**Louise Pettus**

**NEARBY HISTORY**

Carolinas newspapers in the fall of 1923 were carrying stories about the sale of the mill property of Col. Leroy Springs of Lancaster. The first that Rock Hill people heard was when the Record, a Rock Hill newspaper, copied a Sept. 12 bulletin from New York. The heading read, "The Springs Mills Now In Merger." Springs was selling the Fort Mill Manufacturing Co., the Eureka Mill and the Springstein Mill at Chester, and the largest cotton mill in the world under one roof, the Lancaster Cotton Mill.

Four days later the paper printed that the mills went for a total of $10 million.

All of this generated tremendous interest in this area. Leroy Springs was a native of Fort Mill township and had first married Grace Allison White, the daughter of Capt. Samuel E. White, who founded the Fort Mill Manufacturing Co. in 1888.

The second Mrs. Springs, Lena Jones, was active in women's affairs and her name would, the following year, be placed in nomination for the vice presidency of the United States in the Democratic convention of 1924.

The Oct. 4 edition of the Southern Textile Bulletin reported that a dinner in Charlotte honoring Col. Springs and Edwin Farnham Greene had attracted more than 200 leaders of the Southern textile industry. The Springs Mills had the reputation of being among the best managed and most profitable of all Southern mills.

When Leroy Springs was asked his plans, he would say only that he hoped to relax and play a little golf. Springs had been in Lancaster since 1882 when he and O.P. Heath set up a general merchandise store. The store had been successful and eventually served as a financial base for Springs when he got into a cotton mill venture with local residents.

After 41 years, Lancaster residents thought of him as a permanent fixture, but word got out that Leroy Springs would probably move elsewhere. A delegation from Charlotte arrived in Lancaster in Cadillacs; a former governor, heading a delegation in a Buick and two Chevrolets, tried to convince Springs that Columbia was the place to be. Fort Mill residents reminded him of his roots.

Winnsboro, Ridgeway and Fort Lawn all had plans to entice the Colonel. But of all the efforts to snare Leroy Springs, Rock Hill's had to be the most colorful.

The State newspaper reported that a special train of the Southern Railroad carried more than 300 Rock Hillians to Lancaster for the express purpose of inviting Mr. and Mrs. Springs to make Rock Hill their home. When the train got into Lancaster, a 12-piece band led the Rock Hill party down Main Street to the Colonel's home (the house, on Gay Street, once served as Lancaster's City Hall.)

Forty-eight uniformed Winthrop College seniors marched behind the band (Springs was a Winthrop trustee). Behind the seniors came members of the Winthrop faculty and the president, D.B. Johnson, along with Rock Hill's mayor (J.B. Johnson) and City Council, members of the Chamber of Commerce, Kiwanis, Rotary, and just plain residents.

Every group had a banner with the words "We Want You." The male marchers wore hat bands, and the women and students wore sashes, all with the words, "Rock Hill Wants You."

The planning was done by John T. Roddey, one of Rock Hill's all-time great town boosters. The Springses must have known the Rock Hill group was coming, for they graciously served them sandwiches, punch and tea. When lunch was over the Winthrop students sang a number of songs. Each ended, "Ray, Ray, Rah, Springs and Mrs. Springs." Everyone agreed that Rock Hill had hit on an interesting and unique way to put its best foot forward.

On Nov. 28, The New York Times carried the news that the deal was off. Colonel Springs said he would not sell his mills. He later moved to Charlotte but is buried under the Lancaster plant that he claimed was the largest mill in the world under one roof.

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*Sept 9-2000*

# Towns went all out to lure Leroy Springs