

# South Carolina's Story

The making of a state

By Ron Chepesiuk and Louise Pettus  
of the Winthrop College faculty



May 19, 1983 - YORKVILLE ENQUIRER

You're never too old to leave your mark upon the world. Take a look at the life of Mary Frayser.

She was 44 years old when she moved to South Carolina, but by the time of her retirement from public life at the age of 78 she had left a legacy of public service to the state that few South Carolinians in the 20th century can match.

You name it; she was involved with it—social work, teaching, research, women's rights, home economics, church work, civic improvement, professional association organizing and even civil rights.

Frayser came to the Palmetto State in 1912 at the request of Winthrop President David Bancroft Johnson, who appointed her state agent for rural and mill village community improvement.

But before moving, she had left her mark on her native state of Virginia. She was one of three who organized the first teachers' association in Richmond. In 1908 Frayser chaired the committee of the Virginia State Teachers Association that secured passage of a law to give public school teachers in Virginia a pension.

In her job as state agent, Frayser took up the cause of poverty-stricken mill workers and rural tenants, working hard to improve educational oppor-

tunities, living conditions and recreational facilities.

She finagled interviews with the industrial barons of South Carolina, trying to convince them that if workers were adequately fed and well-treated they would be better workers.

She worked tirelessly to get them to finance projects. Operating in a rural setting, she often walked many miles from one mill to another.

One of her early projects shows her style. She wanted to organize a booth at the State Fair in Columbia in 1912 to inform the public about the death rate of infants and small children in South Carolina. She planned to bring in a doctor and a nurse to examine babies right on the spot.

State Fair officials, in the reply to her letter asking for permission, said that because of the large number of livestock entries, there would be no room for such an exhibit.

Years later, she told what she did: "I just sat down and wrote them back, saying that the hundreds of club women in the state were a whole lot more interested in having a state full of healthy babies than healthy pigs. I still have the nice letter I received, telling me that we could have our spot at the Fair."

In 1926 she resigned her position to work for the South Carolina Experimental Station, which

was co-sponsored by Clemson University and Winthrop College. Frayser did much the same thing as she did in her former position: doing social work and trying to improve community life in the mill villages of the state.

Soon after arriving in the Palmetto area, she became involved in a number of firsts: the first conference on mental health in South Carolina (1913); the first institute for club women in the United States, which was held at Winthrop (1916)—the first organization of the South Carolina anti-tuberculosis association (1917).

Perhaps Mary Frayser's most important contribution lay in her involvement with the public library movement in South Carolina. She referred to public libraries as people's universities and was fond of saying, "A reading people is a leading people. Let us see to it that the reading needs of every resident of the state are met."

She lobbied the General Assembly for money to support libraries, backing up her arguments with numerous facts and figures to show how inadequate state support was. Frayser was the catalyst in getting the first state appropriation from the Legislature in 1943.

Frayser managed to be a member and officer of practically every important women's organization in South Carolina. She helped to organize the South Carolina Council for the Common Good, was a charter member of the American Association of University Women, which was organized in 1925, and chaired several different committees of the South Carolina Federation of Women's Clubs.

Other organizations that made use of her talents included the South Carolina Federation of Business and Professional Women, the South Carolina Interracial Relations Committee, the South Carolina Congress of Parents and Teachers, and the South Carolina Home Economics Association.

Throughout her long life, Mary Frayser championed women's rights. She was a prime mover in getting the South Carolina White House Conference organized in 1945. The purpose of the conference was to promote greater participation of qualified women in public affairs.

In 1947 she wrote, "It is a moral obligation that the women we recommend be well-qualified. Some men and women question the participation of women in public affairs. The women appointed or