

Western York County: **The way we were, is the way we are.**

For many years I have sought the answer to why the people of Western York County are so different from other areas of the county namely, the eastern and northwestern sections. Though I will be the first to admit that my conclusions are not inclusive, I do think my present theory is pretty close. But first, I must define what section I am calling WYC.

There are several ways to define the area; it can be done using geography, politics or history. Geographically the ridge that runs approximately down the center of the county and creates the watersheds of the Catawba in the east and the Broad to the west, nearly divides the east from the west. For the sake of political representation the western side of the county is divided into two districts, which lines are subject to change with a swing in population. Historically, however WYC is much smaller than either the geographical or political lines. In the late 1880s, historian James L. Strain, defined WYC as it was known before 1850, he wrote that the area as being bordered by the Broad River in the south, Turkey Creek on the east and Kings Creek as it most western border. Roughly speaking, the townships of Bullocks Creek and Broad River along with the towns of Hickory Grove, Sharon, Smyrna and numerous farm communities that have lost their names over time comprises WYC. Now that we have an idea of the area we are dealing with, let's take a closer look at its people.

Urbanization and the flood of newcomers into the county have had little effect on the people of WYC--though it is feared it is only a matter of time. There still remains a sizable number of residents whose roots were planted in these clay hills 200 years ago, and a large number of farms with notable acreage are still in tact. Too, a common cousin unites many of the people into one family. Unlike most residents in urban areas who usually choose to identify themselves through performance, rural York Countians still identify themselves as parts of an extended family; in other words, it is accomplishment versus background. No wonder the two have a hard time communicating and understanding one another.

Because of the lack of influence from outside forces, WYC people still retain a collective memory of the old South and even social remnants of the mother country. To understand the sociological make-up of WYC we have to step across *the pond* to fourteenth century Scotland. Moderns have a very romanticized idea of Scotland that we overlook its true history and visualize the country filled with a happy, noble people in tams and kilts dancing spirited flings. The Scot's true role in history is one of hardships while eking out a living in poor soil, and watching for invading armies and constant internal feuds. During the Four Hundred Years War with England, beginning in 1292, the Lowlanders (ancestors of the American Scotch-Irish) were in constant danger of England's scorched earth policy. Every Chieftain and his vassals had to be in a state of readiness to rise up in arms to keep from being burned out or slaughtered. During the next centuries Scotland barely survived Viking raids, wars with the Britons, Angles and Normans, as well as lethargic churchmen. The Scotch-Irish farmer who migrated to America beginning in the seventeenth century came from one of the poorest, backward and lawless countries in Europe. Yet, to their credit, within 200 years Scotland emerged from something near barbarism to civilization and eventually arrived in America with a strong sense of individualism unencumbered with an aristocracy.

There was little law enforcement in Scotland in the 1500s and what there was, it seldom bothered itself on the local level. Though the country had a parliament it was medieval except for a thin civil veneer derived from its alliance with France. No king since the time of Robert the Bruce (d. 1329) had been able to prevent invasions by the throne of England that was determined to suppress and wipe their religion (Presbyterianism) from the face of the earth. Two hundred years later when the Scots and Scotch-Irish migrated to America, they came with their history of hardships indelibly impressed on their collective memory, seeking a place where they could live in peace and practice their religion without interference from government. The descendants of those immigrants gravitated to the South with the same ideology and looked upon government's interference in private life with a jaundiced eye. It may be said with more assurance that the American Revolution and the Civil War that followed was a war against government interference. The desire for life with limited government is still very much alive in Western York County.

Christianity came to the Scots in the sixth century when St. Columba set up his headquarters on the island of Iona and began mission work among the Picts and Scots. By the sixteenth century the Roman Catholic Church in Scotland languished in a deplorable state, with the general population believing in magic, sorcery, witchcraft, necromancy, ghosts, spirits and demons. Morally the people were bankrupt with cattle stealing, bigamy, and adultery, with rape a common occurrence. John Knox arrived on the coast of Scotland in 1559 with miraculous timing. He easily led the people into Presbyterian thinking, and nowhere in Europe was the shift from Catholicism to Protestantism more peaceful than in Scotland.

As Scotland waded into the sea of Protestantism, nobility found it more advantageous to make an alliance with England, driving the French from their shores. The Reformation sparked such zeal for Christian living among the Lowlanders that when they migrated to Ireland under the "Ulster Plantation" experiment, they greatly influenced the moral character of those on the island.

Presbyterianism was birthed among a practical people who were virtually unaffected by the world at large--the Renaissance as a whole bypassed the Scots. When King James VI of Scotland became King James I of England in 1603, Scotland was still a backward country. Even landowners, lived in houses little better than the peasants and towns amounted to little more than a cluster of hovels with inhabitants living off subsistence agriculture. From their hardships the people lived a practicable lifestyle--no waste or extravagance.

Generally speaking, much of the population of WYC that descend from the Scots and Scots-Irish retain much of the motherland's practicability. Arriving in America these practical people were content with a good, but modest, home, land and cattle of their own.

Farmers and businessmen may acquire a good deal of wealth and in some cases a vast fortune, but a show of wealth was religiously eschewed. Today, the older generations of WYC still retain the old mindset in dealing with wealth.

The Scots and later the Scots-Irish practiced their faith in the same no-fuss fashion. While Knox led the Scots into worship without "aids" he was not the cause of the Church of Scotland to be devoid of icons and religious art. The truth is, Catholic churches in Scotland had no elaborate icons or works of art because it lacked the wealth of European churches. Presbyterianism grew

up without these aids and grew proficient in depending upon nothing but faith. It has been less than fifty years that rural Presbyterian churches in Western York County began to see the introduction of crosses, pulpit reparments, advent wreaths, Christmas trees and observance of near-holy days. Former generations would have considered the like to be “strange fire.”

In regards to pre-Reformation education, Scotland indeed had three universities but they were little more than medieval institutes. After the Reformation and establishment of Presbyterian churches, education in Scotland took a quantum leap and played a major role in the lives of the people. The church worked to place a school in every district in hopes of producing an educated clergy and giving every Christian the ability to “search the Word” for himself. The trend successful wiped out illiteracy and all of Scotland developed an enthusiasm for learning. The Scotch-Irish that flooded into the South Carolina piedmont quickly built their meetinghouse and soon after, developed a school. In WYC settlers established the Four Presbyterian B’s (Beersheba, Bethesda, Bethel and Bullocks Creek) upon their arrival, and their ministers opened schools.

Immigrants are motivated by two factors: (1) dissatisfaction with the homeland and (2), the desire for a better life. Those poor, but optimistic Scots that participated in the migration to Northern Ireland and later to America were so motivated. On the “Ulster Plantation” many acquired land of their own but the migration did little to improve their economics. Yet, tenants and landholders enjoyed a close working relationship that resembled a democracy. The sons of both classes sat on the same bench at school and their fathers served as elders in the church. It was their descendants that came to America a century later with their drive to improve life, live peacefully and free--the same ideology that would later be captured in the United States Constitution that confirms the God-given rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Historians agree that the American Revolution was a Presbyterian war for freedom and liberty, -- how fitting was the announcement to Parliament, “America has run off with the Presbyterian parson!”

Continued next month....

Last month we began looking into what makes the people of Western York County different from other sections of the county. After defining the “historical” WYC as opposed to geographical and political lines. Beginning with Scotland’s history in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, we got a glimpse of what developed the mental desires of the early Scots and Scotch-Irish whose descendents settled in this country. I have a theory that remnants of this culture are still very much alive in Western York County. This time, let’s take a look at WYC’s nearest neighbor, the town of York, and site the differences in the two areas of the county.

While the historic town of York is most often considered a part of Western York County, but as the courthouse town, (like any other courthouse town) it is an entity of its own. When the county

was formed in 1785 and its county seat established, Yorkville immediately became a center for law, attracted professionals, and became a viable market place, associating with people from far and wide. These things alone defined the town differently from the rest of the county. Some who live in WYC and are sensitive to “place“ claim they can feel a difference though they cannot explain it. This phenomenon is not unique to York County alone, but some in Chester County say they can “feel” the difference between the town of Chester and West Chester County.

Indeed, there is a strong family bond between the people of York and WYC, but a slight difference in ideology does exist. The recently published book *Townways of Kent*, a social study of York, sheds some light on York’s uniqueness and how its people differs from their western cousins. The study’s researchers found that York in the 1800s enjoyed a very social relationship with Charleston. (Who of us have not heard York is called the “Charleston of the upcountry?”) The *Yorkville Enquirer* in the mid-1800s bears witness to the fact in articles chronicling visits of the lowcountry elite and other Charlestonians hoping to get away from the stifling summer heat and fevers. General Wade Hampton, at the end of the Civil War was familiar enough with Yorkville that he sent his wife to live with a family to get out of Sherman’s fiery march.

Another witness thrives along the streets of Historic York--the magnificent magnolia. These green giants with their fragrant blooms give a strong testimony of the city’s association with the lowcountry. Their testimony might have eluded our attention had it not been for another book--*Red Hills and Cotton*. In this work, author Ben Robinson tells us that the majority of people living in the piedmont during the mid-1800’s viewed the magnolia with a jaundiced eye, seeing it as a symbol of lowcountry decadence. (Remember rural families views the world in practical terms.) If York’s love of magnolias came from their association with lowcountry people, the lack of them in Western York County illustrates it’s the lack of interaction with lowcountry residents. One might be hard pressed to find a 150 year old magnolia west of Highway 321.

The natural development of towns along with its businessmen heightens the distinction between rural and urban residents. Across the South Carolina piedmont during the 1840s an entrepreneur class rose out of the farmer class as they left subsistence farming and made investments in land and slaves. Consequently there was a surge in the development of towns and the grandsons of immigrant settlers became members of an elite class built of businessmen, entrepreneurs, professionals and planters. Across the state this class became increasingly influential in countywide affairs and rural people wondered if the urban dweller’s interest went beyond the town limits. Gradually wonder grew into suspicion and the gap widened between the different groups. Sensitive to the widening gap, the South Carolina legislature began to pass bills to establish a public school system, in hopes of arresting the developing situation by socializing the rural people--ultimately to gain their support of the leadership by the upper class. These bills had the desired effect of unity because the grandsons of the Scotch-Irish settlers still centered their culture on the local church and school.

The ideological difference between rural residents and urban residents is all quite normal, and there is no reason why we should not recognize the difference and celebrate those differences without prejudice. For an example of this gap we do not have to look too far back in time. It was in the late 1880s when the trunk line of the Chicago, Cincinnati & Charleston was built across the county it spawned the towns of Sharon and Hickory Grove and later Smyrna. As these

villages became viable markets and attracted local enraptures who had the means to change from rural dwellers to town dwellers that in a small way mirrored York's development. Oddly enough those who formerly felt distant from the internal workings of York, now became merchants and leaders in the new villages, and gradually a difference in how one looks at the word developed as it has in other areas of the state. One thing must be said to the village's credit, they were well aware their existence depended on agriculture and the merchants worked diligently with their rural counterparts.

So the emotional distance that might be felt between the east and west sides of the county is a common occurrence that happens when towns appear in and develop out of rural areas. In the case of Western York County however; I believe there is something else that makes us unique. The difference is that there remains among the people a living and healthy remnant of their distant heritage.

Many retain their ancestor's earthiness and practical nature, and though many have acquired much of what the world has to offer, they remain aloof of showy materialism. Calvinism motivated the people to be content in whatever situation one finds one's self and to be content with a comfortable home and resist any temptation to flaunt their wealth. WYC still retains its sense of community--not in the sense of organization--but as a people who feel they belong together. This sense involves blood and attitude--one is born into it and forms a natural relationship. Because the people have this sense of community, Western York County is still one of those places where a man's (and woman's) word is good as gold and where a handshake is equivalent to a signed contract.

Times are a-changing. If the county population continues to climb and the economy rebounds we will see this "Southern Eden" disappear. In short, what has helped Western York County to retain so much of its heritage is that it has escaped urban development due to its location that provided isolation and insulation from rapid growth. That however is about to change. The development of Highway 5 as a corridor between I-85 and I-77 is the bold handwriting on the land. The change Western York County will see through the completion of this project will be on a much larger scale than that of the coming of the 3C's railway in the 1880s; but for now we can continue to enjoy the benefits of rural life, like peace and quiet and being able to see the stars at night.