

COMMENTARY

Picnic in Filbert served up politics

Thousands would gather at railway spot

From 1901 to 1921, everybody in York County and all the politicians in the state were aware of the Filbert picnic held every summer, usually in the first week of August.

Filbert was a small spot on the Carolina and Northwestern Railway about 5 miles north of Yorkville, the county seat. Thousands of people came to the picnic (the record was said to be 15,000) to hear political luminaries, some of them national figures.

In the first five years, the Filbert picnic was a local affair that featured, as James Grist of York described it, "a bountiful supply of corn liquor and several knock-down, drag-out fights." That changed when some local citizens in 1906 invited Sen. Benjamin R. "Pitchfork Ben" Tillman to debate J.S. Brice, York County's state senator, on the issue of South Carolina's state dispensary system.

The state dispensary system was Tillman's "baby," created when Tillman was governor. In an effort to ban "rot-gut whiskey" in South Carolina, Tillman had persuaded the legislature to back a state-



Nearby history

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owned, state-regulated dispensary that manufactured and bottled whiskey sold in state manufactured bottles with the Palmetto tree molded in the glass. The state also owned the stores that sold their product. The Yorkville Enquirer had stirred up a great deal of York County sentiment against the system.

The "fire flew" at the Tillman-Brice debate. For an hour and a half, Tillman was at the top of his form. "The crowd was with him," the newspaper reported. "They whooped and hollered and shouted and sweated and many of them loaded up on the fiery red liquor that could be obtained from any of several of the 'great moral institutions' that were then located in the county of York."

The 1906 debate became the model for those that followed. Nothing was too outrageous for the people who expected politics in general to supply them with

"interest, pleasure and entertainment." Others came to the picnic in the spirit of reunion with old friends and some came just to see and be seen. And there was always the famed Tirzah band to entertain the crowd.

In 1913 The Observer announced that S.C. Gov. Cole L. Blease and U.S. Rep. George Rembert would be present to stand "at the highest altar of a politics-worshiping people." Four thousand people, including a number of North Carolinians, enjoyed the big picnic dinner before the speaking. The star speaker always spoke last, in order to hold the crowd to the end. By the time they got to "Coley" Blease, a rabble-rouser if there ever was one, the storm clouds threatened to break any minute. Blease spoke only five minutes before the rainstorm drowned him out.

In 1917 women's suffrage was a major national issue. The Filbert picnic organizers invited Congresswoman Jeanette Rankin to be the main speaker, hoping she would speak on the controversial topic. At the last minute, to the great disappointment of many, Rankin wired that she couldn't come.

Former governor Blease was back in 1921, along with Congressman W.F. Stevenson. There was an

added feature that year. Charlotte's new radio station, WBT, sent down the Raners Quartet to entertain the crowd. The introduction of other features to what had once been politics-only entertainment indicates that the postwar world was somewhat different. Interest in politics seemed to be diminishing.

By the early 1920s the number of political speakers dropped so that only the picnic feature (and probably the band) was kept. Fried chicken, soup, cakes and pies attracted mostly the local folks. Gone was the excitement of the train unloading luminaries from Washington, Columbia and other distant points.

In 1929, folks talked of reviving the old-time stump speakings, but the idea never caught on. Some said radio had killed the necessity of politicians to meet the public face to face. Now they could "hide" behind a microphone that didn't allow them to get worked up the way politicians had when they "stumped" at places like Filbert and Tirzah (another famous York County politician's rallying ground).

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Louise Pettus is a retired history professor from Winthrop University. Her column appears Saturdays.