Life simple but hard 200 years ago

Families cooked over open fires, spent time making own clothing

NEARBY HISTORY

Louise Pettus

Recently, a resident of Tirzah, a community about seven miles southeast of York, asked, "What was life like here 200 years ago?"

We all know that 200 years ago there were no paved roads, no electricity, no grocery stores, no telephones, etc. Life had to be much simpler, but it was not an easy life.

In 1800, most of the population in this area was Scots-Irish, perhaps as high as 90 percent. Nearly all were either immigrants or children of immigrants. They brought a lot of customs from the Old World but had to cope with New World situations.

The American Indians had coped for several thousand years and had much to offer. People who grew up eating oatmeal were soon learning to eat corn; and learning to cultivate it. They learned to fence in their gardens and grain crops and let their livestock roam and forage. Animals ranged over the S.C. countryside until an 1877 law required fencing them in.

Food was preserved by salting, pickling or drying. It was cooked over open fires, either inside or outside of the house depending on the temperature. Iron pots and skillets were the most valuable property in the household.

Having wood for the fireplace was a continuous need for cooking and heat and light. Candles gave off little light and the kerosene lamp wasn't invented until 1854.

Nowadays, we tend to visualize the earlier countryside as mostly covered with trees. Not so. Much was cut to clear the land for crops and to build log cabins. With no commercial fertilizer, there was a limit of about four years for a crop before the land had to lie fallow in order to recover fertility. When William Hill built iron works on York's Allison Creek, the mill consumed more than 15,000 acres of trees to make charcoal for the iron works.

The cotton gin was invented in 1794 and took at least a decade to catch on. In 1800, women and children separated seed and lint by hand. Spinning wheels and looms were household necessities. Families were large and spent a big percentage of their time providing enough clothing for each person to have two of any clothing item. No more than one pair of shoes was normal for most people who went barefoot in the summer to save shoe leather.

Carolina red clay made it difficult to build decent roads. In the winter it was impossible to travel on any wheeled vehicle. If one didn't have a horse, then there was nothing to do but walk. Most people stayed home.

The first public places built were taverns and churches. Taverns served as inns and postal stops.

In 1803, there were only two post offices in York County: in Yorkville, the county seat, and at Hill's Iron Works. Tirzah's first post office opened in 1877.

A few years before 1800, there was a "preaching station" at the home of Joseph Miller about two miles west of the present Tirzah church. And there was an Associate Reformed church at Ebenezer which is now inside Rock Hill.

At Ebenezer, there was a split in the congregation over whether to follow the custom of singing the Psalms or adopt Watts Hymns. Those who wanted only Psalms left Ebenezer and joined the Associates who worshipped at Joseph Miller's home.

The two groups organized the Tirzah congregation in 1803. They built a log church and until 1827 were served by four men called "supplies" who served as substitutes in the pulpit. These were the Rev. William Dixon, Eleazer Harris, John Cree and Isaac Grier. Both Cree and Dixon were immigrants and well educated. Grier, born near Clover, is particularly remembered for training other ministers, a large percentage of them black men.

In 1827, a new church was built and the Rev. William McElwee was installed as minister for Tirzah and Sharon A.R.P. In a few years, the church was divided over the issue of slavery. McElwee preached against slavery and in 1832 moved to the Northwest Territories. Slavery remained the major issue in the church until the end of the Civil War.

Louise Pettus is a retired Winthrop University history professor. Her column appears Sundays.

Entrepreneur

MAKING IDEAS WORK

Artist Sara Martin of Rock Hill creates pastel portraits and structural pen-and-ink drawings in her business, Sara's HeArt. Contact Martin at (803) 980-5307.

One goal at a time

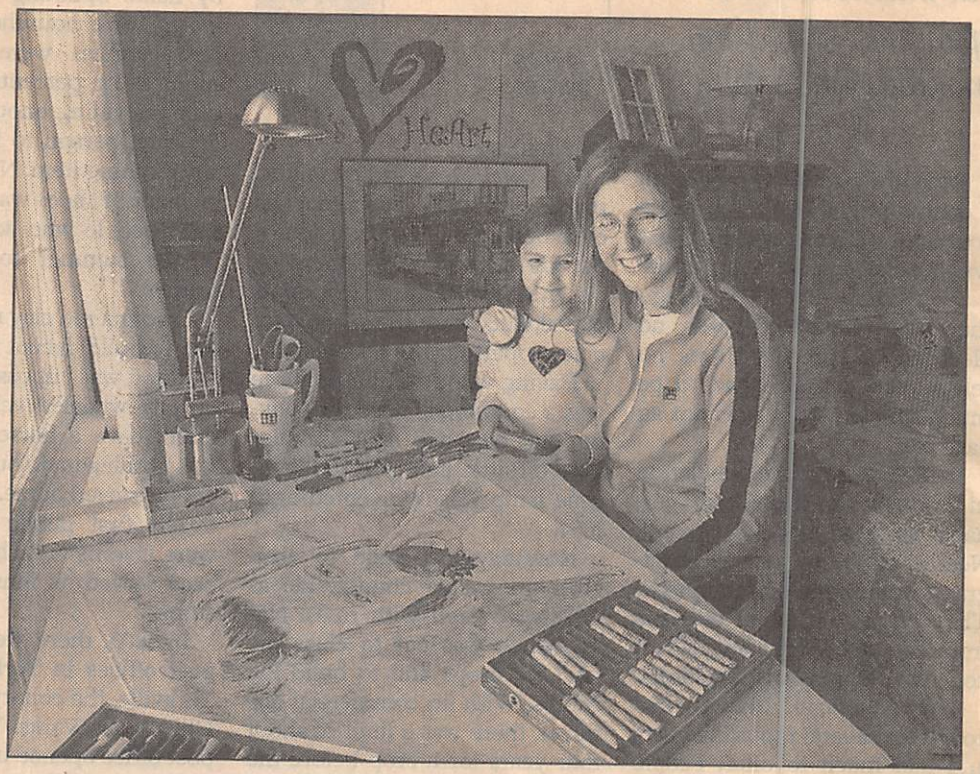
Sara Martin of Rock Hill has always been interested in art. The Indiana native even won a national Hallmark award with a pen-and-ink drawing, but she set that interest aside to pursue her athletic career.

"Even in high school, playing volleyball and considering going to art school, I knew I could only play volleyball a short time, and then I'd pursue my other passion."

She went to UNC Chapel Hill on a volleyball scholarship, got a master's degree in motor control from Western North Carolina and coached volleyball there. In the meantime, she had gotten married and had her first daughter, Madison, now 7.

"I felt led by God to stay home and be home with my girls. I was on the road so much (coaching), putting in 200 hours of overtime in a season." Martin quit coaching in the spring of 1997.

Back into art



DIEDRA LAIRD – STAFF PHOTO

Sara Martin sits in her home studio where she works with her 5-year-old daughter Kelli. Martin has just started her own business drawing house, pet and children's portraits in pen and ink, and pastels.

things to make improvements. That's why I want to start out very small. I'm a perfectionist by nature."

Not ready for real world

Martin spends about three to four hours creating a pastel portrait from a photograph