Happyville Failed To Prosper

BY RON CHEPESIUK
AND LOUISE PETTUS

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South Carolina's Story

The making of a state

WINTHROP COLLEGE

At the beginning of the 20th century, there was much concern in the South about the region's lack of success in attracting industry and in increasing agricultural productivity.

Many Southern leaders believed the situation could be improved by bringing European immigrants to work the fields and factories. However, most European immigrants preferred to settle in the industrial North and West rather than the underdeveloped South. A way had to be found to attract immigrants.
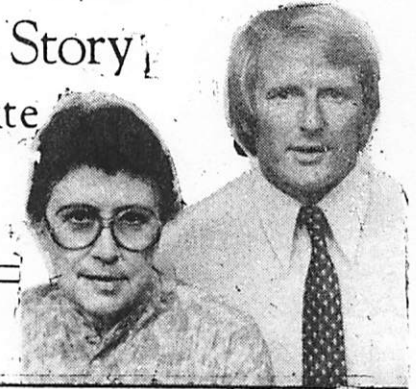
No Southern state was more imaginative and industrious in promoting immigration than South Carolina. In November 1903, A.J. Mathieson, a banker from Columbia, called a meeting on immigration in Columbia. Eighteen out of 42 countries sent delegates. As a result of the meeting, the Legislature established a state immigration bureau, with $2,000 appropriated for its work and E.J. Watson appointed as its head.

In the spring of 1905, Watson established a New York office. One of the first objectives of the office was to encourage "desirable" Europeans to farm in South Carolina.

Watson eventually met Charles Weintraub, a man who was looking for an area in which he and several of his friends could settle quietly. Watson managed to convince Weintraub that South Carolina was the place for him.

Weintraub and a friend journeyed to South Carolina in search of land. Curiously, he was looking for land that needed cultivation because he believed that "poor land improved was the land that brings forth the best results under proper cultivation." When no suitable site was found, Weintraub and his friends returned to New York.

But the persistent Watson persuaded Weintraub to return to South Carolina. This time Weintraub purchased a tract of land about seven miles from Aiken. He paid $6,000 in cash for an area known as Sheffield Phelps Plantation.

By December 1905, Weintraub and 10 families arrived. Early the next year 15 settlers joined them.

Almost as soon as the colonists arrived, they began making plans for the first crop. Several houses were built, the land cleared, and equipment purchased.

The colony was established near Montmorenci in Aiken County. The settlers optimistically named it Happyville.

At the beginning, the colony looked like it would prosper. Weintraub was already planning to have a dozen more families brought in, and he soon expected a school to be built for the colonists' children.

The optimism and initial success of the colony was soon tempered by the harsh realities of the local climate. A killing frost followed by heavy rains destroyed the cotton and peach crops.

Despite adversity, morale was good at Happyville, and the colonists, believing the weather in 1906 was atypical, looked forward to the next year.

Weintraub purchased equipment and began a public relations campaign to boost interest and support for Happyville.

By the end of 1906, the situation had so changed that many observers felt Happyville would be a success. Commissioner Watson reported that Happyville "is doing well and steadily growing."

This rosy analysis was premature. By May 1908, a public announcement indicated that Happyville would be abandoned.

Why this sudden change? There were several factors, mainly financial, according to the late historian Dr. Arnold Shankman. The colony was heavily in debt from building a saw mill and ginnery. Meanwhile, the farmers in nearby Montmorenci had built a competing cotton oil mill and ginnery that cut into the colony's revenue.

Couple this with unexpected bad weather and poor farmland, and you no longer have a colony capable of surviving.

By July 1908, the Happyville land had been sold and all the colonists had left the area.

Although Weintraub publicly announced that he and his supporters were going "to prove to the people that a Jew can make a success on the farm," no more European colonists were forthcoming.

Happyville became an interesting but dimly remembered footnote in South Carolina history.