

1899: Simple but hard lives

Area residents celebrated New Year's with quiet rejoicing

Imagine we're in a time warp that allows us to visit York, Lancaster and Chester counties as they were 100 years ago. What would we find?

That life had a different rhythm. Most people got up at dawn and went to bed early. The majority lived on farms and had animals to look after. Cotton was the main crop, but the farmer grew as much as 90 percent of his foodstuffs.

Marriages lasted longer, people lived a shorter time and they had little education.

For them, New Year's Eve at the start of this century was welcomed with a solemn prayer instead of drink and song.

Louise Pettus



NEARBY HISTORY

It was a time when telephone service cost \$1 a month, when bicyclists had to ring gongs to alert pedestrians, when a dog tax paid for rural schools.

In the towns, more people worked in cotton mills than anywhere else. The oldest mill around was the Rock Hill Cotton Mill, built in 1880. By 1899, all of the towns in this area – Rock Hill, Fort Mill, Lancaster and Chester – had at least one mill, and Rock Hill had a half-dozen.

In all of South Carolina, around 120 cotton mills were constructed in the boom years of 1895-1900 alone. They would be the factories and the industry that would dominate the economy for decades and shape the development of local communities.

Around each mill were clus-

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Photo courtesy of LOUISE PETTUS

The roads and streets were made of dirt at the turn of the century. Farmers bring cotton bales from the gin to Main Street in Lancaster to be sold to the mill.

"If you talk to a lot of people who are progressive, who want South Carolina to move forward, they're going to say nobody should be wearing a mask anyway," he said. "This highlights the issue that the Klan is out there. It highlights the issue of hate crimes. And it ties in with the flag."

The law exempts holiday costumes, theater productions, masquerade balls, gas masks in a civil defense drill or an emergency and workers who wear masks for safety.

South Carolina's mask law is similar to New York's, which drew attention when Mayor Rudolph Giuliani tried to deny the Klan a rally permit but was overruled. The city then argued that under an obscure 1845 law, Klan members could not gather if they wore hoods that covered their faces.

A lower court said the law was illegal, but a federal appeals court said the city was enforcing a law and not discriminating against the group's message. The Klan, however, has won legal victories over anti-mask statutes in Indiana and Pennsylvania towns.

Brown's bill also would eliminate penalties for burning a cross,

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tered small houses built by the mill owners and rented at modest rates. Often there was a company store where weekly accounts were deducted from the workers' pay.

The towns grew in population (white population, that is; there were few, if any, black mill workers). The rapid increase in population stimulated building. New stores went up. A 12-year-old girl in a factory weave room could expect to earn more money in a year than her tenant-farmer father. Ordinary farm labor wages were only about one-third the pay of factory workers.

New Year's Day had a special meaning to tenant farmers and sharecroppers. It was the day contracts were made for the next year. Traditionally, the farm owner and his hired operatives, who were mostly black, would then settle the books.

The tenant farmer, who rented land from an owner to work, hoped to be able to pay up. The sharecropper – a tenant farmer who gave a share of his crops in lieu of rent – was furnished tools, seed, fertilizer and often living expenses. For many tenants who got into heavy debt, it was time to move.

There were no trucks (or automobiles, either) to move the few belongings of a tenant farmer. His new landlord would send a mule-drawn wagon to fetch whatever the tenant had.

Most farm families couldn't survive unless they grew their own corn, bacon, flour, oats, and cane for molasses in addition to a large garden.

Local businesses tried to gain popularity by offering prizes to farmers. Always the first bale of cotton ginned in the county would warrant a money prize. So would the fattest hog and the cow that gave the most milk.

Prisons meant better roads

The roads were terrible – not a paved one in the three counties. Prisoners did the road work. Each county had a chain gang, often carted from site to site in a horse-drawn cage with iron bars. Chester County, which had the largest and best-run chain gang, also had the

reputation of having the best roads.

Typically, more than a quarter of a county's budget was spent on road and bridge repair. There were no bridges over the Catawba or Broad rivers, only ferries. Fort Mill residents constantly complained that if they had to go to the courthouse, it took two days to get anything accomplished.

If the Catawba River was up, the only way to cross was to walk a narrow plank along the tracks on the railroad trestle that connected Fort Mill to Rock Hill.

But it was just as bad to go from Yorkville to Charlotte. Where Buster Boyd Bridge is now (S.C. 49), there was a ferry. In November 1899, Mecklenburg County offered to build a bridge to replace the ferry because it wanted Yorkville trade. Yorkville (it was not called York until 1916) responded to Mecklenburg, "Go ahead, we will get more trade from Mecklenburg than you will get from us." (It was 1923 before a bridge was built.)

Bicycling was popular in the towns. Lancaster had a town ordinance that required the bicyclists to ring a gong to let pedestrians know they were coming. Horses weren't too happy about this. Every now and then, a nervous horse would panic and break up a wagon or buggy.

Rail travel, like today's air travel, was the quickest and easiest way to get anywhere. Almost every community had a depot that handled passengers and freight. Even Winthrop College had its own stop on the back of campus with special cars added twice a year when the college opened and closed. The Winthrop student enrollment in 1900 topped 500 for the first time.

All the towns had telephone companies, but it would be 20 or 30 years before phone service reached the rural areas. In 1899, telephones in homes cost \$1 a month and in businesses \$2 a month.

Going to the dogs

Each town had a high school, either public or private, but there was not a single rural high school in the three counties. A

few well-to-do farmers boarded their children in town just so they could have the benefits of a high school. Elementary schools, almost all with only one or two teachers, were scattered around the rural landscape. There were no school buses. These "field schools" – school buildings sitting on worn-out cotton fields – were likely to be terribly underfunded.

In fact, York County's chief source of money to run the rural schools was a dog tax. Every dog owner had to tag his dogs and pay a tax of \$1.25 each.

There was no compulsory attendance law. White children in mill villages usually had a school available, but their parents had the choice of sending them to school or signing them up to work in the mill. The factories would put children as young as 5 to work in the spinning department. If the mill was large enough, it might have a separate mill school.

For black children, schooling was hard to come by. The teachers often had no more than an elementary education. Yet despite a lack of funding, by 1900 black illiteracy had declined to about 53 percent from 78.5 percent 20 years before. The best schooling for blacks was at private academies, financed by Northern philanthropists or missionaries.

Party like it's 1899

Doctors made house calls. The major fatal diseases were diphtheria, typhoid fever and pneumonia. Smallpox was the most feared (in Rock Hill people with smallpox were put in a town-owned "pest house").

Entertainment? Mainly it was found in visiting kinfolk, hunting, fishing, church revivals, stump meetings and picnicking. For the well-to-do, there were railway excursions to large cities along the East Coast or to mountain resorts in the summer (homes were not air-conditioned.)

And how did people celebrate New Year's Eve, 1899?

Some folks accepted the invitation of the Methodist churches to join their congregations in their customary year-end service. And in Rock Hill there were at least two weddings in which the couples said their "I do's" at the stroke of midnight.

A number of people, like their ancestors, sat up far past their bedtime to "watch the old year out and see the new year in." No champagne, no confetti, no cheering. It was a solemn occasion in which people said a prayer and resolved to better themselves in the coming year.

Farm people, who were the majority, probably slept through it and found nothing remarkable about the coming of a new century.



Photo courtesy of LOUISE PETTUS

Virginia McMurray sits with 40 of her pupils at Unity School in Lancaster, S.C., circa 1901.