

Heroic efforts relieved starvation in post-Civil War Lancaster County

It is estimated that in the first years after the end of the Civil War (roughly, 1865-1868), at least two-thirds of all the families in Lancaster County were bankrupt. Many were starving. The 1866 crop year was one of the worst since the Great Drought of 1844-46.

Louise Pettus



NEARBY HISTORY

By various means, word was spread across the nation that tens of thousands of "helpless women and children" were likely to perish. The governor of South Carolina, James L. Orr, appointed a committee to do an exhaustive study of the state's needs. Among other things, the study found that some people were attempting to exist on corn shucks and that one-fourth of the people "had not tasted meat in 30 days."

The newly published "Relief and Recovery in Post-Civil War South Carolina" by two Winthrop University professors, Martin Hope and Jason Silverman, not only gives the story of severe deprivation but of the efforts of the remarkable people who attempted to solve the problem.

It must be remembered that there was no Red Cross, Salvation Army, United Way, etc. Nor did Southern churches have a history of providing formal economic assistance to their members. Of course, relatives and neighbors had always given assistance to the down and out, but now it seemed that almost all were in the same boat.

Among the individuals who publicized the plight of his neighbors

was John F.G. Mittag of Lancaster. Mittag, a Unionist, had come to Lancaster from Maryland to teach school in 1827 and stayed. He married the daughter of William McKenna, Lancaster's wealthiest man, and developed his remarkable talents, becoming a medical doctor, a lawyer, portrait painter, and linguist (he spoke or read nine languages), as well as serving in several political offices. Mittag traveled widely and had many Northern friends.

Mittag wrote numerous letters to Northern newspapers. Wealthy people responded (including Robert C. Winthrop, for whom Winthrop University is named). Dr. J. Marion Sims of New York City, who had been one of Mittag's first students in Lancaster, pitched in and persuaded others to do so.

Dr. Sims donated enough money to purchase a hundred acres on which a building would be built to house poor people. The building was named the "Sims House," but for many years was known as the Poor House. In more recent years this land east of Lancaster, still owned by the county, has become the site of some county government offices.

Mittag persuaded the Maryland legislature to appropriate \$100,000 for aid to the South and requested \$12 million from the U.S. Congress. Republican radicals held up the bill saying that it was unconstitutional to give money to charities, but finally a \$1 million appropriation passed.

Not all of the money and grain Mittag collected came from as far as New York and Boston. Some came from Charlotte, New Bern and Wilmington in North Carolina. Because Lancaster did not have a railroad, the corn was shipped to

Rock Hill and wagoned to Lancaster.

Drs. Hope and Silverman do not stop with accounts of fund-raising for the destitute and the distribution of corn for people and horses. They also deal with the Freedmen's Bureau, education, health and medical conditions, women's organizations and much more.

The last chapter of the 336-page book, "Life, Without Variety of Enjoyment, is but a Miserable Experiment: Attempts to Find Relief From the Misery Through Entertainment," is not only about theater, opera, concerts and Christmas balls, but includes interesting accounts of the first baseball games, jousting tournaments, billiards and horse racing.

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