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A Reminiscence of Pittsboro

Thomas Letson Nooe*

PROLOGUE

Some time around the first or middle of the 1850s there was in the town of Lexington, North Carolina, a young fellow named Bennet Nooe. Also, in the same town was a likely-looking young lady named Mary Watson. These two young people, living not so far apart, maybe going to the same school, got to going together and finally fell in love and married. From this union were born John (Uncle John), Elizabeth (Aunt Lizzie), Bennet (Father, Dec. 31, 1859), Sarah (Aunt Sack), Mary (Aunt Mayne), and Fred (Unc).

At about the same time in history there was in Chester, South Carolina, another upstanding and likely young man named Henry Rothrock. And, in Chester also, there was a lovely young auburn-haired lady named Charlotte Letson, who was having a ball breaking a few hearts among the young men of the town. Finally, Henry persuaded Miss Charlotte to stop causing so much misery in the young male population of the town and settle it all by becoming Mrs. Rothrock. So in Chester there was another big wedding, and to this happy couple were born Minnie, Henry, Fannie (Mama, June 2, 1860), and Lula.

Sometime around the late 1870s or early 1880s, Mr. Rothrock decided that he could better provide for his family if he would move to Lexington, North Carolina. So after looking over the area for a home, he bought a nice two-story white house with green blinds and a big, wide veranda. The beautiful big front yard with circular drive was rife with cedar trees, so naturally the home was called "The Cedars."

Well, when Ben Nooe saw the beautiful auburn-haired Fannie Rothrock, that was it, and after a time Ben convinced her that he just could not live without her and in March 1884 they were married.

Now, Ben was an industrious young man and was

making a good thing out of furnishing dogwood and persimmon logs for the manufacture of shuttle blocks for the textile industry's weaving and loom machinery. As the industry expanded, that type of wood was becoming sparse in the Lexington area and Ben was advised to try his luck east in Randolph County. After looking over the area around Asheboro, some well-wisher friend told him that he had heard that Chatham County was just covered in dogwood. So Ben went on east and found that this story was true, and shortly thereafter Ben and Fanny gathered up their belongings and moved to Pittsboro and into a house on a hill at the north edge of the town, in later years known as the Eubanks house. I believe that is where Bennet, their firstborn, put in his appearance, and maybe the second son, Henry, and possibly the third, Louis.

Within a time the textile industry discovered that metal shuttles were cheaper than wood, due to their longer life. So Ben started a lumber manufacturing business. Pines being plentiful, he soon developed a chain of sawmills around the area and a planer mill in Pittsboro.

This house and its surroundings were really a showplace for those times.

And, too, built a new home on the eastern edge of Pittsboro. Now this house and its surroundings were really a showplace for those times. Three stories high, it had fifteen rooms and three baths.* The first floor had a living room, a parlor, and off the parlor, with an arch connecting them, was a library—shelves to the ceiling and all shelves full—a dining room, a master bedroom, a nursery, and a sunroom, as well as a kitchen, which was connected to the house by a closed-in porch, and a pantry. The main hall was between the parlor and dining room on the west and the living room and nursery on the east. The stairway was at the rear of this hall, leading to the second and third floors. The master bedroom and the sunroom were across the small hall from the living room and

*See editor's notes at end of article.

nursery. There was a private bath off the master bedroom and another off the nursery. The third bath was off the stair landing, over the rear of the downstairs hall. All the sleeping rooms had large closets; the nursery had two. There were four large bedrooms on the second floor and the third floor had three, to which the younger boys were shunted if there happened to be an overflow of company.

The house was set some 300 yards from the street and the drive was straight toward the front door for the first hundred yards and then branched both ways to make a hundred-and-fifty-yard-diameter circle. A graveled walkway continued on north from the beginning of the circle to the end of the straight section of the drive to the conjunction of the two arcs of the circle, where a paling fence separated the drive from the front yard of the house.

At the halfway point along this walkway was built a summer house or gazebo, eight-sided with diagonal lattice work on studs with arched openings on the north, south, east, and west sides. Tennis courts were built on the east and west sides of the summer house, within the circular drive.

The walkway continued north from the circular drive and on to the house steps; a three-foot-high yard fence separated the circular drive from the yard. All along the driveway from the street and all around the circular drive were planted Lombardy poplars. Thus the home place was known as "The Poplars."

It was in this place that the little girls were born: Frances, named of course for Mama and called locally Fanny and by the family Sister, and Mary, named for Grandma Nooe. Then came Benjamin, such a fine specimen of young manhood that Father spoke of him as a buster, hence the nickname Bus that followed him all his life. Of course, Mama and all the dignified ladies and preachers called him D.B., but to the world at large he was "Bus."

And last but not least, came me, Thomas Letson, named for one of Mama's uncles, who by the way migrated to Texas about that time, probably chagrined at having such a brat named for him. So much for bornings, back to the real estate.

A lane along the west side of the yard fence led to the back of the house and to the barn, which was another hundred yards back of the house. There was a one-and-a-half-acre garden west of the lane, which had a large hickory nut tree, four or five feet in diameter in the southwest corner, just right for small boys to climb—and get licked if caught. There was also a huge scuppernong arbor in this same area where many late summer hours were spent. In the northeast corner of the garden enclosure was a house for the cook and her family to live and behind this house were the fig trees. On south of the garden was

a five-acre apple and peach orchard where more tummy aches were spawned. The lane went on south, separating the lawn area from the orchard and leading to the planer mill and lumberyard, and father's office.

The north fence of the garden continued west to the Mitt Williams line and thence north along the Williams and Brewer lines to where the Brewer line turned east along our north line and on, back of the barn, to the corner where our common line turned south to the street, the old Raleigh road.

This barn had sixteen stalls, a feed room, a harness room, and over its center section, a loft. There were sheds on the east side for buggies and carriages and wagons, and on the west side for cows and hog pens. Eight of the stalls were for the mules for the lumber wagons to haul lumber from the outlying sawmills to the planer mill. The others were for the buggy and carriage and saddle horses and for visitors' horses to be cared for.

So, with apples and peaches and figs and scuppernongs and hickory nuts, and with horses to ride and drive—when the boy was big enough to handle them—a small boy was in clover.

CHAPTER ONE: THE FIRST DECADE

... On a lovely spring afternoon, Fanny and Mary decided it would be fun to take little brother to school with them. The school was known as the Pittsboro School Academy and was situated just south of the old Jackson home on the Moncure road and across the road from the Methodist church and cemetery.*

Little Tommy let loose with a whistle blast

The little girls sat T.L. down at their desk with a geography book to look at while they were reciting at the front of the room. One of the pictures in the book that took little Tommy's eye was that of a train, and when he saw it he let loose with a whistle blast, "Whoo, Whoo, Whoeee," at the top of his lungs. This demoralized the whole room, so that the afternoon classes were suspended and the teacher, Mrs. Mattie Thompson, told Fanny and Mary to "take that child home and don't bring him back until he is old enough to start school on his own."

... On the first day of September 1905, I having become old enough to enter school on my own . . . A new schoolhouse had been constructed on a lot in front of the Eubanks house. 'Twas a monstrous two-story white building that had rooms enough to accommodate all grades, with an auditorium and stage, music room, library, and everything.

'Twas an awesome building for a first-grade kid to enter. The teacher of the primary grades had one large room with a big wood stove to heat it, five lanes

of double desks, six desks to each lane—that's sixty kids, poor woman. The desks at the back end of each lane had a roughly-made bench for the seat; the others had finished seats, attached. Now, the outside back corner desk of the room had a longer rough bench than the others, and Jack Lanus, Andrew Signor, and I selected that corner for our own. There was plenty of shelf space in those desks for three little boys to put our books, and the bench was long enough for the three of us, but we always fought to get the seat next to the wall. Why? Well, there was a very good reason. The primary teacher, Mrs. Mary Barber, was healthy and had a good right arm, so when the murmur of the kids got too loud she made a trip down each aisle, swinging a good-sized switch on each exposed back. Two swings to the desk until she got to Andrew, Jack, and me; then she swung three times. Well, the boy next to her got his lick, and the middle boy got his, and by that time the boy next to the wall had crouched down in the aisle and the middle boy absorbed the third lick. Hence the struggle for the inside seat.

... To the east of us was the Brewer land—actually, also to the north of us behind the barn and some hundred feet on the west until it reached the Mitt Williams property. Now, Mrs. Brewer (Miss Mary) was a widow with a maiden daughter, Miss Annie, and a grandson, William Fred Hunter. To the south of the Brewer house* the area clear to the street was heavily wooded in oaks, hickories, and scads of dogwoods, and along the line between our properties were muscadines on almost every one of the trees: more little boy fun and tummy ache.

The garden of the Brewer home was back of the house and the barns and other out-houses, smoke-house, granary, carriage house, and toolhouse were east of the garden. A trail or road led on down the hill, eastward, to the springhouse. This was a wonderful spring, with cold, not cool, water right out of the bottom of the hill. The springhouse was complete with a milk trough to set the crocks of milk in, just as good as a refrigerator.

Further on down, maybe a hundred feet but still on the Brewer property, was a baptismal pool, some eight feet square and four and a half feet deep. The local Baptist church used it for years, until modern times when they built a new church with its baptistry therein. All of the Nooe family were Methodists, Father a pillar of the church, so we were sprinkled, not dunked. 'Twas in this pool that Possum and I learned to swim. Fred's nickname, Possum, came from his reactions on the first possum hunt Bus and I took him on. He had so much fun it just followed that he should have that name.

One day Fred, or Possum, and I decided we would

take a look at a few of Bus's muskrat and mink traps down on Robeson's Creek. This was in early spring and the creek banks were steep and rather slippery. Well, in trying to get a closer look, Possum got just a bit too close and slid down into the creek, up to his armpits. The water was icy cold and he, according to his granny and maiden auntie, was a "fragile child." Actually, he was strong and as healthy as an ox. ('Course I could lick him, 'cause I was heavier than he was.) So I grabbed an overhanging tree in one hand, set my feet behind a small stump, reached down and grabbed him by the hand, and hauled him out of the water and onto the bank.

He was scared to death and kept crying, "I know I'll die, I know I'll die." Bus had been following us to see

When Fred kerplunked into the creek, Bus ran up and gave me a hand in getting Possum up the bank.

that we didn't swipe any pelts from any of his traps, so when Fred kerplunked into the creek, he ran up and gave me a hand in getting Possum up the bank. We, too, knew that he would have to get out of the wet clothes and dry out, but the only house anywhere near us was the Perley house, across the creek and up a hill, about a half-mile away. So we went down the creek a short way where we could cross on stones and made our way on up to the Perley house. (The Perleys were more or less newcomers to our area; they had moved down south from Iowa and bought the old Merritt place.) Mrs. Perley, a lovely young Iowa matron, took Fred into the kitchen, stripped him, and dressed him in her daughter's clothes while his were drying. Fred was so embarrassed he almost died, and I of course kidded him for weeks about what a cute girl he would make. Each kidding started another scrap.

CHAPTER TWO: THE SECOND DECADE

... The second year of high school was the beginning of all good things. Mr. Earl Franklin was our new high school superintendent and professor, and he was ably assisted by Miss Cassandra Mendenhall, whom we loved as much as we did Miss Ida.

... At about this time, a young lawyer opened an office in our town. This was about the time when Boy Scouting was spreading to the smaller towns, so our young lawyer, Mr. Wilkins P. Horton, accepted the position of scoutmaster and appointed Ernest Boone and me as assistant scoutmasters. Our first move was to order uniforms for the three of us. When the uniforms came, there were two pairs of canvas leggings and two rolls of woolen cloth, about ten feet long and four inches wide. We knew what to do with the canvas leggings, but what to do with the strips of

cloth threw us. We laid our problem before the scoutmaster, who immediately showed us by wrapping the cussed things about his legs. The two of us had never heard of wrapped leggings until that time.

By the way, this young scoutmaster and lawyer soon became the Honorable Wilkins P. Horton, Lt. Governor of our fair state. *But--* his greatest accomplishment was talking our Miss Cassie into becoming Mrs. Wilkins P. Horton. Truly, two of my most favorite people.

. . . Now, Mama's dream was to have her boys be the best. Bennet, the oldest, was the lawyer. (Attorney at law is what he insisted that I, the youngest, should call him but I never did.) Henry and Louis were already in the lumber business with father. Bus was at A&M, now N.C. State, studying agriculture, a fitting occupation due to the land that Father had acquired by buying so many farms for the timber thereon. So, I, the baby boy, was to be the doctor. That was all settled until the county commissioners decided to do something about the rocky and red-mud roads. They hired an engineer to make a survey of the county road system and begin a program of improvement, by grading, some relocation, and surfacing with topsoil or gravel.

Well, on looking at that young engineer in riding breeches and leggings, with a big, wide-brim hat, and toting that apparatus over his shoulder until he set it up on its three legs, then peeping through the thing at some candy-striped sticks--rods, I believe he called them--that had to be held by the young men. . . Well, that was all she wrote, that was for me, I was sold, the doctor deal was out the window. I sometimes wonder which would have been best. I'm not rich like most doctors, but I've been to lots of places and had lots of fun and made lots of friends, all over North and South America. . . .*

CHAPTER THREE: THE THIRD DECADE

. . . Sometime around the late nineteen-teens, Father had been talked into joining an Ohio lumber firm in the harvesting of the huge amount of timber in the Georgia and South Carolina swamps. The first job was to rebuild the existing mills and the highwire skidding equipment. Everything was going nicely for a year or two, and Father was rapidly climbing the economic ladder. This timber was being cut in sizes for shipbuilding mostly, but for ordinary uses also. In order to get the necessary capital for this undertaking, it was necessary to mortgage the huge landholdings Father had acquired over the years in buying farms for the timber that was on them. (Note: Back in those days people would not sell the timber and keep the farm, but would sell the whole thing--land, buildings, and all--so the old folks could move to town and not have to worry about the farm. When they passed on,

the will or wills would allocate money to the several heirs, thereby eliminating quarrels such as "I wanted the home place and they gave it to Bill" or "I just knew the pasture land was going to be mine, but they gave it to John." Many farms and homesteads were acquired in that manner, when all Father wanted was to get the timber.)

Along came Armistice Day and the cessation of the shipbuilding boom, along with a railroad strike that stymied the delivery of materials all ready for shipment, which was in itself the straw that broke the camel's back. Father ended up with only our home, the planing mill, a few outlying sawmills around Pittsboro, and less than ten thousand bucks in the local bank. Thus, in the middle of my junior year, my college career came to a screeching halt. . . .

**Editor's notes: This excerpt is taken from a copy of an incomplete memoir by Thomas Letson Nooe, youngest son of Bennet Nooe, Jr., which is filed in the Pittsboro Memorial Library. The prologue and chapters covering Nooe's first four decades are complete except for four pages of chapter two, which may describe his experiences during World War I. The Chatham County Historical Association thanks Jane Nooe for permission to print from her copy of the memoir.*

Although the Nooe house burned down some years ago, a vestige of the planing mill stands on Thompson Street at the end of Small Street; this unusual structure was a bin for shavings from the mill. The Brewer house still stands on Thompson Street, the old Raleigh Road.

The Pittsboro Academy was torn down about 1979 after an oak tree fell on it during a violent thunderstorm. The street is now called Fayetteville St.

At the point we stop the narrative, Nooe left Pittsboro, never to return for any appreciable length of time. His memoirs describe his many engineering jobs, including surveying the Inland Waterway between Beaufort Inlet and Pamlico Sound and building highways, railroads, and buildings up and down the Eastern seaboard. In his thirties, Nooe moved to Iowa and remained there for many years in highway construction and as a county engineer. In his sixth decade he was back in North Carolina, engaged in housing construction for the military that led to a tour in Panama.

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