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In Cleveland County's Early Days

By MAMIE JONES

WHY SHELBY DIDN'T GET MAIN LINE SOUTHERN RAILROAD?

Two or three years back, when Shelby folks were discussing the building of an airport, one often heard the remark: "Eighty years ago our forefathers, through a short-sighted money policy, failed to get what is now the main line of the Southern Railway through Shelby when it was offered to them. Lack of main line railway facilities has greatly delayed Shelby's progress, etc."

In an effort to find out just who was to blame for Shelby's missing out on this valuable asset, I hurriedly scanned the recorded proceedings of the commissioners of Cleveland county during those early years, and find no record of any proposition from the North Carolina Railroad Company (now Southern, work on which was begun in Greensboro in 1851) which might have been made to our county representatives.

I have no way of knowing what was the attitude of our town leaders regarding the proposition, because the books containing the records of the Town of Shelby were burned in January, 1901, in a fire which destroyed the stores of the Miller block, located where Penny's store now stands, on West Warren street.

However, I did find plenty to make it clear to me why the town and county representatives during the 1850's, 1860's, and early 1870's would have been reluctant to take on any additional expense.

MONEY WAS SCARCE

In 1850, according to the census, there were in Cleveland county 8,495 white people, 1,750 Negroes, and 1,524 dwelling houses. The real estate valuation was a little over \$500,000. The personal property valuation (which included 1750 Negro slaves) was around \$700,000. Taxes collected, according to the report of Joseph Carroll, Sheriff, amounted to \$272,159.

population was 12,348, or an increase of 2,000 in ten years; and real estate values had more than doubled. But in 1870, after four years of devastating war, the cash value of all the farms of the county was just about half what it was

in 1860.

PURCHASE RAILROAD STOCK

In June, 1857, the thirty Justices of Peace, sitting as a Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions for

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Cleveland county, considered the purchase of \$50,000 worth of capital stock of the Wilmington, Charlotte and Rutherford Railroad (now Seaboard Air Line) which road was already under construction.

At an election held in August, 1857, according to a report made by Sheriff I. C. Grigg, there were 607 votes in favor of purchase of this stock, and 502 votes against it, giving a majority of 105 in favor of buying the stock.

The record shows that only those men who were qualified to vote for members of the House of Commons were permitted to vote in this election. In other words, only freeholders—men who owned fifty or more acres of land—could vote to impose taxes, or to spend the county's money. Free suffrage came later.

The Wilmington, Charlotte and Rutherford Railroad was completed as far as Cherryville during the first year of the War Between the States—1861—and nothing more was done for many years. The war checked all progress of any kind.

A SMALL VILLAGE

I do not know whether this proposition to build the Southern Railroad came in the late 1850's or in the 1860's. But in 1857 when the election favoring the purchase of stock in the Wilmington, Charlotte and Rutherford Railway was held, Shelby was just a little village of approximately 400 people, nearly half of whom were Negro slaves.

It is likely that if this North Carolina Railway (now Southern) proposition came after the \$50,000 in bonds was bought, the governing bodies of the town and county felt they could not assume additional obligations, especially since there had been so much op-

position to levying a tax for bonds already subscribed for.

In 1850, Winnsboro, South Carolina, was the nearest freight shipping office for Shelby. In 1860, North Carolina had 900 miles of railroads.

COULDN'T PAY INTEREST ON BONDS

In the Minute Book of the County Commissioners for the year 1870, I find record of a meeting held in September, that year, containing a report by T. P. Wells, the agent appointed to represent the county in dealing with the W.C.&R. Railroad, in which he says in substance:

"In 1857 Cleveland county bought \$50,000 worth of Railroad bonds; and the interest on these bonds at 7% is \$3,500 annually; with interest on interest after maturity. In the seven years from 1864 to September 1870, inclusive, only \$8,500 had been collected for interest; and the county was then being sued for interest due."

No tax levy was laid for railroad bonds in 1869, because everybody was broke after the War; and because of added tribulations incident to the so-called Yankee Reconstruction program being carried out throughout the South; and the fact that Yankee troops were stationed here in Shelby.

In 1873, the properties of the Wilmington, Charlotte and Rutherford Railway were sold under mortgage foreclosure, and ultimately became the property of the Carolina Central Railway. This company built the road into Shelby in the Spring of 1875, and completed it into Rutherfordton in 1887. After 1893 the Carolina Central became the Seaboard Air Line Railway.

A great many individuals all along the route of the W. C. & R. Railway invested their savings in stock in this company. I have on the table before me as I write, the fragment of a bond made out to my mother's father, J. T. Beat-

tie, for one share of stock, for which he paid \$30.00 in September 1870. The road was bankrupt in 1873.

I recall hearing, some years ago, a wild story that certain individuals bought up this stock and got rich on it. I do not think this can be true. If anybody knows anything about it, I wish they would write or call me.

Of course if our forebears' foresight had been as good as their hindsight, despite their poverty they would have taken such measures as would have secured a main line railroad for Shelby. But they had reason to believe the present Seaboard Air Line Railway would be a main line and would continue on to Asheville and further North.

DR. MILLER'S ERROR

Dr. W. J. T. Miller, a leader in the county and a far-sighted man, said in substance: "There is no use putting up money to get that railroad to come through Shelby. It is to be a connecting link between Atlanta and Charlotte, and through Shelby is the shortest route. They will have to come this way. There is no other way they can go."

But "they," meaning the North Carolina Railroad (now Southern), did find another route, namely, through what is now Kings Mountain and Grover. According to church records the road was completed in 1872 through these towns.

FOLKS WILL GOSSIP

There is a local story that a representative of the North Carolina Railroad Company came to Shelby to negotiate with our business leaders. But that he got messed up with a handsome Shelby matron, and her husband made matters so unpleasant for him that he had to leave between suns; and with him went hopes for a railroad. But then, folks will gossip!

There are various legends as to why we missed the railroad. One is that an election was held, and the vote was against issuing additional bonds. Another legend concerns the actions of Rube McBrayer and L. E. Powers, who were members of the Legislature. According to such records as I can find, both these men were representatives long after the railroad was completed in 1872. Another legend is that Burrell Blanton was opposed to the road coming through here, and would not lend the money. Since Mr. Blanton was not a banker until some years later, that legend does not hold water. Do any of my readers know why we did not get that road?

SOUTHERN BRANCH LINE

In 1889, the branch line of the Southern Railway which now serves Shelby between Marion and Rock Hill was open to traffic.

Robert Miller, who now lives in Charlotte, writes me that he recalls there was a large crowd on hand at the Shelby station when the first train came through on this newly opened road. Maude Arey says her grandfather Halliburton built the first depot we had.

Relatives to the opening of this road, J. Fell Babington writes me: "I was a passenger on the first train that ran through Shelby, on September 19, 1889. 'Yankee' Phelps was the engineer; John Barxtell the conductor; Maj. John F. Jones, president; Eustace Bruce was road master. My late grand-dad, B. B. Babington, was superintendent of railway shops at Black's Station (now Blacksburg). The railway was then called the Charleston, Cincinnati and Chicago—shortened to "Three C's Railway." Later it was known as the Ohio River and Charleston Rwy. In 1902, the bankrupt road became part of the Southern Rwy. Company."

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