

PETTUS

WILLIAM CHURCH WHITNER

William Church Whitner (1864-1940), a native of Anderson, S. C., married Mary Katherine Roddey of Rock Hill in 1890. Kate Roddey was the daughter of Capt. William Lyle Roddey, one of Rock Hill's leading businessmen. Besides owning a large mercantile company, Roddey was head of the Union National Bank and sat on the board of directors of the Chicago, Cincinnati and Charleston (3C's) Railroad.

Whitner brought with him to Rock Hill a background of experience that fit well with Roddey and Rock Hill interests. A graduate of the University of South Carolina, Whitner began a career as a railroad builder that lasted until 1889 when he came down with a bad case of typhoid fever in Rock Hill. His father, Maj. B. F. Whitner took him back to Anderson to finish his recovery.

While in Anderson, the town asked Whitner to build them a waterworks system and a steam-operated electric plant. Whitner asked for a franchise which was granted. With only \$5,000 to put into the enterprise, Whitner decided that he could deliver electric power cheaper by dropping the idea of using steam and going directly to water power as the source.

Whitner then did what no one else had ever done. He figured out how he could transmit electric voltage over wires to a large number of customers. There were plenty of skeptics. Many people felt that the power would take "French leave," that is to say that the power could not be contained in the wires and would move through the atmosphere uncontrolled. Even General Electric and Westinghouse companies said it wouldn't work. Whitner proved the skeptics to be wrong.

After the Anderson venture, Whitner moved to Rock Hill and built a home on Oakland Avenue for his growing family (eventually five sons and two daughters). He surveyed the Catawba River basin lands in preparation for building another electric power plant.

It has been written that the banks were "very liberal" in their loans to Whitner in 1896 when he built the hydroelectric plant at Portman Shoals. It is most probable that the generous financing came from National Union Bank in Rock Hill, the bank owned by Whitner's father-in-law.

On Jan 1, 1901 the Catawba Power Company was incorporated with a capital of \$100,000. The charter was issued to W. Gill Wylie and his brother Robert H. Wylie, along with W. C. Whitner and his brother F. C. Whitner. (The Catawba Power Co. was the forerunner of Southern Power which was the forerunner of Duke Power.)

The design and engineering plans of the India Hook dam (located between Rock Hill and Fort Mill) were done by Whitner. However, floods and freshets bedeviled the builders and Whitner lost patience. In August 1902 he pulled out of the India Hook project to become chief engineer of Virginia Passenger Power Co. of Richmond, Va.

Several months after Whitner went to Richmond in 1902 he sent for his family but they stayed only a short time. Mrs. Whitner and the children pined for Rock Hill and moved back in a few months. Records show that the children attended the Winthrop Training School. Whitner came back to Rock Hill frequently.

When Whitner surveyed for the India Hook Dam he had bought land along the river for himself and operated a farm. In 1925 he advertised Riverview Farm as having 35 high-grade Guernsey cows and that the dairy "will deliver from our own wagon at your home or place of business."

The man who was the first in the world to deliver electrical power over bare wires also wrote, "In that the Southern Power company lines pass over the farm, a transformer has been installed and the current brought into use in operating the farm machinery. Soon electric milkers will be installed and put into use."