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July 20 - 1950

In Cleveland County's Early Days

By MAMIE JONES

This is a continuation of a story I published several weeks ago, based on an interview with Baxter B. Suttle, dealing with life in the village of Shelby in the 1880's and 1890's.

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 street; the Sam Green home built by David Froneberger on the corner of Graham and South LaFayette street; (this was used for years as a Key club); the old S. S. Ross building, part of which later became the Shelby Female college, which was torn away to make room for the present city hall; the First National bank building; and the "old Dr. Williams house" torn away to make room for Central Methodist church. The lower portion of this house was of stone. The freight building at the SAL depot was erected before the Civil war. During Yankee occupation after the surrender in 1865, and later during Ku Klux activities, this building was used as barracks by the Yankee troops who were stationed here. The Crawford Durham hotel, where Sterchi's now stands on East Marion street which was built by slave labor in the 1840's; the Webb theatre on the same street which was formerly the Methodist church, erected about 1878 or '79; and the Bill Love building on East Warren street, which later became part of the present Webb building.

"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 a little boy 13 years old in 1884, but I have been told that about that time business seemed to take on new life and much building was done.

"The cornerstone 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 erection of this building; and at about the same time erection of the brick building directly across the alley, now occupied by A. V. Wray & Six Sons. Blanton's hall, which was part of this latter building, was described as being one of the finest opera houses in western North Carolina at that time. It measured 52x110 feet, and had a seating capacity of 1500.

"As I have just said, I watched the construction of these two buildings. Water for making mortar was drawn in buckets from a well on the court square, about where the Confederate monument now is, 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 three public wells on the square at that time; each facing one of the courthouse doors on the east, south and west. By each of these wells there was a watering trough for horses

and other animals, and of course a bucket and tin dipper for humans.

"My uncle, D. D. Suttle, for many years sheriff of this county, was a man of considerable property and political importance. He built and lived in the house on North Morgan street now called "The Old Homestead", Mrs. Paul Webb's antique place.

TOBACCO FACTORIES

"Directly in front of this residence, 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, and Mr. Nance brought with him a Wash Webb, a competent Negro assistant.

"Speaking of Jack Nance, I recall you stated in a recent story that Walter Fulenwider married a Miss Nance. Presumably, this was Jack Nance's daughter, Mary, a woman of unusual charm and good looks. Or at least she seemed that way to me when, as a little boy, I was at her house quite frequently, and she always had lots of candy to give me. Later, when Mary separated from Fulenwider, she married Jack Van Landingham.

"I worked in my uncle's tobacco plant when I was mighty young. I worked at noon, and in the afternoons after school, and sometimes I made 40c or 50c a day, stemming tobacco.

"There were four tobacco factories here. The first was estab-

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lished in the years immediate after the Civil war. This was operated by Jesse Jenkins, John Stephens, and Baxter in a building located where the George Blanton, junior, home now stands. E. H. Humphries & Co. 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. One of their cigar makers was named Beale, another was Henry Grady. Frank Hamrick learned to make cigars, and later worked in Asheville.

"A pamphlet published in 1884, boosting the county, says that some of the finest grades of leaf tobacco sold here that year for \$1.50 a pound. The pamphlet 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, written by Tom Dixon, Jr., was published for advertising purposes, and stated that Shelby had 1,500 inhabitants, just as we now say it has 20,000.

"I do know that this section produced an excellent quality of leaf tobacco which sold for an average of 14 cents a pound. The manufactured plug tobacco, when sweetened with cheap licorice and molasses could be sold at three plugs for 25 cents.

TOBACCO CENTER

"A number of wagons carrying the products of these several tobacco factories peddled them throughout the countryside. Shelby became a tobacco center. But the very high tax cut deeply into the profits of the manufacturers. Some very clever operators could bootleg tobacco and avoid paying the tax. Only then could the manufacturer realize a real profit.

"There were several big tobacco barns in the county. The building on West Warren street, near the Southern railway tracks, formerly occupied by Kendall Medicine company, which was recently burned, was built for a tobacco sales barn. Also there used to be a tobacco barn near where the Cleveland Cloth mill now stands.

"Gradually cotton replaced tobacco. Farmers found it easier to produce. During the past 40 or 50 years only a little burley has been raised in the county, and that mostly for home use. That is, with exception of two or three years when certain large Cleveland county planters tried raising bright leaf tobacco. They did not find bright leaf profitable in this immediate section. However, I believe Irvin Allen of the Kings Mountain area had a tobacco acreage allotment, and he continues to raise some bright leaf tobacco.

TURKISH TOBACCO

"This year some of our farmers are experimenting with Turkish tobacco and, according to a statement by County Agent Ben Jenkins, between 125 and 150 farmers have put in 275, or maybe 325 acres, of aromatic tobacco, that is in the neighborhood of one-half acre each. To grow this tobacco successfully the soil must not be too fertile, else the leaves will grow too large and thereby lose their aroma. To keep the leaves small the plants are set rather close together, and 60,000 or 70,000 plants is the usual average per acre.

"Mr. Jenkins says that last year Turkish tobacco brought an average of 80 cents a pound on the market.

"Continuing our discussion of earlier days: with the coming of the Carolina Central railroad (now Seaboard Air Line) in 1875 Shelby became the center of a very large trading area. I recall there was a line of wagons, reaching from the court square all the way to the depot loaded with bales of cotton waiting to be weighed.

"This cotton sold for 7 cents 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. Those markets were mostly in the north. There were very few cotton mills in this area at that time."

(To be continued)

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