

# The Chatham Historical Journal

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## Springtime

Vivian Cole\*

Spring of this year (1991) is one of the most beautiful I remember for a long time. Flowers began blooming in late January, and, while there have been a freeze or two and a few frosts, the setbacks to Spring have been only temporary. Everything has come out again immediately, and now it is impossible to look outside without seeing huge splashes of white, pink, yellow, red, or lilac in the bright green grass, or the pale green leaves that are beginning to clothe all the trees in yards and forests.

When I was a child I thought Spring would never come. In late January or February there would be a warm day now and then to give us hope, but the cold winds, the rain, and the snow would return, making us very much aware Winter was not over until after the third week in March.

Our spirits began to rise when children began bringing our teachers two or three short-stem daffodils, then a few pieces of white shirt-button spires, or yellow forsythia. Then suddenly the ditch banks would be covered with purple violets, the grass spotted with yellow dandelions, and little yellow buttercups sprang up everywhere. The edges of the forests were pink with redbud followed immediately by the showy white dogwood.

At recess and lunch-time, pale children spilled out of the classrooms to run and play in the sunshine again. Soon our rough, chapped hands would be smooth again, and our sore noses and cracked chapped lips would heal. Color would return to our pale faces. It was Springtime again at last!

In school we opened the windows wider to let in the

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*Vivian Cole grew up on a farm near the northern boundary of Chatham County. After her retirement, she joined a group of men and women who sharpened their writing skills by sharing their reminiscences. The County Historical Association is honored to publish some of her recollections.*

warm breezes. We sang with feeling "Welcome sweet Springtime, we greet thee in song." Before long we would shed our old winter coats and wear only sweaters to school. The long winter underwear known as union suits would be put away for next year. The girls (such as I) whose mothers insisted we wear long stockings began rolling them down to the ankles by mid-day, and we played outside without even sweaters. The wind sometimes was cool, but once it was Springtime we refused to let a cool wind send us back into winter clothes or back into the school building except for classes.

On the playground, balls made from twine and bats made from tree limbs or old planks began to appear. The ball games resumed where they had left off in the Fall. Girls as well as boys played ball. Also, marbles were brought out, and soon a lot of boys and some girls would be on their knees shooting marbles. It was against school rules to play "for keeps," but many kids did so anyway.

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At our homes our fathers were busy with spring plowing. There were few tractors in those days, and the horse- or mule-pulled plows were not very fast. However, the farmers worked steadily, and at the end of each day large areas of freshly plowed land gave evidence of their dedication to their work.

Most of those men were uneducated, unpolished, and some people said insensitive. But they were more sensitive than most non-farmers realized. They saw great beauty in nature. In their newly-plowed fields they saw promise of the crop and harvest to come. In



the sunshine, the clouds, and the rains, they saw the beauty of God's sharing in their work.

Daddy saw beauty in the forest and the blossoms of the trees and the wild flowers that grew around his fields. As he made his way home from some field at the close of the workday, he often stopped to break a few flowers to bring to us. I remember so well the yellow and green blossoms from the tulip poplar trees, the sweet-smelling blossoms from what is called the "Fringe Tree" in my wildflower book, but known to us as "White Ash" or better still as "Grandsir Graybeard." The pink honeysuckle, as we called the wild azalea, was another one of our favorites, and Daddy often would delight us by bringing home a few sprigs.

For the farmers' wives Springtime meant spring cleaning – washing away the winter's accumulation of dust, smoke, and germs. They also planted the gardens of vegetables for the table and flowers just for beauty. Springtime also meant setting the hens to raise the chickens for summer frying and for next winter's eggs. It was a time of work for the ladies, but it was work which gave them satisfaction not only for the present time for for days and weeks to come.

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Springtime also meant that the school year was almost over, since we had only eight months of school in rural areas then. It was time for teachers to begin making out exams and also planning for the commencement programs we had each year. Each class had a part in those programs. New songs had to be taught to the children.

There were always a few short skits in these programs, but the main attraction usually was an operetta. The teachers would spend much of their free time sewing crepe paper into costumes in the form of flowers, trees, or animals for the children to wear in the operetta. Some mothers would help, but the teachers did most of the sewing. They also were in charge of rehearsals and decorating the auditorium as well as the stage for the commencement program.

Just before school closed for the term, most children were taken shopping. This in itself was a major event in our lives. Frances and I were taken shopping in Durham about three times a year -- in the late summer to buy school clothes, at Christmastime to tell Santa Claus what we would like for him to bring, and in April to

buy clothes for commencement. These commencement clothes would be our Sunday clothes for the Summer.

The commencement program was like the end of Spring to us. It became Summer whenever school was out. But Spring had brought to the farms baby calves, baby chickens, and at least one litter of baby kittens. As we played with or helped care for these young animals, we moved easily from Spring into Summer.

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*Children found pleasure in each season of the year in its time, but I don't think we looked forward to any season – not even Christmas – with as much longing as we did Spring!*

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## *"Saved from Drowning By a Mule's Tail"*

by Joe Burke\*

This is a segment of the newspaper, the *Chatham News*, Friday, July the eighteenth, 1941. The title of this article is "Man is Saved from Drowning by a Mule's Tail." Now, this information was passed on to the reporter, whoever he or she was, by our oldest sister. Hilda is not the oldest sister that I have. Annie lives beyond Greensboro; she's the oldest. You'd have to know our oldest sister to appreciate this. I'm going to read the article to you; then I'm going to reconstruct it. It didn't *exactly* happen this way. Almost, but not *precisely*, all right?

"Story from Bonlee," states, "Heavy rain causes odd things. All kinds of stories have been growing out of the recent heavy rainfall throughout the county, but the latest, and perhaps the best, comes from Bonlee, where a mule is credited with saving the life of a man, preventing him from drowning in a flash flood. The *Chatham News* has received this story from Annie Burke of Bonlee. Mr. Burke and family, wife Mary, children Annie, Hilda, W.F., Calvin, Sarah, and Joe, and Billy Fields, who was a neighbor," -- (Now, W. F., our brother, and Billy, were close friends. They were about the same age. Dub was [about] twelve or thirteen.) --

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*\*Joe Burke, retired teacher and administrator, was reared in Chatham County. In November 2000, he reminisced about his youth in Bonlee for a meeting of the Chatham County Historical Association. The next issue of the Chatham Historical Journal will carry the major portion of his presentation; however, the anecdotes printed here had to be omitted because of space limits. An unedited audiotape of the recorded presentation and an unedited transcript may be borrowed from the Association, P. O. Box 913, Pittsboro, NC 27312.*



“one recent afternoon left home for a few hours to visit a neighbor, Mrs. Fields, Billy’s mother. ‘We had been there about two hours when a black cloud was sighted in the west. Fifteen minutes later it began to rain. We stayed a while longer, hoping it would stop raining so that we could go home without getting wet. It looked as if it wasn’t going to stop raining, and so we decided to try to get home. Someone made a suggestion that Billy should carry us home in his wagon -- (This was a one-horse wagon, now.) -- and so we started home. When we reached the creek and saw the water was higher than we expected, we didn’t know if we should try to cross. Someone said to try it, and so we started across the stream.’ ” (Now, [my sister, about] fifteen then, saved our lives. Listen to this. Neither one of us would be here today if this had not happened.) “When the water reached the mule’s stomach, he stopped.” (He had sense enough to stop.) “Six of the party got out, because Hilda was screaming to the top of her voice and said, ‘We do not need to go across.’ But the other three, Mr. Burke, W. F.,” (my brother who was twelve or thirteen) “and Billy” ([whose parents owned the [wagon]]) “decided to try to cross.”

(Let me explain to you that my father, W.F., and Billy were all excellent swimmers. Don’t need to worry about that. None of the rest of us could swim. My brother Calvin, who was killed in a automobile accident four years ago, never learned to swim, and he always swore that he would never go in swimming until he did learn. Well, the bathtub wasn’t quite big enough for him to learn in.) “Billy told Mr. Burke he thought it would be better for him to drive across. When the wagon reached the center of the creek, it began to slide downstream .” (And I remember this. I wasn’t very old, but I remember it as if it were yesterday.) “Billy and W.F. jumped off and swam to the bank, then the bed slid off the wagon, and Mr. Burke released . . .” (Now, Daddy is in the water, but he didn’t leave the mule and the wagon because he knew the wagon had to be cut away from the mule or the mule would die.) “Mr. Burke released the hamstrings on the mule so that the animal could swim out. After he released the hamstrings, the mule made a lunge and kicked him under the water. He came up in time. . .” (and this is where the story gets a little tricky) “and came up in time to catch the mule’s tail and was pulled safely to the bank.” (I’ll come back to that in just a moment.) “During this tragedy, the ones on the bank were yelling and trying to get help, but to no avail. This is something that rarely happens -- dash -- when beast saves man.”

Now, let me go back and reconstruct one part of that. Yes, as soon as my father released that wagon from that mule, of course the mule felt it and lunged, and that threw my father underneath the water. But as I told

you, he was an excellent swimmer. He came up and there was the mule’s tail, just laying on top of the water -- all he had to do was grab it -- and he knew the mule was headed for the bank. He grabbed it with his left hand, and of course he was swimming with his right.

(Well, Annie got carried away when the reporter came. Because we know that reporters always record it the way it you tell it. Right? We know that, so we’re not questioning that.) And they went out. So that’s how it got to be the story that a man was saved from drowning by a mule’s tail.

My father was a big man. He wasn’t fat; he was just a big man. Six three, he weighed about two-thirty, and when people would remind him about this story, he would just laugh, because it was a funny thing to him.

## Culture Shock

*[After completing his presentation, Mr. Burke invited questions and one of the questions was, “This is a whole new world for a Brooklyn girl, obviously. How did you react when you went into the army and went to Korea. Wasn’t it a culture shock for you just to leave the state for Florida?”]*

It was a cultural shock for me to go to Greensboro!

My older sister wound up in Greensboro during the war. The Trailways bus came through Bonlee and stopped, so in the summer she would let me come up and stay a day or two with her and come back.

Oh, I’d been everywhere! I was like the guy that lived over in the Pittsboro area . . . And this is a true story, incidentally.

Around the turn of the century, he became a prodigal son. He got up one morning and said, “Daddy, I’m tired of working on the farm. Just give me what I’m going to inherit, if I’m going to inherit anything. I’m going to leave.” Well, he did. He got a ride on a wagon to Sanford [about 20 miles], stayed down there about two weeks and almost starved to death, and had to walk home -- came back to Daddy.

They were picking at him, and they said, “Oh, gosh, don’t tell anyone. I mean, you left home, almost starved to death, and came back.” They were just ribbing him, and he said, “Yeah, but I want to tell you one thing. Saw some of this old world while I was gone.”

So when I went to Greensboro, I’d seen some of this old world while I was gone.

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### *Photograph Includes Chatham's Lt. Governor Wilkins P. Horton*

Lt. Gov. Wilkins P. Horton stands behind his wife on the left side of the photograph. Gov. Clyde R. Hoey stands between his daughter and wife on the right side. Other people are not identified, nor is the occasion for the photograph.

W. P. Horton (1889-1950) was born in Kansas but reared in Pittsboro from the age of 3. A graduate of UNC law school, he entered practice with H. R. Haynes and was a state senator from 1918 to 1935. Lieutenant governor from 1937 to 1939, when he left to campaign for governor, Horton returned to Pittsboro after losing the race to practice law with Daniel Bell and Harry P. Horton, his adopted son. He served as superior court judge in 1949 for six months before his final illness.

Clyde R. Hoey (1877-1954), popular governor of North Carolina from 1937 to 1941, declined to run for a second term, and was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1945, where his long white hair, string tie, frock coat, striped pants and hightop shoes were familiar until his death in 1954.

The photograph is part of a February 2001 gift from Jerry Wasko to the Chatham County Historical Association. The gift included newspaper clippings, photographs, photocopies, and notes saved by the late Cassie Horton Wasko from her mother's papers. Many of the materials had been collected for the publication of *Chatham County 1771 - 1971* but not used. Doris Goerch Horton, co-editor of the county history, was the daughter of Carl Goerch, popular radio commentator and founder of *The State* magazine, now called *Our State*, and wife of Judge Harry P. Horton.