

## INDIA HOOK SHOAL

by Louise Pettus

At six o'clock in the morning on March 30, 1904 the first electricity generated on the Catawba River flowed from its source at India Hook shoals to the Victoria Cotton Mill in Rock Hill.

It was much cheaper to use the power of the river than it was to buy coal to generate steam power. Very quickly, every cotton mill in the area converted to electricity. Most households also installed electricity, if for no more than the "lights."

Besides receiving the first Catawba river generated electricity, Rock Hill and York County had a special interest in the men who made it possible. William Church Whitner was the engineer and designer of the plant at India Hook. Dr. Gill Wylie, a native of Chester and frequent visitor to Rock Hill was the major financier of the enterprise. Wylie became the chief stockholder and president of the Catawba Power Company. Then there was William States Lee, the brilliant engineer, whose family had once lived near Van Wyck in Lancaster County. Each of these three men contributed to the construction of the India Hook facility.

William C. Whitner, a native of Anderson, S.C. was a graduate in engineering from the University of South Carolina. His first work was in railroad engineering but a severe case of typhoid fever forced him into a long convalescence in his father's home. While there the town of Anderson asked him to build a water works systems and an electric plant. In 1890 he completed a steam-driven electric plant. It turned out to be too expensive.

Whitner's problem-solving mind soon conceived the idea of generating the electricity using turbulent river water and then delivering the power by wire to its source. For advice he went to New York to see Nicholas Tesla, the great Serbian scientist who had perfected the alternating current motor.

Whitner returned to Anderson and leased High Shoals in 1894. Both Westinghouse and General Electric had refused to wind a motor for such high voltage but Whitner proved Tesla to be correct. .Soon, Anderson was christened "The Electric City."

Dr. Gill Wylie, like Whitner, was trained as an engineer at South Carolina College but had been persuaded by Dr. J. Marion Sims, a Lancaster native, to take up medicine instead. Dr. Sims, the "Father of Gynecology," had set up two New York hospitals, Woman's Hospital and Bellevue Hospital which had a medical college attached to it. After Wylie graduated from Bellevue, Sims gave him the task of setting up a model training school for nurses.

Wylie was the first doctor to train women as operating room nurses. Periodically he returned to his home area to recruit nurses. Doctors Fennell, Strait, Gaston, Lyle, and others in this area were Wylie's best source for recommendations. When in Rock Hill, Wylie, a very persuasive speaker, often gave lectures on public health. He was a one-man crusader for home screens, covered wells, and the abandonment of backyard privies.

On one of his Rock Hill missions, Wylie met William C. Whitner. Whitner had married Katherine Roddey, daughter of Capt. W. L. Roddey, one of Rock Hill's most well-to-do citizens. Whitner had an option on the old Carothers Mill property at Indian Hook shoals. Wylie's interest in engineering revived and the plans were laid for the Indian Hood shoals dam.

Whitner's design was sound but the river was extremely difficult to tame. Excessive rains, mud, and washouts ran up construction costs. Whitner pulled out of the venture but Wylie and his brother, Dr. Robert Wylie, also a New York doctor, stuck with it in the hope they could sell for a profit.

Leaving William States Lee in charge of the India Hook plant, Wylie returned to his New York practice. One day a patient with a sore foot listened to Wylie's tale of the potential of electric power in the Catawba River. The patient was James Buchanan Duke, the tobacco tycoon. The rest is history.

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