

BLACKSBURG & THOMAS DIXON

Until 1897, the town of Blacksburg was in York County. In that year a new county was created from portions of three counties—York, Spartanburg and Union. Two possible names were offered to the electorate—Cherokee and Limestone. Cherokee won by a landslide. A few years before Cherokee county was created iron was found in the area. At that time Blacksburg was a peaceful village at the foot of Whitaker Mountain which was served by the main line of Southern Railroad. The mines and railroad shops attracted workers.

Blacksburg's history went back to a "Mr. Stark" who settled there after the Revolution. Stark came from Charleston with several people he had persuaded to come with him. He told them it was a new area suitable to the planting of bananas. He turned out to be wrong and was "laughed out of the settlement." For a time, the village was called "Stark's Folly."

When the railroad came through its depot was named Black's Station for three brothers of whom the best known was Dr. John G. Black. Dr. Black enjoying drafting bills for the state legislature and was quite successful in getting the bills passed.

It was a time when numerous tourists came to hike to the top of Whitaker Mountain where they could climb atop a mammoth lookout and boast of seeing 80 miles in each direction. Hunting parties were common. Kings Mountain was only 10 miles away and attracted both sightseers and hunters.

David Summey Ramsuer grew up in Cleveland County across the state line from Blacksburg. In the summer of 1872, before he went off to Wake Forest College, Ramsuer participated in York county Ku Klux Klan activities. Just before Christmas, he was in an oratorical contest on campus when the students were suddenly interrupted by an U. S. marshal and 6 federal soldiers. Ramsuer was arrested. Over a six-month period, while awaiting trial he was in jails in Columbia, Charleston and York. At his trial in Columbia, he was found guilty and sentenced to eight months in prison.

On June 9, 1872, Ramsuer boarded a ship at Charleston and 4 days later was in prison in Albany, N. Y. He was put to work making coffins. On January 20, 1873 he was handed a slip of paper with the name Ulysses S. Grant on it and was told he was free to return home. He then took up his college studies at Wake Forest and when he graduated moved to Blacksburg to practice medicine.

In 1883, another Wake Forest student, Thomas Dixon of Shelby, N. C., younger brother of a classmate of Ramsuer was searching for information to help him write a story. Dixon remembered Ramsuer and contacted him. Ramsuer encouraged Dixon and not only told his story to Dixon but let him use some of his mother's letters which were filled with "pathetic love and tenderness." Thomas Dixon's first story, titled "From College to Prison," appeared in the college magazine, January 1883.

Thomas Dixon graduated from Wake Forest and became a Baptist preacher in New York city for a time. He also took up farming and was

unsuccessful. Then he found fame. He revived his story about David Ramsuer and made it into a four-part book he called "The Clansman," which he set in York County, SC. The book was sensational; book stores couldn't keep it in stock.

Then Dixon turned his book into a stage play that was immensely popular in the South. In 1915 the play was made into the movie with D. W. Griffith directing, "The Birth of A Nation" was a 12-reel movie that turned out to be a phenomenal box-office success.

Dixon wrote a second novel about the Klan, "The Traitor: A Story of the Fall of the Invisible Empire." It failed. And so did three movies, "The Fall of the Nation, "The Red Dawn" and "The March of the Beast,"

Dixon lost his money and had to take a position as a court clerk in Raleigh in 1937. That signaled the end of Thomas Dixon's writing career.

By Louise Pettus