

# Cleveland County Native Historical Group Topic

By EDDIE SOUTHARDS  
Star Staff Writer

Thomas Dixon, a Cleveland County native, who was a newspaperman, actor, preacher, politician, novelist and film maker during his lifetime was the subject of a lecture last night at the regular quarterly meeting of the Cleveland County Historical Association.

Charles L. Sandifer, associate professor of English at Gardner-Webb College, spoke on the life and works of Dixon to an audience of about 75 historical association members.

Sandifer has specialized on the works of Dixon in his graduate study towards a doctorate degree.

Sandifer emphasized the dramatic elements in Dixon's life that later influenced his literary work.

Dixon was born in 1864 about six miles north of Shelby on Highway 18. He lived in or around Shelby for the first 22 years of his life.

Dixon attended Wake Forest where he won various medals for his debating ability and where he wrote his first play entitled "From College to Prison". This play was about a Shelby man who attended Wake Forest and was arrested and sentenced to prison for his activities in the Ku Klux Klan. This would later influence Dixon's greatest works.

Sandifer emphasized how Dixon's historical interest "romanticized and dramatized the Reconstruction period".

In 1884 Dixon started a small theater in Shelby where his plays were performed and where he often acted.

He ran for the state legislature at the age of 20 and won a seat. While he was a legislator he attended the Greensboro School of Law. Dixon opened a law office in Shelby in 1885.

Sandifer explained that Dixon used "stump oratory and slapstick comedy" to get elected to office.

As a lawyer Dixon had a

chance to display his "extraordinary talents as an orator".

Dixon later became a preacher in churches in Boston and New York City and wherever he went to speak he packed auditoriums to overflow.

In 1896 Dixon began a trilogy of novels that would propel him into the national limelight. The novels were titled "The Leopard Spots", "The Klansman", and "The Traitor". All three dealt with the Ku Klux Klan and the Reconstruction period of the South.

In 1914 Dixon and the famous film maker, D. W. Griffith, pooled their resources and made the first full length motion picture in history. It was titled "birth of a Nation" and was based on Dixon's trilogy of books.

Dixon made about \$1.25 million off his three books and another \$1.25 million off the movie. He lost the greater portion of these two fortunes in the stock market and the Depression of 1929.

Dixon, who had twice been a millionaire, died penniless in Raleigh in 1946.



**THOMAS DIXON REMEMBERED** — Mr. Charles L. Sandifer, associate professor of English at Gardner-Webb College, is shown speaking to the Cleveland County Historical Association last night on the life and works of Thomas Dixon, a Cleveland County native. Sandifer emphasized the dramatic elements in Dixon's life that later influenced his literary works. (Staff Photo)