

# Upright churchgoers shunned the gamblers in 19th-century society

Joseph Stewart was 81 years old when he was interviewed by W.W. Dixon for the Federal Writers Project in 1938. Dixon found the old bachelor living in a four-room house near Ridgeway in Chester County.

Stewart said he was born near Mitford, not far from Great Falls, Jan. 17, 1857. His father and mother, Thomas and Sallie Stewart, had a few slaves and a small tract of land.

He was 7 when Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman's troops raided his community. The slaves were freed, but Stewart thought that monetary loss not nearly so devastating as the destruction of the community's cotton mill, gristmill, distilleries and tanyard. The people had no resources with which to replace their small industries.

The Union troops also destroyed the private school that Joseph had attended for one year. He said he had only gotten as far as the "baker" column in the old blue-back speller but had learned to read, and he read well enough that he could read newspapers.

Mount Dearborn Cotton Mill, the destroyed mill, was one of only a few pre-Civil War cotton mills in the state. Mount Dearborn was a water-driven mill owned by Capt. Sam McAlilley and named for the old fort near Great Falls that led to Rocky Mount.

Four tanneries — by the names of Gayden's, Montgomery's, Lewis' and Gaither's — were never rebuilt, but the two distilleries were restored. Stewart remarked that every store sold whiskey. For many years the price was a gallon for one silver dollar, and a barrel holding 31½ gallons went for a 10-dollar bill.

Dixon always asked his interviewees to remark on the pastimes and amusements of their youth. Stewart responded that society as he remembered it had a "distinct cleavage."

First, there was the "religious crowd who took things seriously and went to church every time the church had anything going on."

This group formed temperance societies and had a revival every summer. Their preachers believed in hell and brimstone.

The churchgoers disapproved of the "other crowd," who played cards, danced, gambled and took part in many "innocent amusements." Stewart listed the innocent amusements as raising game chickens and race horses, keeping foxhounds and playing cards in the barrooms and hotels of Chester-ville and Winnsboro.

There was a race course that ran parallel to the Rocky Mount road. Thoroughbred racehorses belonging to Colonel Whittaker, Major Berry of York, the Hamptons of Richland County, the McCarleys of Winnsboro, the Thompsons of Union and the Harrisons of Long-town competed on this track and "much money was won and lost at these races."

Cockfights took place in Chester-ville and Winnsboro. Stewart had seen as much as \$500 bet on the side winning the most fights and \$300 on a fight that lasted only a minute.

Those who gambled at cards usually played "seven up" in day-time games. No great sums were won or lost on this game, but at night in the fall and winter the card game was "draw poker."

He witnessed a "fine old gentleman" join a poker game in which he lost all the money he had. The old man had a wagon parked on the street with four bales of cotton on it. Stewart watched as the bales, one by one, were lost. The man next offered a mule. At that point his son came in and led him out of the hotel.

On the first Saturday in May everybody (the religious as well as the gamblers) piled into wagons and buggies and headed for what was then called Catawba Falls and is now called Great Falls.

Shad and catfish were seined and fried in great numbers to feed the thousands who appeared at the picnic. Stewart had heard that the picnic began as an annual social gathering in 1784 (a year after the end of the American Revolution).

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NEARBY HISTORY

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Dec. 13, 1997