

Jonathan McElwee--Always in Front

Jonathan McElwee (1867-1928) was known as a "progressive merchant," a term that back in the 1880s generally meant a man who sought customers by advertising his goods and displaying them in an attractive manner.

McElwee grew up on a plantation south of Rock Hill in the Mount Holly community. He early decided that he would not be a farmer and went to college for two years in Newton, N. C. His first job was in A. E. Smith & Company, one of Rock Hill's major stores. He stayed with Smith about 3 years before finding a partner (John M. Russell) and setting up a "fancy grocery store" known as J. N. McElwee & Company.

McElwee quickly expanded with another fancy grocery and soon opened up a restaurant that was advertised as the largest restaurant between Richmond and Atlanta. The advertisements certainly sounded as if the McElwee Restaurants was a gourmet's paradise. He had the facilities to serve as many as 500 guests at one seating and had a "fancy soda fountain and ice cream fountain that rivaled any in the nation."

One thing led to another. He employed a German baker and was soon selling bread in all the surrounding towns— Fort Mill, Chester, York, Lancaster, etc. McElwee also furnished bread to rural stores. While Winthrop College installed new equipment in its dining hall, McElwee was able to furnish enough bread and rolls to take care of the student body.

McElwee's grandfather had had a grist mill on Fishing Creek of the old-fashioned kind with a water wheel for power. McElwee installed a modern turbine made of steel which operated for many years. This mill furnished the flour for his bakery enterprise as well as grinding corn for his "rock-ground meal" that he sold to grocery stores. In connection with the flour mill was a cotton gin.

McElwee set up a store in Manchester Cotton Mills' village (later called Industrial Mills). His store on Main Street expanded to include dry goods and shoes. He installed National Cash Registers in his store--the first Rock Hill merchant to do so.

McElwee's "firsts" included the first electric coffee grinder, the first meat slicing machine and a cheese cutter that would cut the exact amount a customer wanted from a quarter-pound on up. (In those days cheese was available only in bulk "wheels" or "hoops" which were wrapped in cheese cloth and packed in wood cases.)

Around 1908 McElwee built the Pastime Theatre, Rock Hill's first movie house. Tickets to the silent movies were 5 or 10 cents depending on the length of the movie. Before long he built the Air Dome, an open-air forerunner of the "drive-in" movies. He also had an opera house that mostly offered vaudeville shows of traveling troops.

McElwee opened Rock Hill's first pool hall (then called a billiard parlor) and its first bowling alley (hiring young agile fellows to set up the pins).

On Main Street where City Club (formerly Belk Department Store) is located, McElwee remodeled the old Gordon House and turned it into a hotel. His own home was located on East Main Street. He let the town have enough of his town lot to extend Oakland Avenue from Main Street to Black Street.

Jonathan McElwee's parents were William Lewis McElwee and Mary Eugenia Sadler Poag McElwee. He married Katherine Russell in 1890 and they had 4 children—John Russell, William Lewis (died at the age of 3), Margaret Nelson and Catherine.

(This sketch of Jonathan's McElwee's unusual business success was written entirely from information given by his daughter, Mrs. Catherine M. Rhea, as a part of the 1951 Rock Hill Centennial Committee's effort to record Rock Hill's history up to that date.)

Louise Pettus