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A Chatham Native Son: Wade Hadley

[Editor's Note: On 18 April and 14 May 1991 Wade Hadley and I sat in the living room of his Queen Anne family home in Siler City and talked about his early life in Chatham County, his career, and his activities since retirement in 1968. The following article is excerpted from those interviews. The tapes are on file in the Pittsboro Memorial Library.]

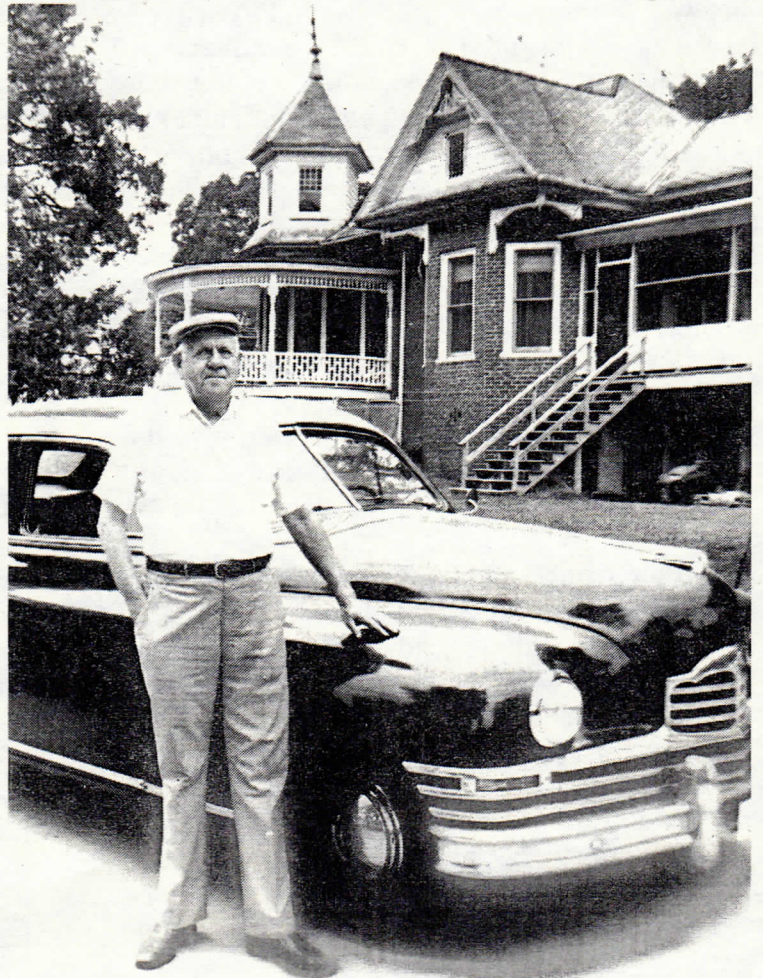
My interest in local history comes from my strong attachment to place or origin. In my active professional career of forty years, I lived in several cities and in foreign countries. During all of those years, it was always my desire and intention to return to my home town of Siler City upon retirement. I had the good fortune to achieve that goal. My neighborhood along East Raleigh Street had remained much the same. I returned to live in the house of my parents, where I had grown up from the age of eleven. From there I could still see the house where I was born, less than a block away.

On recalling the past, my thoughts turn to the rural family farm. Although my early recollections are of a time while living with my parents in a small town, both parents had been born on family farms and spent their formative years there. My maternal grandparents were then living on a family farm less than two miles away, and I made many visits there. The thing I like to recall about these farm families is their high degree of self-sufficiency. The farm was the family's main or sole source of income or livelihood; they raised most of their food, and much of their clothing was homemade. The sewing machine was a major household item and it was much in use. Looking back, I admire the modest but independent life of the family farm.

Wade Hadley, with 1949 Packard sedan and the Hadley family home in Siler City

[Photo by Jeff Davis, Chatham News, 21 Aug 86]

In recalling my early years, I think of the now-absent sounds I then heard: the natural sounds of cackling hens and crowing roosters, the barnyard sounds of cows and pigs, and the sounds of the hooves of horses clopping on a hard, dry road. Then there were the manmade sounds: of an axe felling a tree or chopping wood, the mill and railway steam whistles, and the church and school bells. Today there is much concern about pollution of the environment. I think manmade sounds or noise are one of the chief offenders -- the noise of automobiles, trucks, motorbikes, and chainsaws, the sirens on the ground and the jet planes overhead. All of those things disturb the tranquility of our environment and fray our nerves.



W. H. Hadley,
Owner and Proprietor

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Family Background

I am a linear descendant of one Simon Hadley, of English extraction, who was born in Ireland, came to America in 1712, and settled in New Garden township of Chester County, Pennsylvania. I am of the eighth generation of his descendants. My line of Hadleys came to North Carolina in 1758 and settled in the Cane Creek area of what is now Alamance and Chatham counties. They were originally Quakers but my direct line parted company with that denomination in 1823. Three generations of Hadleys operated grist mills on the streams of Chatham County, ending with my grandfather. That involved two mills. The first one was on Terrell's Creek in Hadley township; that was also known as Hadley's Mill. It was there by the 1820s, and there was a post office there at one time named Hadley's Mills. My great-grandfather stayed there a while and then bought a new mill down at Landrum Creek, the present Hadley Mill, which was written up for the National Register by Mrs. Eliza Robinson. The clearest recollection I have of it is that we were standing outside there watching the old water wheel, and I remember my grandfather went in and turned the water on, so we could see it running, and stuck his head out the window. When he moved to the new town of Siler City in 1887, his father (my great-grandfather) was living at the home by the mill, along with a married daughter, whose husband later operated the mill. My father was seven years old when the family moved to Siler City.

My maternal ancestors were Hanners, who had been living near the Siler City area since 1843, and in what is now Guilford County since before the Revolutionary War.

My father's business career was spent, mainly, operating a wholesale grocery firm in Siler City. I used to go down there and try to make myself generally useful. Starting when I was about eleven years old I would go to the office after school and seal the outgoing envelopes of mail. A year or two later during summer vacation I would affix address tags to outgoing goods with a little tack hammer. A lot of the items were packed in wooden boxes or containers at that time. As I grew larger I helped sort and stack incoming merchandise. We'd go

down to the freight depot and get the goods that were coming in. Sometimes the stuff came in car-load lots: sugar and salt and things like that. It was a big deal to unload it and bring it back to the building.

By the time I was fifteen we were delivering goods to country stores and neighboring towns by truck. I went out with them first as a helper and later as a driver. This was the only wholesale grocery firm in the county, though there were others in Greensboro and Sanford. Our territory included Gulf, maybe to Moncure, to Ramseur, Snow Camp, and Pittsboro. There were perhaps five or six working in the store, salesmen. [My father] could just pick up day labor from the street to help with handling the incoming freight.

We also shipped by rail. We would make up a car of goods and put it in the depot and ship to Goldston, Bonlee; that was even before the truck. If the goods could go by rail, we shipped that way. Then the trucks came and we could go to places off the railroad. [One of the major changes in my lifetime has been the difference between dirt roads, gravel roads, and paved roads.] Among the worst things were the dirt roads that got dusty in the summertime, and we can speak of right here where we are, in this room in the front of the house. In the summer when a car drove by there was just a cloud of dust behind it that would blow, and it was a nuisance. You had to keep the windows closed. And then of course there was the mud in the wintertime. We didn't get out on the road too much at that time, but when you did you might have to put on your chains to operate in the mud. [However] I would like to drive in the mud sometimes, slipping back and forth across the road. In the Model T days there was a certain romance to driving. You had lots of flat tires, punctures and blowouts, and you had to be good at changing tires and pumping them up, patching the inner tubes.

(This is the first part of a two-part article.)

The *Journal* is an occasional publication of the Chatham County Historical Association. Inquiries about articles may be addressed to the Secretary, CCHA, P. O. Box 913, Pittsboro, N. C. 27312

LIFE ON THE RURAL CHATHAM COUNTY FARM IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Sara Jo Blair*

At the turn of the century, Roundtop was a self-sufficient farm of 475 acres on Hickory Mountain. Here life in rural Chatham was as it had been throughout the nineteenth century.

The house was clapboard, built at least a generation before, with three bedrooms upstairs and two rooms downstairs. One of the downstairs rooms was the "parlor," the other the master bedroom with its big fireplace and featherbed. The master bedroom served as the family sitting room. The kitchen was a little shed on the back until the number of children grew and made it necessary to add a wing with two more bedrooms upstairs along with a guest room, dining room, and a larger kitchen downstairs. While there was no running water in the house — dishes were washed on the big kitchen table with water heated on the wood stove — there was a small room off the kitchen for bathing. Each room had a fireplace except the dining room, where a stove gave off more heat.

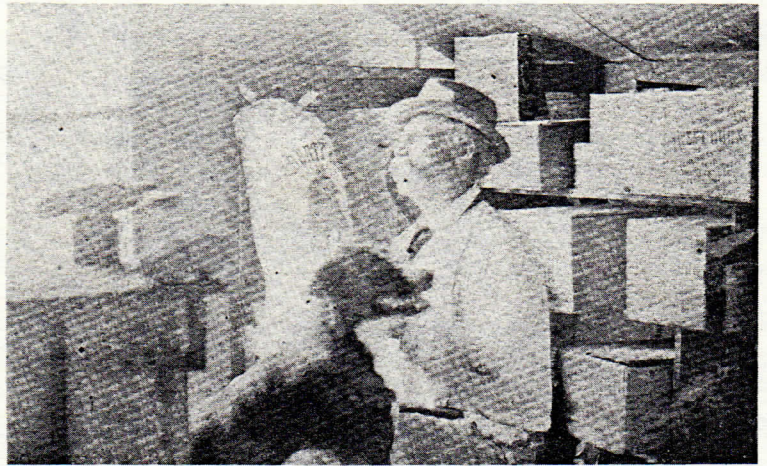
The farm's main crop was cotton, and the three or four tenant families were both black and white, working for shares or occasionally money at cotton-picking or garden time. On the farm was a large flock of sheep (kept for wool and meat), beef for farm use, geese plucked for feathers and down for beds and pillows but never eaten, as well as horses, mules, and several jennies (all ridden by the children).

Roundtop, recovering from a depression when cotton sold for five cents a pound, had its own cotton gin and saw mill, and ran a grist mill a mile from the house on a creek that fed the Rocky River not far away. Two new, great millstones were brought in about 1900 to grind the corn meal.

Roundtop had a post office and a store. The post office was one of three (Kimbellton and Lynhurst were the others) enroute to Liberty. The store sold staples and non-perishable items to tenants and nearby neighbors. The drummer, who often became a friend of the family, sold sugar by the barrel, apples, green coffee (to be roasted and ground), stockings, thread, sardines, raisins, candy, and flour. Nobody tended the store, which was located on the road and

Sara Jo Blair is the wife of Dr. Walker Blair, Jr., and lives in Burlington. A note with her manuscript reads in part: "This was the girlhood home of Mrs. Walker Blair Sr. However, it was written not as a family piece but only as a base to describe the typical back-country middle size farm. . . ." Information came from interviews with Audrey Womble Blair and Margaret Womble Sharpe, daughters of James David Womble (1859 - 1926) and his wife Adelaide May (1859 - 1922), the "mama" of the narrative.

The manuscript, billhead, and photograph were made available to the Chatham County Historical Association by Laura (Mrs. Henry) Blair, a charter member of the Association.



James David Womble in his store at Roundtop

kept locked. If a customer came, he had only to call and mama or one of her almost-a-dozen children would come to sell, or even trade an egg for a spool of thread.

In the kitchen mama canned and pickled summer vegetables on her "Happy Home Wood Stove." Into glass jars went green beans, kraut, tomatoes, strawberries, and cucumbers in brine (to be pickled later as needed). English peas were eaten as they came from the garden while other peas were picked by the tenants and dried. Apples, pears, peaches, watermelon, and strawberries all grew on the farm, and some apples and peaches were dried. When kitchen help or special help was needed, mama "rang the bell" for "Mamie" to come in from her cabin on the edge of the barn lot.

Social activities for the turn of the century family on the farm four miles from town centered around harvesting, the church, and town celebrations. Wheat thrashing came in early summer and lasted all day. The wheat had earlier been gathered in shocks in the field and taken by farm wagons to the barn loft to dry. Some 30 to 40 neighborhood men, both black and white, started by handing down the grain from the loft to the yard, where a single horse walked in a circle to provide the power to turn the gears that operated the threshing machine. The separated grain went into the garner and the straw was baled. The owner provided supper and perhaps toddies of corn whiskey or apple brandy, and the men would sing while they worked until dark fell. By the 1920s, the binder had come to Chatham, first pulled by horse and then by tractor. A machine was sometimes bought by a farmer and hired out and sometimes bought by a group for their own use. Now one machine goes through the field performing the entire operation.

In the fall after frost, the corn was brought into the barn lot and the ears piled into a chest-high pile 100 feet long. The tenants and neighbors — from 25 to 30 — would kneel down along the row to shuck the corn, throwing the corn over the pile in front and the shucks behind. The shucks were used for barn floor bedding in winter and later fertilizer. As at

wheat thrashing time, mama had supper ready for all. The blacks worked alongside, eating after the whites.

Church revival was an annual weeklong affair at the nearby Methodist or Baptist church. The presiding elder for the Methodists came from a nearby county (Fayetteville, Liberty, etc.) to hold his protracted meeting in July or August. Services began at 10:30 with a long time out for dinner, followed by afternoon services, and no child dared miss them. No evening services were held, for the church had no lights. Most families went to their own nearby homes at night; there was no camping on the church grounds as in earlier days. However, this was a time of visiting for the children, who would go home with one another each evening. A whole lamb was prepared for the week, and mama fried chicken each morning. There was always someone there without his "basket" because "he couldn't catch his lamb."

The entire family went into town for the Fourth of July celebration and to the Old Soldiers Reunion in August (veteran grandpa was still alive), taking always roasted lamb, fried chicken with thin, rich chess "cake" (that some had been known to pile five high on a plate), pies, potato salad, and biscuits. The children rode into town in a wagon with a black nanny while mama and papa came in the buggy. Later, the roomier surrey allowed the entire more prosperous family to ride together.

The older children attended town picnics at Kelvin Grove but by 1900 great picnic tables were laid in the cross of the ground floor of the courthouse. The ten- and twelve-year-old girls would slip in while their mamas were setting out the food and greedily eat all they could hold. Upon returning from such a trip nursing the children, "Ol' Aint Nancy Small" told mama and papa, "You can take Pittsboro and sew it in onions!"

Children on the Chatham farm often numbered a round dozen. They tended the store when called; took lunch to papa, brothers, and tenants working in the grist mill; rode anything with four legs; picked cotton with the tenants; slid or were pushed in a chair around the frozen creeks in the winter; and bathed neck deep clad in old dresses in the same creeks in the summer.

School was held no more than four months a year in a one-room schoolhouse. The teacher was a young

lady from Pittsboro, Miss Maggie Horne, who was hired by four Hickory Mountain families to teach their children. During the school session, she boarded alternately with the Burkes, Straughans, Griffins, and Wombles. This method of teaching by very young "gentleladies" with only a rudiment of education themselves prevailed in the post-reconstruction south during the last quarter of the century, until the rural public school system stabilized. This one-room, one-class, one-teacher gave many all the education they received.

The older Hickory Mountain children came into Pittsboro for school, attending either the Academy or the School for Girls on Hillsboro Street. Some of the young ladies both from town and the farms went on to the Littleton Academy, or other "finishing schools."

Visitors were frequent at Roundtop, and a guest room was maintained. The preacher often stayed on the farm when he came for protracted meeting. And when a distant cousin would appear with her basket, the children knew she would be there for a week, helping mama with the scratchy woolen pants that were made at home for the boys, perhaps from wool from the farm sheep carded either at Bynum or Dixon's Mill.

Whenever mama needed new quilts, she gathered all her scraps and called together five or six of her neighbors, who would bring needles and thread and in a busy day turn out a quilt. Dinner would be provided at midday, and the ladies would be back in their own homes by nightfall. This was not done on a regular basis, but whenever there was a need. And, of course, mama would go to the neighbor's when called. Quilting was always done in a home.

In the winter five or six couples were invited over after supper, along with a fiddler and banjo player, for an evening of dessert and dancing in the parlor. The adults danced the Virginia Reel or the Four-handed Reel while the children were allowed to watch — early in the evening only.

Roundtop is gone; only a few blackened chimneys and a grove of trees are left. But Roundtop, like many Chatham farms, leaves a heritage in piedmont Carolina that harks back to its original land grant of 1793, a heritage of sturdy independent farm families, well content with a day's honest labor. ■

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