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Pittsboro in the Twenties and Thirties: A Reminiscence

By Lula Foushee Hinton Hoskins*

My early schooling took place in Pittsboro from 1927 to 1938. During the entire period Mr. J. S. Waters was principal. There was one classroom for each grade one through six; grades seven through eleven were departmentalized. School terms were for eight months a year.

Even though kindergarten was not a part of public schools in North Carolina then, Mrs. Berta McBane, wife of Dr. T. W. McBane, and Mrs. Cassandra Mendenhall Horton, wife of Wilkins P. Horton, conducted an introduction to first grade prior to our entering school. I remember some of the experiences – getting health records and marching to the music of John Philip Sousa's "Stars and Stripes Forever" on the wind-up Victrola.

In the '20s Pittsboro was one of twenty other locations in North Carolina to offer training to young high school graduates who wanted practical experience in becoming teachers. They received some college credit for their participation. The requirements were graduation from a standard high school and a recommendation from their high school principals. At one time Berta Coltrane, later Mrs. J. W. McBane, was the instructor for this program. Most of those participating became teachers in North Carolina, some in Chatham County.

In high school a lot of emphasis was put on public speaking. Debating teams were under the supervision of Mr. Frank Houser. His teams always did well in

statewide competition. All in all, the curriculum was adequate, strong in the language arts fields and weak in science. That was probably because there were no funds for any sort of lab equipment.

Many of the students rode school buses from surrounding areas. I remember what a treat it was for me to go home overnight with a dear friend, Faydine Johnson (later Webster), who lived on top of Hickory Mountain. Her brother, Lynn, drove the bus and riders were well-behaved.

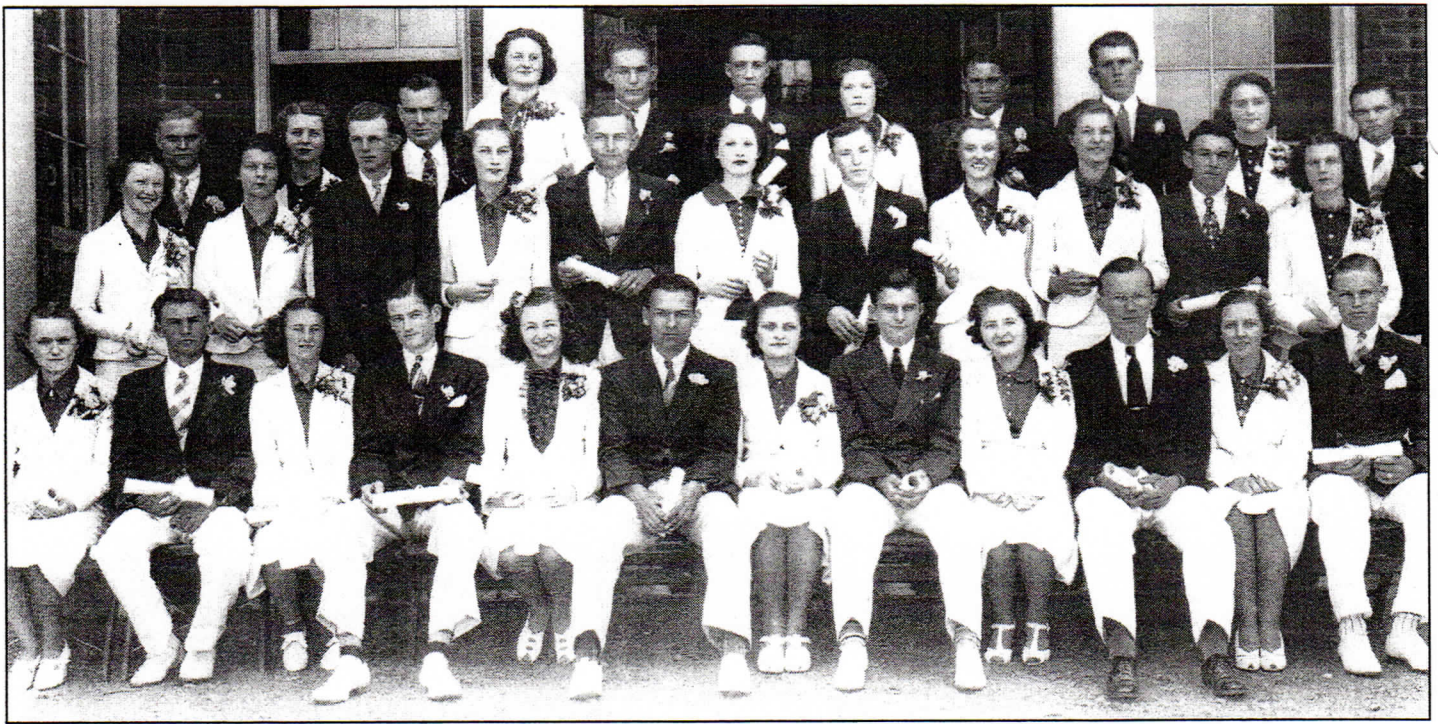
In those days the state did not furnish textbooks. They were to be purchased at Womble's store, next to "Dr." Pilkington's drugstore. I can still remember the smell of new books there and Mrs. Womble, with her pince-nez glasses, finding the books needed for that term.

Each week there was an assembly program for all grades, 1-11, in the auditorium. Brown-paper songbooks were passed out: *101 Best Known Songs*. We sang songs like "Spanish Cavalier" and "Funiculi, Funicula." Mr. Waters made announcements and gave calendar notes. He surely had a great influence on education in our area. I remember him as one with exceptional rapport with students and the community. The local community supported the school. We were blessed with dedicated teachers, too!

Having been born in 1921, I, with my generation, experienced the Depression era. Few of us realized how much parents were suffering from financial adversities. We still had such a good time growing up!

For instance, a day's outing might be to ride the train to Raleigh. Seaboard Airline had a branch track from Moncure, which was mainline – New York to Florida. In Pittsboro, Mr. Harvey Gunter was station agent, Captain Jim Alston,¹ conductor, and Mr. Fred Riggsbee, engineer. We would round up several teenagers, board the train, get on the "big" train in Moncure, and on to Raleigh. There we would have a drugstore lunch, go to a movie, and ride the train back, arriving home before dark – all for about a dollar.

*Lula Foushee Hinton Hoskins is the daughter of E. R. Hinton (1887-1965), a prominent businessman and civic leader in Pittsboro. She now lives in High Point. Ms. Hoskins graciously provided identifications for the photo caption.



1938 Graduating Class, Pittsboro High School

Front row: Elsie Mann, Billy Burns*, Mary Kelly, Sam Riddle, Betty Bell, Thomas Hinsley, Christine Ward, Fletcher Mann, Jr., Nancy Johnson, A. Webster, Faydine Johnson, Joe Wagner*

Second row: Allene Young, Christine McIver, Ralph Hobby, Gloria Wirtz, James Cook, Edith Seagroves, Bobby Roberts, Bette Johnson, Louise Farrell, Ray Canada*, Bertha Rives

Back row: William Fletcher Mann, Athalene Rives, Henry Johnson, Peggy Siler, Milton Perry**, Fred Jenks, Margaret Jenks, Thomas Bland, William Rowe, Lula Hinton, Horace Clegg

*Died in World War II

**Milton Perry finished high school with us; he had attended the State Blind Institute earlier. He rode his bicycle to school, took notes in braille, and brought his portable typewriter for taking tests.

(Photograph courtesy of Walter "Corkey" Harris)

Our favorite time for this outing was in the spring, for the company took the coach off for its yearly cleaning. During that time we could ride in the ca-
boose and have high-up seats.

There was no "turn around" for the train in Pittsboro, so one way the engine was pushing its load rather than pulling. Mail came in on the train, so many townspeople gathered in the post office and socialized while the posted letters were put in the boxes.

Another way teenagers socialized was by renting the Community House for a dance. For two dollars we could use it for an evening, playing 78 rpm records and enjoying the Big Band music that came about that time.

All in Pittsboro were proud of the Community House, a bonus and useful W.P.A. project.

Our age group was certainly gun fodder for World War II, with our class graduating in 1938. Billy Burns, Ray Canada, and Joe Wagner, my peers, were all casualties. There were only 38 class members probably half of them boys, so these were terrible losses.

NOTES

¹Captain Alston was married to Octavia Daub. She was the granddaughter of Peter Daub, Methodist circuit rider and first president of Greensboro College. Captain Alston commissioned Frank [Marsden] London, a noted native artist, to create the beautiful stained glass window in Pittsboro Methodist Episcopal Church as a memorial to his wife, Octavia. Mr. London also designed a window in the Church of the Good Shepherd in Raleigh and two windows in St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church in Pittsboro.

[Editor's Note:

Chatham's union schools were called "high schools," even though twelfth grade was not added until the 1940s. Pittsboro High School was located on West Street on the site of today's county Law Enforcement Building. Womble's store was on the southwest corner of Hillsboro and Salisbury streets; the drugstore next door is now S&T's Soda Shop.

The railroad station in Pittsboro was on East Salisbury Street, then the main east-west highway through town, near Small Street. The Community Building still stands on Thompson Street half a block east of Hillsboro Street.]

Growing Up In Gorgas

by Margaret Bryant Pollard*

I was born [near the Deep and Rocky Rivers], where my ten siblings were also born. We have the most beautiful vista in all Chatham County. (Don't tell anybody. We kinda like it like it is.) If you go out past the home place, across the pasture, and look across the river in May, you will see a swath of beautiful pink rhododendron and laurel and white pines.

We had a ball when we were growing up. We had a buggy, that we pushed from three-quarters of a mile to a mile up the hill on the Gade Bryant Road, and then everybody got on except the biggest ones, and they'd give it this great big shove and down the hill we'd go. Sometimes it would turn over, and sometimes it wouldn't, but we never had a broken leg - around the buggy - because we always waited and jumped off in time. Except one time. My parents were not at home and we were supposed to keep the baby. Well, no one wanted to stay at home and keep the baby while the others were pushing the buggy, so what we did was, we took the baby and we put him in the buggy. And this time we went down the hill and the buggy turned over, with the baby in the buggy. Everybody - every body - was afraid that the baby was dead.

But, guess what? The baby didn't even wake up!

Play . . .

We liked to play jackrocks, hopscotch; dodgeball was big with us; softball was big. My father liked to play ball with us. Even until he was in his eighties he liked to play softball. So one time they were choosing up sides and my niece Kia's team chose my father. She was his great-granddaughter, and she said, "That old man can't hit no ball." And so when it came time for him to hit, he lost the ball. We were all sitting on the porch just tickled to death that he could outthit the kids still. We really had great fun with those games.

We enjoyed picnicking on the river. We had great fun at night. What we would do is get two big, black fry pans - skillets, you know - and lard, and sugar. Somebody would have gathered green apples - somehow there were always green apples to cook, on the river. So we would have lard, sugar, and two big frying pans. I don't think

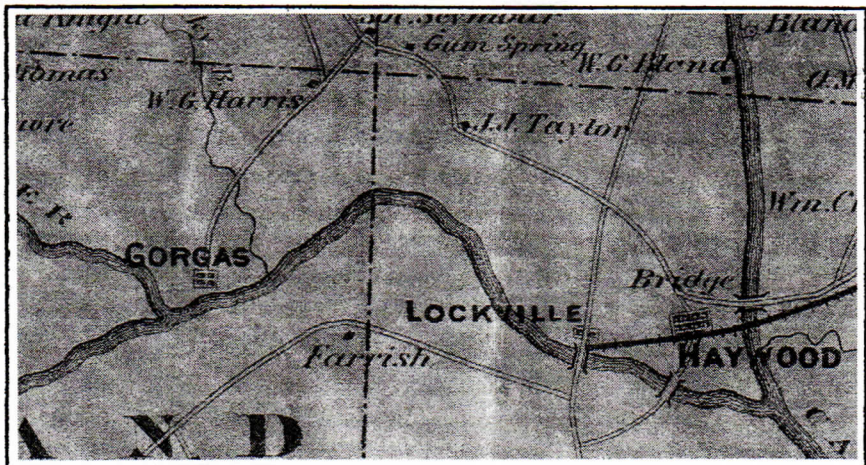
* This article is excerpted from retired county commissioner Pollard's presentation on 3 March 2005 in the CCHA "Cozy Up to History" series. An unedited audiotape and transcript are filed in the Chatham Historical Museum in the historic county courthouse in Pittsboro.

we ever had any spices to go in the apples. We just had plenty of sugar in them. And we would build a fire on the river because we knew we were going to catch something.

And this is how we knew it. We would put a trotline across the river. A trotline is a rope or a piece of wire that we'd wrap around a tree on each side of the river. And on that rope or wire we would have lots of hooks. We would bait those hooks with earthworms, or liver, or corn, or whatever, and then we would start the fire because we knew any time we were gonna have some fish. Sure enough. And we had a cousin that could fillet those fish and we didn't have to worry about bones. In the meantime, we would start to - I can't say we were singing, we were yelling. I don't know why we had to sing so loud, but the first song we would sing was "I've Got Shoes." Then somebody would start yelling, "I'm Going to Lay Down My Burden." Again, somebody down the river would start singing to the top of their lungs, "The Stormy Monday Blues." And after a while, the fish are ready. And apples are, too. We had a cousin named Ernest Lee. We'd ask him to do the blessing, and he would say, "Lord, look down with tender mercy on such gracious hearts as these. Make us truly thankful. Amen, pass the possum, if you please."

. . . and Work

We didn't just play. We worked. We worked just like beavers. We'd get up in the morning before most people thought the night was over, and milked the cows. I mean, we got up early early. We would take the cows to the pasture. We had a brother just older than Wilbur and me who could have taken those cows out to the pasture by himself, but he wouldn't do it. He said, "It's not fair for me to take the cows," so we had to go with him. And going down the hill, it was just easy to fall. I'll bet I have scars right now on my



Detail of Capt. N. A. Ramsey's 1870 map of Chatham County. Just west of Gorgas the Rocky River enters the Deep River. At Haywood the Haw River joins the Deep River to form the Cape Fear River.

hands where I fell down taking the cows to pasture when I didn't really need to be going. Anyhow, we'd come back and eat breakfast and take a little birdbath and go to school. (You know what a birdbath is? Okay. Well, that's what we'd take.)

Anyway, in March, late March and April, the cows would eat onions. Can you imagine what it's like putting your milk in your cereal, milk that had onion flavor? Well, we'd fuss about it but that's what we had. Because we had to drink our milk. In those days children had to drink milk. I don't know whether they have to do it now; I don't think so. But anyway, the eggs tasted like onion, too, so my mother would make omelette, thinking she could camouflage the oniony taste. And she'd come up with all these souffles and things, but we still knew it was oniony eggs.

A School for Gorgas

When my brothers and sisters were three and four years old my parents realized, one of these days the children were going to need to go to school and the closest school is three or four miles away. So they went to the school superintendent and mentioned that they needed a school. Well, they were told, it's going to take, let's say, twenty-five children to justify a school in Gorgas. They couldn't justify a school in Gorgas because they didn't have but about sixteen children that were going to be of school age in a year or so.

So what my father did, he went across the Rocky River - there were some families over there - and he said to them, "You know, we can have a school in Gorgas if your children can come to school there, and what we really need to do is build a bridge so that we can weatherproof their travel back and forth to school. So the men in the neighborhood built a swinging bridge across Rocky River and those children could come across the river in all kinds of weather. And they did, to go to school.

That's how they got the county to build New Zion School, a one-teacher schoolhouse that I went to through the sixth grade. New Zion School must have been a good place, because from that tiny little neighborhood, maybe ten families, six people graduated from Horton School valedictorians, and four salutatorians. I don't want to go back to the one-teacher school, but I'll tell you what, there's something to be said for it.

New Zion had been a seven-grade school, but the year I became a seventh grader they decided for it to be just six grades, and in a year or two they consolidated the whole school. It was in the seventh grade at Horton High School that we got new books - first year algebra was a red and black book and the geometry book was green. I will never forget. Because

before that all the books we received at school - you know where you put your name in books? You'd have four or five lines, maybe six. Well, those lines would be filled by the time we got them and we'd have put our names somewhere else. And you know, sometime they'd have the nerve to make us pay damage fee for those! Anyhow, it happened.

Community Action

Getting New Zion School was just one example of collaboration and my father's faith in people. He also realized that our Horton High School did not have an agricultural department and that the extension program of Chatham County was not extended to black people. So he and some of his friends went to the county commissioners and asked for an extension program for black people.

That sounds so strange now, with integration, to ask for a program for black people, but that's the way it was then. And they said, "Well, no, we can't do that because we don't have any space for the black people to be housed." So they said, "Okay, we'll be back when we get a building for the... to house the agricultural extension agent and the home economics agent." They built the Neil Alexander Bailey building by just going from one church to another, one African American church to another, passing the hat, and they took up enough money to build that little brick building across from the liquor store. And of course, it did in fact begin the extension program for the African American community. They built that building in forty-seven.

Out of that collaboration, the Farm and Home Organization became the Fair Association, and that fair has been in existence since that time. Many of that same group were among the charter members of the credit union that lasted some fifty years and made something like eight million dollars in loans for education, houses, automobiles for people to get to work and back, and for those kinds of things.

My father always thought that just around the corner there's going to be a much better day, and he knew that people working together could get a lot done. [When] the barn burned down - don't you know when it was time to put in tobacco on Monday, the tobacco barn was up? Neighbors did it. Didn't cost a penny, cut the wood, everything. That's the kind of a community I grew up in. A place where it's sorta like one for all and all for one. You're just not alone in that place.

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