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A Persuasive Picture of Picturesque Polk

and Tryon Co.

New citizens, coming from all over the world, declare there is no place on earth quite like it.

By BILL SHARPE

Lotus eaters of the 20th century were the first to herald the news that the southern slope of the Blue Ridge was an exceptionally fine place for living. The very first settlers knew it, too, but while they happily put their roots down in this soil, they had not thought of communicating their discovery to others.

Well-Kept Secret

That is why Polk County's secret was kept so well and without effort or design. While it was still a part of Mecklenburg, settlers came in, nudging their farmlands right against the Indian boundary so closely that Royal Governor Tryon himself came to the area to parley with the Cherokees and establish a line. The expedition led to naming for him both a mountain and later the new county of Tryon, formed in 1768 from Mecklenburg.

Already, traders were coming up the old Blackstock Road from Charleston to trade the Indians out of their furs and hides. The trail ran to the Block House on the state line just below the site of the present town of Tryon. Settlers later used the same path in entering the county, and the Block House survives as the site of modern horse events.

But neither the county nor the peace its name celebrated lasted long. In 1776, General Joseph McDowell was defeated by the British at Earle's Fort, forcing his withdrawal to Gilberttown in Rutherford. The Cherokees were emboldened by this success to join with Tories in bloody raids on frontier farms.

A company of militia under Captain Thomas Howard finally ended these massacres. An Indian guide named Skyuka showed Thomas a secret pass over the Blue Ridge, and by following this route, the militiamen surprised the Indians from the rear at Round Mountain, driving them back toward the Smokies. The battle site today is known as Warrior's Gap, the secret pass is Howard's Gap, and the Indian who betrayed his people is remembered in the naming of Skyuka Creek which flows into the North Pacolet River near Mimosa Inn.

Tryon County was abolished in

Foxhunters on the trail near Tryon.—(Photo by State News Bureau.)



1779, being supplanted by Lincoln and Rutherford.

Bloody Times

Living in that section was as unpleasant then as it is pleasant now. Colonel Ferguson bivouacked his troops on Green River, and it was here that the two deserters from Sevier's Tennessee troops found him to breathlessly blurt out their treason. It was their news which put him on the way to Kings Mountain.

Some of the most prominent citizens were Loyalists. Colonel Ambrose Mills was one of the Tories captured at Kings Mountain, and was hanged later in an impetuous blood-letting at Biggerstaff's which reflected little credit on the Patriot military leaders. His son, William, was badly wounded at Kings Mountain, but managed to escape across what is now called Mills Gap to find refuge in a cave on Sugarloaf Mountain. He is believed to have been the first settler in Henderson County. Columbus is named for Dr. Columbus Mills, descendant of Ambrose.

This very disaffection of some citizens indirectly stimulated fresh emigration into Polk. Speculation syndicates acquired land confiscated from the Tories, and also land given to officers and soldiers for services in the Revolution.

Huge Holdings

One of the largest of the big land holdings in the area was acquired by Tench Coxe of Philadelphia in 1796. His boundary covered territory totaling almost half a million acres, now embracing Polk, Henderson, McDowell, Gaston, Union and Cleveland counties, as well as parts of Buncombe, Rutherford and Mecklenburg. Tench Coxe sold his land to Augusta Sackett, a New Yorker, and Sackett became the first of a long line of real estate promoters for the territory. With widespread and far from modest advertising, Sackett attracted a stream of settlers into the mountains.

Those who came to Polk were farmers, of course, and they found the valleys of the Pacolet and Green rivers fine for crops.

Gold Rush

Then came the discovery of gold, and until 1840 North Carolina was the

nation's principal source for this metal. What is now Polk was well prospected. Little productive mining was done there, but the gold rush brought settlers.

In 1846, the legislature created Polk, a small county from Henderson and Rutherford, but a squabble developed over location of the courthouse, and the General Assembly was so disgusted that in 1849 it repealed the act creating the county. After litigation over this repealing act, the General Assembly in 1855 repealed the repealer and once more Polk was set up in business, with Columbus fixed as the courthouse site. It is the only instance in North Carolina history of a county being erected twice.

The new county was a small one, totaling only 237 square miles. All of it lay on the southern slopes of the Blue Ridge, the county's northern boundary following the crest of that range. It had some of the characteristics of both Mountain and Piedmont regions, an oddity later exploited with establishment of Saluda as a summer resort, while 8 miles away Tryon flourishes as a winter resort. Elevations ranged from 750 feet in the south to 3,238 in the northwest. Then as now the terrain was pleasingly varied. The Blue Ridge sends long shoulders southward to the lower lands; rolling foothills break up the occasional flatlands and river plains.

Water Everywhere

The climate is salubrious, and the water trapped in the forested Blue Ridges is slowly released to stream over the county in dependable rivers and creeks. The Pacolet and Green rivers drain the county, the latter feeding beautiful Lake Adger, a Duke Power project used for recreation.

Thousands of springs gush from the slopes, and even the most realistic pioneers paused to admire the waterfalls, numerous and sometimes spectacular, such as Pearson's and Melrose. On the side of White Oak Mountain, a stream rushes down the precipice in two mighty leaps, and the water seems to pour over the very rim of the mountain, apparently pushed up there by artesian pressure. When a well was drilled for the Central High School near Mill Spring, water was struck at 138 feet and astonished the drillers by producing 40 gallons of water a minute

around the clock — pure and so cold it almost chatters the teeth.

Flora

Such benign physical characteristics stimulate the co-operation of nature. It has been said that Polk has a larger variety of plant life than any other county in the state. Flowering shrubs beautify the landscape.

Thermal Belts

To all this Providence added a novel bonus — the thermal or isothermal belts. Earliest settlers noticed these areas — some large, some small — of frost-free lands, and took advantage of them in their plantings. But they had neither understanding nor name for them. One especially warm cove was explained by a superstition. Here a family was burned at the stake by marauding Cherokees, and the diabolic heat of that outrage has never died, said the legend. However, scientific studies begun in 1861 by Silas McDowell of Macon County have resulted in a large volume of specific data.

Perhaps in no other county in North Carolina has the weather so shaped development. Early farmers planted the traditional cotton and grain crops along the river bottoms and creek bottomlands, but diversity reduced their importance. Agriculture has been more and more altered to take advantage of the variety of growing conditions — terrain, soil, climate — and few places offer farmers so many choices.

Agriculture

It may surprise some readers to learn that Tryon grapes are more important in romance than in economy. Of the \$2,138,592 farm income in 1958, grapes accounted for only \$12,000. The same is true of the well-known Saluda apples, which brought only \$105,000.

A crop rarely associated with Polk (in the popular mind) actually was a leading income producer. The county harvested 149,000 bushels of peaches in 1958 and for them received \$211,500. Cotton planting, once totaling 8,500 acres, was reduced to about 250 acres. But milk brought \$495,110, eggs \$348,000 and beef cattle \$97,750. In addition to these products, Polk commercially grows wheat, corn, sweet corn, tomatoes, snap beans, peppers, lima beans, cucumbers, watermelons,

(Continued on page 24)



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W. M. HESTER, Owner

A PERSUASIVE PICTURE

(Continued from page 12)

strawberries, cabbages and lettuce. There are 997 farms.

Civil War

Meantime, the twice-born little county organized around the courthouse at Columbus was still an infant when the Civil War struck.

Polk sent 303 men to the confederacy, and while no battles were fought in the county, Stoneman's raiders pillaged and it was plagued by bushwhackers and deserters. There was division of sentiment, and just before the war abolitionists set up "stations" for the "Underground Railway." Robbery and murder occurred, and a Ku Klux Klan was active. Disorders continued for a decade, and the new county was set back in the years when it should have been growing.

Rails Bring Growth

Not until the railway came did the section begin to revive. The rails, coming from Spartanburg, reached Tryon in 1877, and the painful construction to the top of the Blue Ridge began. Money ran out, and the state permitted the use of convict labor to speed the work. It was the first time prisoners had been used in this way, and casualties were so high that a legislative investigation was made of the situation.

The line reached Hendersonville in 1879 amid much jubilation. Apparently, the railway company was so exhausted by the ordeal that it decided to rest awhile. Buncombe County had put \$100,000 into the kitty and insisted, without avail, that the line be continued on to Asheville.

At last, Richmond Pearson introduced a bill in the General Assembly to forfeit the railway's charter. Before the bill was read a second time, work was resumed, and in 1885 the line was completed, fulfilling a dream of 50 years. The line later was leased to the Southern Railway for 99 years and is now a part of that company's system. The most spectacular thing about it, of course, is the record-breaking grade down the mountain from Saluda to Tryon — the steepest of any standard gauge in the east, or so it is said.

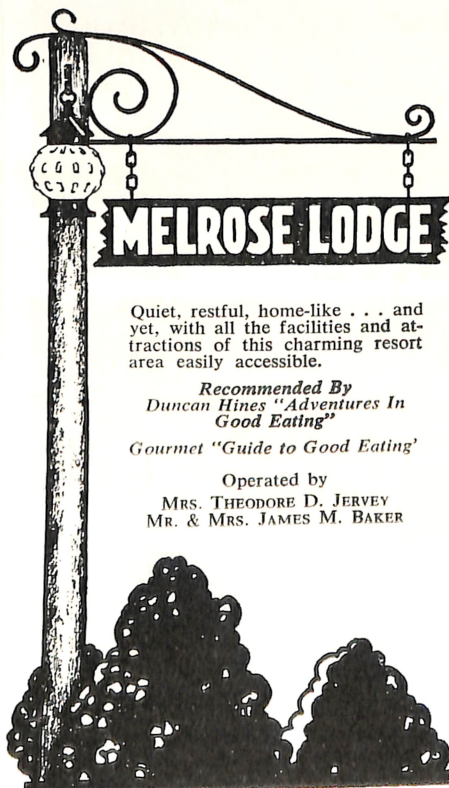
The modern era really began when more articulate settlers arrived. The first of these self-appointed press agents cannot be identified, but he probably came on the railroad along with less purposeful vacationists. Rail travelers from the lowlands discovered that at Pace's Gap they first and most conveniently encountered cool altitudes. Here the summer resort town of Saluda sprang up right on the crest of the Blue Ridges. It was an old route through the mountains, and was being used by wagons as early as 1793.

Later over this same route had come the horde of livestock driven from Kentucky and Tennessee to the cotton plantation country. Polk had shared in the boom created by demand of drovers for feed for their cattle.

Publicity for County

Before long — in the 1880's — newspaper and magazine articles about the "ozone" of Saluda, the thermal belts of Tryon, the scenery and the goodly soil began to appear.

One of the volunteer salesman was a politician, William D. Hill, who in a fulsome speech declared that he had spent six months in Polk County and his stay "has convinced me that the half



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- Fertile soil, long growing season
- Pure mountain water in abundance
- Level sites for cultivation or building, low building costs
- Exceptional recreational advantages, scenic beauty

THE MARKS OF A GROWING TOWN — Columbus is alive, alert, and growing, sparked by a public-minded, hospitable citizenry which is anxious to share its progress with newcomers. Some of the recent evidences of this progress are: two new county buildings completed last year, a new health center and county office building . . . construction of the new county consolidated high school about five miles from Columbus, to cost approximately \$384,000.00 . . . two new fire trucks . . . action of the Polk County Recreation Commission to build a swimming pool, picnic facilities, baseball diamond, and other park facilities on a seven-acre site in Columbus . . . installation of modern mercury street lights by Duke Power Company . . . new dial telephone system installed by Thermal Belt Telephone Co. . . . 36 new homes within the town limits, at a value of more than one-half million dollars; and other homes at the town outskirts . . . new church buildings.

DISCOVERING COLUMBUS — Motivating this vigorous growth is the fact that a steadily increasing number of people who are discovering the exceptional — and unique — advantages that a Columbus location affords for living and "making a living." Some of these are summarized above. Columbus affords the complete facilities for convenient modern living usually found only in relatively larger towns, yet citizens here enjoy the genuine friendliness and informality characteristic of small town living. The exceptional climate and the scenic mountains and resort attractions always available to Columbus citizens — including horseback riding, golf, hunting, fishing, boating, swimming, hiking, picnicking — are the exceptional ingredients that provide a "bonus" in good living here. Within a 45 mile radius are such population centers as Asheville, Greenville and Spartanburg.

The advantages of Columbus as an industrial location have been proven by the continued success of existing industries, the principal of which are Hatch Mill and Southern Woven Label Co., who together employ about 500 people. Columbus will welcome other suitable types of industrial development. Complete information and practical assistance will be gladly given in your investigation of this location.

Above all, the people in Columbus are good neighbors, interested and active in their community, working together for a full and pleasant life. Evidences of this are the Little League competition . . . the outstanding Boy Scout troop (4 boys achieved Eagle rank last year) . . . the social life, built around several Civic Clubs, two active garden clubs, a book club, Chamber of Commerce, Jaycee, P.T.A. and Masonic Lodge.

We invite you to visit Columbus; and while you're here, we hope you will consider coming to live with us. Many fine new people have — and are!



There is no limit to the opportunities for recreation in and around Columbus, like water sports at lovely Lake Adger. There are also golf, horseback riding, hunting, hiking, fishing, picnicking, camping and colorful spectator events in the area.



An advantage not always found in mountain communities is fertile, level and gently rolling land around Columbus—lowers residential and industrial building costs, and provides opportunity for expanded farming and ranching operations. Yet, there's always the inspiring beauty of the mountains in every direction.

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The care and feeding of the visitors, and the maintenance of the estate and more modest properties occupy several hundred. In addition, many Polk County people commute to jobs in Landrum and Spartanburg, S. C., to Rutherfordton, Hendersonville, and other nearby points.

While Polk people say they need more enterprises to provide opportuni-

ties for youngsters, the situation is fairly encouraging in terms of variety of occupations and growth.

And while the county abhors and has never had a "boom," it looks reasonably prosperous to the casual visitor. One reason for this appearance of well-being is the presence of so many people who have made their money elsewhere and here are spending it in leisurely fashion. Their tasteful homes and well-kept acres dot the countryside in every section, hidden in woods, clinging to mountains, or sunning in lush valleys, and they themselves swarm over their adopted land in tweedy content.

A native, scratching his head thoughtfully, tried hard to describe the people: "There are only two kinds of people here," he said, "those who are making a living and those who have already made it."

That is too simple for the visitor, for even in a state noted for its variety, Polk stands unique. Almost from the time of its settlement, migration has never halted for long. Into the little county has poured a stimulating and nourishing stream of mature citizens. The nourishment has not all been material, either. While it is true that newcomers to Polk usually are past the missionary age, the county did not escape the educating influence of their worldliness. And besides that, the "newcomers" are themselves a very part of Polk — its bone and blood.

It is neither South nor North. It is not mountain, piedmont nor plains, either in geography or people, and it is as much a summer place as it is winter. It is mildly agricultural, mildly industrial and commercial. Its contradictory nature is indicated by the fact that it is as often classified with the mountain resort county of Henderson as it is with the Sandhills resort county of Moore, and it is utterly unlike both. It is hospitable both to sedentary retired people and active sportsmen. It is unspectacular without being mediocre.

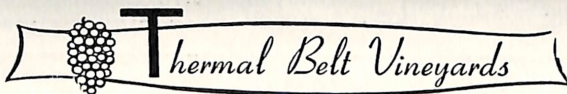
People in Polk feel and enjoy their identity with a peculiar environment. There is little snobbery in the modest living of these people, native or immigrant, but a part of their contentment is a realization that they are citizens of a distinctive country.

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had not been told. . . . Reverently, I have often thought that if the Creator could have made a more delightful climate than that enjoyed by this country, surely He has never done so. . . . Surely, Polk County is a favored land."

Perhaps through lucky accident, the section early began to attract professional writers who were not loathe to use the section as a subject, not only of published articles but of letters to their friends. For it is a fact that a great deal of the migration to this area has been from word-of-mouth recommendation. One man would bring down his kinsmen, and they would convert a neighbor.

This may be why the new citizens formed such a homogeneous group. Such a pattern of migration naturally brought alikes, and to this day "the same sort of folks" seem to join those already there. Carter Brown, a long-time resident, remarked that this was true even in the immigration of "specialty" groups. For example, in recent years a revived interest in the horse events had induced numerous horse-lovers to buy places in the county.

"But they're not the loud, extravagant horsy people," said Brown. "They are the type who want to get away from the dissipating, hard-living horse set."

Saluda got a head start on Tryon, which came into existence about 1890 as a spring and fall resort. At first both were primarily vacation places, but after World War I the emphasis began to shift to seasonal cottagers and year-around residents. No new hotels have been built in this generation, but two motels recently were built near Tryon.

This shift brought two new developments — one was the spread of the homeseekers throughout the county; the other was the development of industry. Polk's population became more stable and with a larger proportion of older citizens. Now, native and convert, the county has 11,627 people.

Industry

The county's industries lean to the textile side. They include the Hatch Mills and the Southern Label Company at Columbus; Tryon Processing Company, Southern Mercerizing, Adam

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