

Cherry Road's path to distinction

Thoroughfare named for J.M. Cherry, who became 'Alfalfa King'

Cherry Road, Rock Hill's main thoroughfare, is said to be the first concrete road in South Carolina. Before the use of cement, the best roads were compacted stone and tar or asphalt. Only the largest towns were likely to have such roads. The best country roads were a clay-sand composite.

Cherry Road held another distinction that is not well known. It was the third paving project in the United States to be assisted by federal funds. The intention was to build a model road that would encourage states and counties to build modern roads. The purpose was twofold: to implement the federal law requiring rural free delivery of U.S. mail and to serve increasing automobile traffic of the post-World War I era.

There was no road other than a farm wagon road in the area of Cherry Road when the 1915 flood washed out the bridge above the present U. S. 21 bridge. James Milton Cherry, who owned about 1,500 acres between Winthrop College and the river, sold the town of Rock Hill a 10-foot right-of-way through his farm along with two acres at the river for a pump station.

The road was completed before the bridge that would link Rock Hill to the Fort Mill side of the river. The first three miles paved became a drag-racing strip.

NEAR BY HISTORY

Louise Pettus



Cherry Road opened only a short time before Cherry's death in 1920. If Cherry had been asked to cite his major accomplishment, Cherry Road probably would have been far down his list. High on his list undoubtedly would have been his experimentation with the growing of alfalfa.

J.M. Cherry was a delegate to the Democratic National Convention in Denver in the summer of 1908. One of the things that impressed him most was seeing large fields of high-grade alfalfa. Alfalfa, called by some "green manure," had an almost magical capability of transforming red clay land worn out by cotton and corn into highly productive soil.

Alfalfa had been grown in the state in the pre-Civil War years and was increasingly being grown over the Eastern United States when Cherry made his trip West. How then did Cherry come to soon gain the nickname "Alfalfa King" and his fields attract national attention?

A set of lucky circumstances contributed to Cherry's fame. The fields were within sight of Winthrop College and joined the college farm, which already had reaped national publicity.

Winthrop's first president, David Bancroft Johnson, had gotten in on the ground floor with the whole home demonstration movement. The head of home demonstration work in the South was Bradford Knapp, son of Johnson's old friend, Seaman Knapp. The assistant head of demonstration work was O.B. Martin, former governor of South Carolina and former trustee of the college.

They boosted Winthrop College at every opportunity.

Whenever a touring group looked at the college farm or the model dairy or examined Winthrop's agricultural education curriculum (also a model), Cherry's alfalfa was likely to get media coverage as well.

Cherry's fortune had been made in banking and real estate and in ground-floor involvement in the first Rock Hill telephone and electric companies. While Cherry was eager for his neighbors to emulate his success in reclaiming the soil, few farmers had the financial assets to allow them to invest in new types of farm equipment and to wait four or five years for the "green manure" treatment to work.

This column originally appeared Dec. 22, 1985. Louise Pettus is a retired Winthrop University history professor. Her column appears Sundays.