the drink, were first used.

Those old folks never heard of vitamins. But they had 'em! Their bread was made of wheat ground between millstones operated by water power, and retained all the elements of the wheat except the husks, and was brown. We who today must have white bread have to take pills and buy vitamin tablets. They ate the potliker where the vegetables were cooked. They knew it was good for them. But they did not know it contained vitamins and mineral matter, including iron. Many cooks today pour that potliker down the drain.

In the spring time they all drank sasafras tea, and were convinced that it was a panacea for all ills. What do you think?