

Village Lived And Died By Railroad

Alongside the S.C. 5 bridge that crosses the Catawba River near the giant Bowater paper mill is a railroad trestle used by the Seaboard Railroad. When the railroad leaves York County, it goes to Van Wyck in Lancaster County, then Waxhaw, N.C., and beyond.

There was once a twice-a-day stop between Van Wyck and Waxhaw, but the last time the train pulled into Hancock station, which served the village of Osceola, was in the 1930s.

The village of Osceola, now grown over, was about a 1/2-mile trek west of U.S. 521 (the main road from Lancaster to Charlotte) and its junction with S.C. 75 to Waxhaw.



Pettus

Osceola was named for the famed Seminole Indian chief who, about 1830, is supposed to have camped at a copious spring for three days before continuing on a northern journey. Osceola's body, without the head, now rests on the grounds of Fort Moultrie, Charleston Harbor.

T.W. Secrest, who surveyed Osceola in 1888, once wrote that he and James F. Steele planned to call the village Waxhaw, but the Georgia, Carolina and Northern (later the Seaboard Airline) started its construction in Monroe. A Union County community took the name Waxhaw before the track got as far as Lancaster County. The two men then chose the name Osceola.

The depot was not called Osceola because the railroad already had two Osceola depots to the south and the freight was always getting mixed up. The origin of "Hancock" as the name for the railroad depot is uncertain, but there was a Methodist church preaching station known as Hancock's Chapel a few miles to the south.

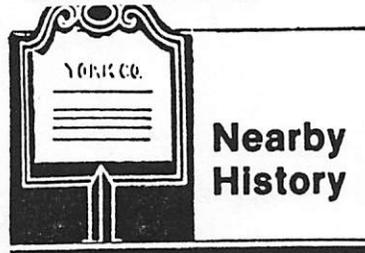
Bishop Francis Asbury, famed Methodist circuit rider, made reference to stops at Hancock's in his journal written in the early 1800s.

Secrest said he built the first store at Osceola and was the first postmaster. By the 1890s Osceola had two stores, a grist mill, a cotton gin, five homes (four white families and one black family) in the village and 20 homes within a 1/2-mile walk. The children attended Morrow School, an ungraded one-teacher school taught by Miss Iva Bennett from Rock Hill. Osceola Methodist church, on the Lancaster-to-Charlotte Highway, was within walking distance.



Courtesy of Bessie Rodgers Pettus

Pictured here (ca. 1912) are James Rodgers (left) and his sister, Florence, at the site of the spring where the Seminole warrior Osceola once camped.



The railroad was a depot, water tank and wood rack. Harry Hines, a well-known Lancaster lawyer, managed the depot for a time. In the fall, at cotton ginning time, a boxcar would sit on the siding for several days until it was filled with cotton seed. Osceola passengers were likely to go to Waxhaw for shopping, but some of them visited relatives at Catawba Junction in York County.

One of Osceola's first storekeepers was Allen Watson Heath. Heath, who also had stores in Van Wyck and Waxhaw, later became the first outside partner of the Belk Brothers Department Stores. J.L. Rodman, the Starnes Brothers, Will Rodgers and perhaps others kept stores in Osceola.

The Rodgers store contained the Osceola post office and Rodgers's wife, Eudisia Perry Rodgers, was the postmaster. The job required only a couple of hours work daily; she was paid in proportion to the number of stamps and money orders she sold.

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The post office had an outside wooden window with iron bars. There was no drop slot. If no one was in the office, the postal patron simply stuck his letter through the narrow iron bars. The store sold picture postcards with pictures of flowers or rural scenes and the words, "Everybody knows everybody's business in Osceola."

Rodgers's father-in-law, John J. Perry, used a buggy to carry the mail over the rural route. Heated bricks and a lap robe helped him keep warm on cold days. When Perry needed a substitute, Rodgers saddled his horse to carry mail over a route that was about 10 miles in circumference.

The last Osceola postmaster was Sally Wolfe, who served at the post for 30 years. She hung out the mail pouches twice a day for pickup by mail trains.

In the early 1930s the post office closed and the building burned a few years later.

When reflecting on why Osceola died while other towns continued and grew, Secrest said: "Twelve-Mile Creek was one side and a mountainous hill on the south so that the only way to get to the town was up the railroad tracks. This, we believe, killed the town."