

# The Life Of A Novelist-Preacher

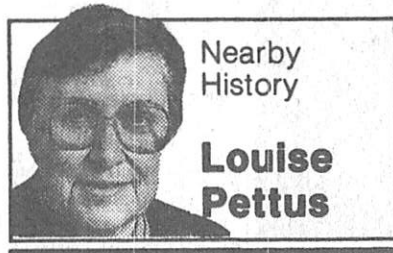
## York County Was Setting For Film 'The Birth Of A Nation'

"The Birth of A Nation," a 12-reel movie about the Reconstruction era, was a phenomenal box-office success in 1915.

Directed by D.W. Griffith, the movie was lauded for its photographic techniques, shifting of scenes and use of orchestral music. The content of the movie, however, raised a storm of protest.

The setting of the movie was York County. It was based on a novel, "The Clansman" by Thomas Dixon (1864-1946). Dixon, a native of Shelby, N.C., is supposed to have witnessed a Ku Klux Klan march when, as a young boy, he awoke one night to see a procession of white-robed Klansmen outside his bedroom window.

The book covered 1865-70 in four sections. The first section was set in Washington at the end of the Civil War. President Abraham Lincoln was treated with sympathy. The second part took place in an S.C. town he called "Piedmont," at the home of the Camerons. The third section returned to Washington to recount the difficulties of President Andrew Johnson, who was portrayed as weak. The last section, titled "The Invisi-



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ble Empire," depicted Klan activities.

The public found the book sensational. Book stores could not keep it in stock.

And why did Dixon use York County as the setting for "The Clansman?" Probably because there was more Klan activity in York County during the Reconstruction period than in any other county.

Dixon had not set out to be a novelist. A graduate of Wake Forest College, he was a Baptist preacher in New York City whose pulpit style had been mostly an angry attack on alcohol, religious apathy and Tammany Hall politics.

John D. Rockefeller heard Dixon and was so impressed that he agreed to give Dixon \$1 mil-

lion, half the cost of building a Baptist church in New York City. Rockefeller taught Dixon how to ice skate.

Other Baptist churches were jealous of the Rockefeller-Dixon alliance and blocked the church-building project. Bitter, Dixon left the church to become a lecturer in the famed Chautauqua lecture tour.

Thomas Dixon decided that he wanted to be a gentleman-farmer. He tried growing cabbage but they rotted.

Discouraged by farming, Dixon turned "The Clansman" into a drama. He stripped the Washington political struggle from the plot and focused on the activities of the Klan.

The play was performed in the South to capacity audiences before reaching New York in 1906.

Dixon wrote a second novel on the Klan, "The Traitor: A Story of the Fall of the Invisible Empire" and wrote a stage version of that. In 1911, he tried to form a movie company to produce "The Clansman," but failed.

Then D.W. Griffith took over. The name was changed to "The Birth of a Nation." Lillian and

Dorothy Gish were so entranced with Griffith's plans that they put up \$300,000 for the filming. Lillian Gish starred in the film and was catapulted to fame.

President Woodrow Wilson had a private showing in the White House with Dixon in attendance. Dixon persuaded Wake Forest to give Wilson an honorary doctorate.

Dixon went to Hollywood and built The Dixon Studio. He produced "The Fall of the Nation," a sequel that was not nearly as good as Griffith's production. Still, he made a lot of money on the production. He also did well with "The Red Dawn," a 1919 move on the rise of Bolshevism in Russia.

Dixon then went into a slump. "The March of the Beast" was a failure. Critics charged Dixon with assisting the revival of the KKK in the 1920s. He lost his wealth in the Depression and was reduced to begging for a federal job. In 1937 he was appointed court clerk in Raleigh.

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