

The Chatham Historical Journal

Volume 14, Number 3

Chatham County, North Carolina

December 2001

The Cape Fear Power Plant Village at Moncure

Johnny Odom and James Watson

[In August 2001, James (Jimmy) Watson interviewed Johnny (Oldham) Odom about the Cape Fear Steam Plant village. This article is excerpted from their exchange of comments, with Odom's recollections in italics and Watson's in Roman type. The original tape and unedited transcript are available for visitors to the Chatham Historical Museum.]

Chatham County's real proud of a lot of villages, like Bynum. You read a lot of articles about Bynum, and a lot of people don't know about the old Cape Fear power plant village. It was a tight little old community. Most people knew it as Cape Fear Village.

Way back there, most everybody called it Phoenix. 'I'm goin' down to Phoenix.' Phoenix Power Plant. We lived there from 1925 until they tore the village down. In this picture, it looks like three of the houses hadn't been built and all that lower village hadn't been built. They were well-built houses. When I went back to Cape Fear [to work], I saw the blueprints on those houses. All the time I lived there, I never saw a house that was damaged by weather. And we had some terrible weather. We had hurricanes, bad storms, wind.

Some of them had plaster walls. They had slate shingles on top, and each house had a screened-in porch. The houses had a Model T garage and a chicken house and a chicken fence -- people back then ate chicken a whole lot. You never locked the doors. You'd come in, all the children, you'd come in and your parents was gone, they'd just go somewhere else and eat. It was a marvelous place for people. I felt very fortunate to be raised up there, and I know you did.

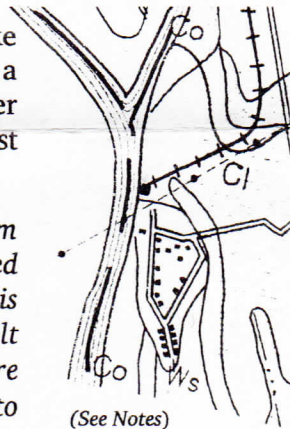
The main reason for the village was to house the workers. Back then it was a day's

trip to go to Raleigh and back, so, bad weather and all, people couldn't get there, so they had the crews right there, to operate the plant.

I got an article here that was in *The Spotlight* [CP&L house organ] that tells a little something about the village. It evidently had nine cottages up on the upper portion, along with the superintendent's house, a boarding house, a dormitory, and a clubhouse, for a total of thirteen houses, plus eight small cottages in the lower village. This article, written in the late thirties,

listed the emergency operating crew, all of whom lived in the village: W. C. Mathis, superintendent; Z. Marshall, J. J. Hackney, Jr., W. G. Poplin, C. A. Watson, G. F. Oldham, H. L. Mitchell, S. W. Rose, R. O. Coble, R. L. Moore, E. E. Mashburn, and Shad McQuillan.

Everyone had phones in their houses, old ring-up phones, magneto-type phones. Everybody had electric power, running water,



(See Notes)



Cape Fear Power Plant Village

(Photograph courtesy of Johnny Odom)



The Clubhouse, later residence for the Turner, Watson, and Mathis families
(Photograph courtesy of James Watson)

plumbing -- and back in the late twenties through the forties, [many rural homes] didn't have that much.

From 1922 until the mid-1950s people moved from one house to another (usually larger) house when it became empty. About 1957 as people built their own homes and moved away, the company sold the houses, and they had to be torn down or moved from the village, though only two or three small homes were moved because of their size. Clifford Dickens's was the last house there, and it was torn down in 1966.

[There were] four or maybe even five small fire houses down in the village, with enough hose in each one to reach to where the other hose was. They had a real elevated water tank so they'd have pressure even if they didn't have any power. So within just a minute or so you could have high pressure water right there. They had axes and reels [for the hoses] so you had to have lots of manpower to drag them. They had to use them maybe four or five times. The

old Walter Johnson house caught fire and used that hose reel. But see, all the young'uns and everybody would just go right there and get that stuff spraying. The Marshall house, which was the boarding house, they had a bad fire. They had some yard fires and some stuff they had to put out.

Everybody in the village had a mailbox and then [there was] the great, big company mailbox in the middle. They'd get packages of stuff that was some size. And if anybody on the village got a big package of something, they'd just put it in the company mailbox.

Just before you'd go down the hill they had a little store building, and the same building was used for our little church. It had a little coal-fired heater to heat it.

[We went to school in Moncure on the school bus.] When we first started, we had to walk out to the main road, and then a little later on the buses started coming

up to the mailbox. And then later I was driving, and I'd go all around the village and pick them up.

There won't much difference in the village and the plant. If anything happened to anybody on the village, the people at the plant would take care of them, carrying them to a doctor or having a doctor come out there. But they was very little sickness in the village -- the whole time I was there -- of the children. They all grew up to be mighty fine people.

Just before you'd go down the hill, they had a little store building there. And the little church. The same building was used for our little church.

I remember they had rocking chairs in that thing, to sit in when they was preaching. You could sit there and rock and go to sleep, couldn't you? After the Second World War they had a preacher that was over here, that lived in Sanford. Reverend Spondenberg came down and preached. When they closed it down -- what, about 1947? -- everybody started going to Moncure churches, didn't they?

Moncure. That was a right viable little community. How about telling me a little something about the stores that was in Moncure at that time. Mr. Hannon's store. . .

[In Moncure] you had Mr. Johnson's store, and Mr. Hannon's store was right together. Down from there was a little hill and there was a little bitty house-like thing built back in the ground. They had a shoeshop there. Had a bank. Mr. Stedman had a store, too.

Ray & McCracken store was out on US 1, along with Mr. Brown's barber shop and Sam Crutchfield's store and the Studebaker dealership. Moncure also had a depot where passengers could get on the train.

Way on back, Moncure had a hotel. It was quite some place when they were building the power plant, the brick yards. While the war was going on they put a Norfolk-



Locomotive crew, 1933: Tom Mims, George Lee Hearn, Dave Goodwin, Clyde Thomas, ?, Joe Pollard, ? (Back row unidentified)
(Photograph courtesy of Johnny Odum)



Johnny Odom, Brother Poplin, Brant Hackney, Mildred Poplin, Pauline Moore, Alton Odom, Pat Rose, Sarah Watson, Kitty Hackney, Skipper Moore, and Garland Odom, Jr. on bicycle

(Photograph courtesy of Johnny Odom)

Southern railroad track in there so the power plant could get all the coal needed. Lockville was a big place. All of them was surrounding the Cape Fear village, within three or four miles of them, by the road. The power company had a boat that run to the Buckhorn plant, and it would go up to the Lockville plant. They'd get groceries and stuff to take back to people in the [Buckhorn] village.

You-all had a tennis court up there, too, didn't you? That picture had a lot of girls in it. Did the girls play against the boys?

Yeah, we had a good court. The company built it for us. We even had a ground-packing machine, keep it packed down. All you had to do was once in a while pull the grass up. We kept the tennis court in perfect shape. I'll tell you one thing, there were some good tennis players there. All of the girls were excellent tennis players. And the boys that played was real good. And then you had some of the older people. Nellie Palmer and Oren Palmer; Nellie was a good player. They was out there playing. Pauline Moore, Sarah, Jeannie, and Kitty.

If there was just a few we'd play singles, and if there was a lot of people wanting to play, we'd play doubles. Depended upon how many people was out that evening to play. Whoever'd win would just keep playing and playing 'til somebody beat 'em, and the loser would have to sit down. Sometimes we'd play all day Saturday and all day Sunday. We didn't play in competition. It was just recreation.

They got one picture in there with all the children up there. One or two missing. Made summer of 1939. C. A. is missing, and he might have made the picture. Welford Johnson and Bobby Johnson's not on here. Jean Moore's not on there [or Elizabeth Mathis]. There's four of them that I know of already passed away.

You were telling me a while back about the Army coming in after Pearl Harbor was bombed in 1941. They thought the Japanese were going to sabotage the

plant, didn't they?

Well, at that time they were some sabotage work going on in the country and somewhere in the real early 40s they was a battalion come in, and also went down the Buckhorn and guarded the dam and the Buckhorn plant. They had their squad tents set up there at the plant where that big field is, where the water tank is. They were there to protect it, and they had live ammunition. They won't there very long, uh, I don't remember exactly how long.

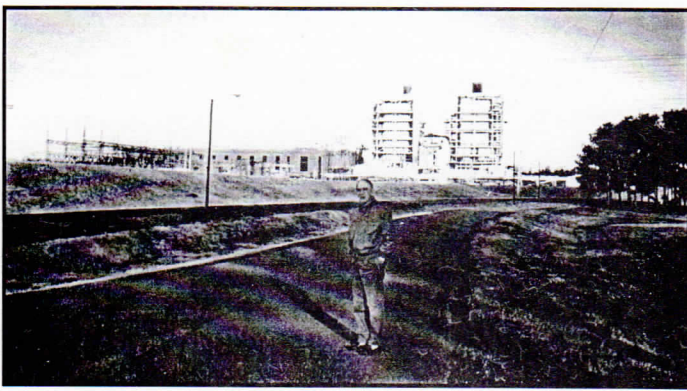
[And one day] there was five P-40s headed for Ft. Bragg, and they all run out of gas. One of them that I got to see was the one that come down, and your mother was coming in, driving, and he went right over the top of her car and landed in front of her and then twisted over in the ditch. But it didn't damage it any. And the other four landed in pastures and stuff around. We got the oil out of that old airplane. Real heavy-duty oil. The war hadn't been going on long, I'd say '42, something like that.

Tell me about the flood of '45. That was the flood that. . . the reason why they built Jordan Lake, wasn't it? We was living on the river bank, on the hill, on that plant village hill, [and] we were flooded in, right?

The two rivers come together, Haw River and Deep River, and then it made a straight run right in front of the plant and further on down it turned left. And of course Haw River would get up high and just encircle the plant. Back then there wasn't a dike that was completed. Before they finished "3" and "4" units, along about that time they put the dike around. The roads would get covered up, and you couldn't go in and out. They had to take the little old locomotive there and go out and get stuff and come back. The old basements in "1" and "2" would flood, but somehow or another, they managed to keep running. The



Wartime buddies: Standing - Brant Hackney, Dixie Marshall, Walter Poplin, Wilford Johnson; front - C.A. Watson, Jr., Johnny Odom (Photograph courtesy of Johnny Odom)



James Watson and the CP&L plant, Moncure, 1998
(Photograph courtesy of James Watson)

village was up high, 'bout as high as the water tank setting up on top of that hill. And the water never even come close to coming up on the village. The low ground, down there where we had our gardens, that was just a big river. Covered up, on both sides of it.

I remember when I was little they had all the men working down at the plant, and two or three families had hogs. Now, I waded down to the hog pens below us, and took a hammer and an old piece of metal and just cut the fence, and let all them hogs out. Six or eight of them. Walter Poplin had one, Daddy and them had one. Them hogs came right on up on the village. They was laying out there in the yard. But they hadn't drowned. The cows, they were in a pasture. They could come up; there was a high spot up there.

During the flood, the only way you could get food back in there was by boat, wasn't it? Seems like Mrs. Yates told me that they had her cooking for everybody down there at the plant, trying to keep potatoes and everything cooked for everyone. She said she'd peeled enough potatoes to feed an army. Mr. Yates was a control room operator, and the family lived in the boarding house. Mrs. Yates cooked for the boarding house and dormitory residents and guests.

Well, what did you do for entertainment when you was growing up? You had a right nice little road to ride around on down there, didn't you?

And hills you'd go up and down. Everybody had a bicycle. We'd put those little old flapper things on the wheels, where it'd sound like a motorcycle. And the little, bitty young'uns had tricycles. You had your own recreation. You'd get out there and throw a baseball. We had a little ball diamond right beside our house. We'd have baseball games, softball. Uh, you made little old hand-guns, rubber guns, where you'd take 'em and shoot rubber bands everywhere. And we had slingshots.

What about hunting? Fishing? Killed a lot of squirrels on that river bank, didn't you?

There's so much that we done, even way back then. They'd kill a hog, and roast it, barbecue it up there. What we had was that old garage that used to be right down from where you lived. In the clubhouse. And down there they had some tables. That old hog laying up there cooking, you'd smell it all day, you know. And everybody at the plant would be taking a meal. Everybody on the village. Back then, that was a treat, though, that was something.

They had some pretty good ball players at the high school, right? That Doug Payne, he was probably the hero of Moncure, wasn't he? He wound up playing professional ball, with the Boston Red Sox. He was probably one of the best ball players to come out of Chatham County.

He was a mighty good pitcher. And the Carolina Power and Light, mostly from the plant there, they had a softball team that played year after year, and beat everybody they played. Royce Dickens, Clifford Dickens, Cecil Ellis, Johnny Martindale, and seems like Macon Goodwin played with 'em. They had a mighty fine softball team. Played over at Sanford a lot, won all kinds of trophies.

You remember they picked up dry cleaning down there? Mr. Johnny Lawrence from Jonesboro Dry Cleaners. Come in there and pick up everybody's laundry and take it to Jonesboro and wash it. One thing that you probably remember was, you didn't hang your clothes out on that clothesline when the wind was blowing in the direction toward the village. Because if you did, you'd just get soot all over it. Those days a lot of coal just went up the chimney didn't it? Didn't have all those high-dollar precipitators and scrubbers and all on the boilers down there the way they do now.

NOTES

The map on page 1 is enlarged from *Soil Survey of Chatham County, North Carolina, Series 1933, No. 7* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture), August 1937. Abbreviations (Co, Cl, Ws) refer to soil types.

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