

Col. Murray Mack-Soldier & Educator

Francis Murray Mack (1887-1979), a Fort Mill native, descended from a large number of Presbyterian ministers and educators on both his paternal and maternal lines.

Mack was "sickly" as a boy and didn't start school until he was 8. When he was 14 he was sent to a preparatory school in Georgia. His older sister was at nearby Agnes Scott planning to become a teacher. With his sister's help he mastered French, Latin and math to the extent that at both Davidson College and Cornell University he was the highest ranking student in those subjects. To the end of his life, Mack maintained that he was not as bright as his classmates, he just worked harder.

After college he came home to work at the Fort Mill Manufacturing Company (the first Springs Industries plant). Like all manager trainees he worked in various departments--weaving, spinning, shipping and dye (which he hated).

Around 1910 Mack joined the Fort Mill National Guard. In 1914 the Guard was sent to the Mexican border. Over 60 years later he recalled a week's hike from the Rio Grande to Las Cruces, N. M. He said the major thing his company learned was how to care for their feet and clothes.

Fred Nims was the company's song leader and no matter how tired he kept them singing. Later, when the Fort Mill National Guard under Col. Thomas Spratt entered World War I as part of the famed Old Hickory Division they became known as "the singing company." And other companies took it up and it was soon "the singing battalion," and before long marching to song became a characteristic of the whole regiment.

Mack sang a verse from one of their favorite songs:

"Keep your head down, Jerry Boy,

"We will catch the Kaiser by the tail,

"Ride him home on a rail.

"For we're from Carolina--Car-o-li-na!

When Mack was in basic training at Camp Jackson in Columbia he competed for the rank of lieutenant. Most of the other candidates were graduates of military schools but Mack had committed the manual to memory and had practiced all the drill orders using small sticks to represent the various officer levels. He came in 4th. However there was one thing he knew nothing about--use of the saber. Mack recalled, "Tom Spratt told me I did well except that I handled the saber as if it were a pitchfork." Mack was made 2nd lieutenant.

Mack had been on Cornell's wrestling squad and had had lessons in boxing. He had also studied jujitsu. He was over 80 to 90 men, many of them gifted athletes. He was expected to drill the men but figured that was for open fields and not very helpful in the trenches. Instead, Mack taught his men the athletic skills he knew. He feared he would be court-martialed for disobeying orders. And then, unexpectedly, he was appointed first lieutenant and ordered to train the

men for close combat. He said he fell back on things that he learned as a Boy Scout troop leader and they worked.

Mack and his men had a number of narrow escapes. He was gassed. This made him so nauseated that he had to get out of a convoy truck and vomit. He got back in with a splitting headache. Another soldier was in his seat. He told Mack to sit at his feet and he would rub Mack's head to relieve the headache. A shell struck and Mack was covered with blood. The soldier sitting in Mack's old seat had been killed instantly.

From 1921 to 1938, Colonel Mack was Fort Mill Superintendent of Schools. He was in World War II and in 1946-47 was military governor of Taegu, Korea, which had a population of more than 300,000.

Mack came back to Fort Mill in 1948 and took up farming with great enthusiasm (he had studied agriculture at Cornell). This occupied him until 1976 when he retired because of health problems.

Louise Pettus, published Feb 27, 1999 in the York supplement to the Charlotte Observer.