

Immigrants didn't last in mills

Early one Sunday morning in November 1906, the first immigrant ship since before the Civil War glided into Charleston harbor. The harbor had to be dredged for the occasion.

On board were 476 passengers coming at the special invitation of the state of South Carolina. Their return tickets to Bremen, Germany, were guaranteed if the state failed to please them.

Normally the immigrant, or his family and friends, paid the passage to America. A total of 15,000 immigrants a day were pouring into Ellis Island and other more northerly ports. The state of South Carolina was paying the immigrants to come. Why?

Part of the answer lies in S.C.'s tentative turn-of-the-century steps toward industrialization. What was needed was a different type of labor system. Mill and shopowners were convinced a new labor system could not be built unless they had a different sort of worker. They were crying for highly-skilled workers who were already adapted to industry's expectations.

Belgian authorities, who normally had barred immigration agents and steamship lines from soliciting their industries, had been persuaded to let skilled weavers leave.

The recruitment had been done by E.J. Watson, an impressively optimistic journalist and Chamber of Commerce promoter who had become head of the S.C. Immigration Bureau, an agency housed in the Department of Agriculture and Industry. With Watson was R. Beverley Herbert, then a young college student, who was later to become a distinguished Columbia lawyer.

Waiting on shore were members of the Cotton Manufacturer's Association who had largely financed the voyage and who expected the workers to meet their needs. Beside the mill owners, there was a large number of members of Baptist Young People with 1,000 Bibles, printed in English, for the newcomers. More ominously for Watson, there was the U.S. Commissioner of Labor, Frank Sargent, with a "corps of inspectors, interpreters and clerks" who were suspicious of the whole enterprise.

E.J. Watson already had as much

South Carolina's

Story



RON CHEPESIUK

LOUISE PETTUS

of Winthrop College faculty

as he could handle. He had left Bremen with 107 single men and 31 single women. Now he had 29 couples who wished to marry. He married them on their day of embarkation.

And then there was the Charleston agent who had the nearly impossible task of getting the railroads to cooperate with readying a return cargo that was part of the exchange. The shipping line would not accept less than 10,000 bales of cotton, and cotton it had to be, for South Carolina had no other crop of such bulk. The agent had secured 10,349 bales of cotton, to Watson's relief, along with "five barrels of flour, one barrel of grits (for Southern expatriates?), one crate hams, one bag coffee..."

Most of the immigrants were put on trains by nightfall bound for cotton mill towns. They went to Anderson, Columbia, Darlington, Fort Mill, Greenville, Hartsville, Lanas-

ter and Lockhart, to name a few. No one knew what to do with the felt manufacturers, the chemists and the copper workers who were among the immigrants.

What the state really needed that fall was to have its cotton picked. Sixty percent of the crop was lying in the fields for want of labor.

Within six weeks, 200 of the Wittekind passengers had drifted back to Charleston and 24 had returned to Europe, 10 of them on the return sailing.

Twice E.J. Watson was taken to court charged with violating U.S. laws regarding payment of immigrant passage. Cynics sniffed that more northerly agencies, especially the railroads spanning the north-central states, had offered special inducements over the years without any special interest being shown by the U.S. Commerce and Labor Department.

They cited the maps printed in native tongues with the Southern part of the U.S. labeled "Malaria! Beware!" which were distributed by northern railroad companies all over Europe. Watson was freed on a technicality and the "selective immigration case" was used as the basis of passing new laws by the U.S. Congress.

Watson went back to Europe for a second load of immigrants the following year. He came back with 121 Austrians, a few Hungarians, and 15 Belgians. The railroads refused to ship a single bale of cotton from Charleston, and the ship had to finish loading in Baltimore. A year later the state of South Carolina abolished its immigration bureau.

EVENING HERALD - 19 DEC 1980

They said it

"There is laziness, too much affluence ... you are making too many concessions (to the Soviets) and one day it will be too late." — Lech Walesa, independent Polish labor leader, criticizing Western society and its values.

"I don't hold a grudge, I'll get even." — Ed Reinhart, Honolulu real estate man, when he found his Buick auto dangling 17 stories high in the air from a crane — a birthday joke from his buddies.