

Sanitation and public health soared with turn of century

In 1938 when the Rev. Oliver Johnson, an ARP minister, was asked how public opinion differed from that of 50 years before, he replied that he saw the greatest change in the people's attitude about public health.

The S.C. legislature had just appropriated what was considered a large sum of money to establish the State Board of Health and money for county boards of health.

In 1888 there had been no board of health. Towns did not have sewage systems nor did they have a county medical officer. "It was regarded as an invasion of personal rights to even require vaccination of the children," Johnson said.

In 1938 county nurses came to the schools to vaccinate children against smallpox and typhoid fever. That would not have happened 50 years before.

Louise Pettus



NEARBY HISTORY

(The Rev. Oliver) Johnson remembered that a half century before, the farmers could only think of growing cotton and more cotton. "There was no diversification and no thought was given to the conservation of the soil." Farmers simply wore out the cotton lands and then cut down fine hardwood forests, selling the wood to townspeople for their fireplaces and planting more cotton between the stumps.

Johnson continued: "Individual privies were generally constructed behind merchants' stores in town, and hog pens were within the town limit."

From 1894 to 1908 the minister served Neely's Creek ARP church near Rock Hill. It was during that period that Dr. Gill Wylie (for whom Lake Wylie is named) regularly visited Rock Hill and lectured the town fathers severely for their failure to develop a water system for the whole town. Wylie maintained that the open wells were the town's main source of diphtheria and typhoid fever.

Johnson recalled that "grocery stores were unsavory places. The vendor had no regard for screens over meats, molasses and other food stuffs. Flies hummed over and

lit on these commodities, but today, by a change of public opinion, rules of boards of health have been enacted, regulating the conduct of these places."

Although Johnson's father supported his family by farming, they had lived in the small college town of Due West. The attraction for living in town was that the Johnson children would be able to attend a primary school operated by Erskine College.

In 1871 a 28-year-old Civil War veteran, Dr. William Moffatt Grier, was elected president of Erskine. He was vigorous and considered a great teacher of "mental and moral science." Johnson recalled Dr. Grier as "gentle, firm, considerate, and just," all characteristics that others were to see in Johnson

himself.

While at Erskine, Johnson won medals for being the best all-around student of the preparatory school, another in oratory and, in his senior year, a medal for the best essay.

In his youth, Johnson had taught school at Lewisville in Chester County. The school was supported by subscription by individual families. It was not a graded school. The students ranged in age from 3 to 22. Teacher pay was so low that in 1938 Johnson calculated that teachers were paid 100 times as much as teachers 50 years before.

In 1891, Johnson left teaching to go to the theological seminary at Princeton, N.J. He stayed there

three years and obtained a doctor of divinity degree. In October 1894 he was installed as pastor at Neely's Creek ARP Church, just south of Rock Hill in the community of Lesslie.

During his 14-year tenure, Johnson led a drive for building a new church. He left Neely's Creek in 1908 for a church in Winnsboro, where he pastored for 37 years.

Johnson had married Tirzah Christine Elliott in 1901. The people of Winnsboro, her hometown, called her "Tiny" or "Miss Tiny." The couple had nine children, five girls and four boys.

Johnson remembered that a half century before, the farmers could only think of growing cotton and more cotton. "There was no diversification and no thought was given to the conservation of the soil."

In spite of the efforts of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and colleges like Clemson, the farmer paid no attention. Farmers simply wore

out the cotton lands and then cut down fine hardwood forests, selling the wood to townspeople for their fireplaces and planting more cotton between the stumps.

Johnson felt S.C. farmers in 1938 were learning how to farm. He felt that farmers would get more for their crops when they diversified and the increased income would result in improved housing.

When the interviewer, W.W. Dixon, asked Johnson about how young people differed over a 50-year period, Johnson said that human nature would always be basically the same. "Youth has more freedom now than then, but it is my firm belief that the boys and girls of today are just as good, maybe a little better, than they were in 1880. (But) I would not exchange the comradeship of parent and child of today for that of the parent toward the child of a half century ago.

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