

# South Carolina's Story

## The making of a state



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There has never been a better book written about the South Carolina upcountry than *Red Hills and Cotton*. Ben Robertson, a professional journalist, wrote the book in about six weeks between assignments while visiting his family at Clemson. The story of Ben's roots may have been put on paper in a short time, but according to his friends, it had been in the making over a lifetime.

To Ben Robertson it was very important to explain what his people were like and what made them that way. Why he had this impulse he was not certain, for his family, like so many others in the pre-World War II period, were still a clan who clung to the oral tradition. Family legends were handed down beside the hearth, on long wagon rides or at the quilting frame. Before Ben Robertson, no one had felt an impulse to commit the family's history to paper.

The Robertson family members were not unschooled, either. One of Ben's grandfathers had served in the State Legislature. His father was a Clemson professor and had been one of the college's earliest graduates. His mother had graduated from Winthrop College in the class of

1899. That is said to be the first marriage of graduates of Ben Tillman's two colleges. Ben Robertson was born on the Clemson campus and stayed there until he finished college.

The oldest members of Ben Robertson's family got most of the attention in his book. He saw them as the real shapers of his personal character and, at the same time, as the epitome of what the upcountry stood for. Robertson gives us a vivid account of his unreconstructed grandmother to whom he always said, "yes, Ma'am." His Grandfather Bowen, the one who had served in the Legislature, was so trusted by everyone that even horse-traders would not hoist their prices or trade him a lame horse.

Of all the relatives, though, it is Great-aunt Narcissa, the oldest of the huge Robertson tribe, who was Ben's earliest and most effective teacher. She worked to instill in her small grand-nephew a marvelous sense of the past. She told him about another Aunt Narcissa who lived four genera-

tions before her and who was scalped by the Indians. But mostly Aunt Narcissa shaped his character. Ben said that the Robertsons cared a lot more about character than they did about culture.

Ben Robertson thought it very important to explain what it meant to be a South Carolinian (far superior to being a North Carolinian) and to be a Southerner (so special that even being a North Carolinian was several cuts above being a non-Southerner.) The essence of being a Southerner was to live by an ethical code that placed honor above all else. Honor was not an individual thing — a person's honor was bound to his family so tightly that it was indistinguishable from the honor of the family. Ben Robertson estimated he had at least 1,000 kinfolks in two or three counties around Clemson.

According to Ben Robertson's lifelong friend Wright Bryant, Ben's talents were diverse. He was, for example, a pianist who could have been a successful professional. Everywhere he had a legion of friends. Ben had a compulsion to explore the world. He managed to get a job on the Honolulu Star-Bulletin in 1926 and from there was able to literally work (write) his way around the world.

In *Red Hills and Cotton*, Ben talked much about his pioneer kin, which included Daniel Boone and Horseshoe Robertson. He was restless like the ancestors he described as being a rambling people who were inspired by motion to the extent that they most likely would rise out of their death beds if someone said, "Let's go."

For Ben Robertson, death came while he was in motion. He was aboard a plane bound for a new position as head of the *New York Herald-Tribune* bureau in London when his plane plowed into the Tagus River as it approached Lisbon. After a week's search, Ben's body was found and sent home for burial. On his tombstone are a few words written earlier by Ben to a homesick relative: "I rest in thy bosom, Carolina, Thy earth and thy air around and above me. In my own country, among my own, I sleep. June 22, 1903 - February 22, 1943."