The Chatham Historical Journal

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The Chatham Rabbit

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Chatham County once had a considerable reputation within North Carolina and beyond as the source of rabbits as an article of food. This was the indigenous cottontail rabbit, which then was abundant. A generation or two ago, this was common knowledge among the people living here; it is no longer true. What follows is a tribute to the Chatham rabbit, now that the period of its widespread renown is fading from memory. Records of the Chatham rabbit as a commodity between the years 1880 and 1920 follow.

Rabbits in Chatham County were first exploited for cash income by the sale of their skins. An article in the *Chatham Record* of January 29, 1880, on the rabbit trade reported: "But few people have any idea of the vast quantity of rabbit skins that are sent from this county every winter, and although they sell for ony three cents a piece, yet this brings no inconsiderable sum of money to our county." The article goes on to say that the great bulk of the skins went to the Raleigh market and a great many to a market in Greensboro.

After the opening of a railroad through western Chatham County in 1884, rabbits were shipped from there as an article of food to markets beyond the county and state. A newsletter from Siler City that appeared in the *Chatham Record* of December 10, 1886, noted that "On last Friday and Saturday 1752 rabbits were purchased at this place. Mr. B. N. Mann alone shipped 1076 to Baltimore."

The season for shipping rabbits extended from November 1 to January 31 of the following year. Eviscerated rabbits were packed in light wooden barrels for shipment.The cold weather during the season provided refrigeration. Local produce dealers at Siler City and other towns on the railroad bought and shipped rabbits along with chickens, eggs, and other country produce. They also bought and shipped quail until their sale was prohibited, starting in the fall of 1913.

W. S. Durham, the leading produce dealer at Siler City, placed the following in the local newspaper: "Durham's Rabbit Letter to the Boys

Dear Boys:

The rabbit season is here again and I am ready to buy. I want your rabbits and will pay you every cent for them I can afford to pay. I have a nice present for every boy who sells me his rabbits. Bring them along and I will treat you right.

Yours truly,
W. S. Durham"

Rural boys supplied a major portion of the rabbits bought by dealers. The rabbits were taken mainly in box traps and were the most desirable. Rabbits taken by shooting were less desirable as people eating them were apt to encounter pellets.

An article in the *Chatham Record* of February 9, 1905, recorded information taken from the Siler City *Grit* of a week earlier: "During the past season ending January 31st, 1905, about 40,000 rabbits were sold at Siler City at an average price of 8 cents each. If so many were sold at one railway station, how many were sold in all the county."

Unfortunately, files of the *Grit* prior to 1909, if they exist, were not available to me. The best records of the rabbit market in western Chatham are in the Siler City *Grit* from 1909 to 1917, while Isaac S. London was owner and editor. The issue of February 2, 1916, summarized seasonal shipments of rabbits from Siler City:

1909-1910	19,621	1913-1914	18,059
1910-1911	16,573	1914-1915	19,809
1911-1912	20,060	1915-1916	13,926
1912-1913	13,979		

Siler City was the major shipping point for rabbits within the county, and possibly for the state.

[Editor's note: This article was prepared for presentation to the Chatham County Historical Association on 19 January 1992.]

Figures for other towns in western Chatham for the 1911-1912 season were recorded in the *Grit* of February 7, 1912: from Bennett, 2,300; from Bonlee, 5,195; from Bear Creek, 9,740; and from Goldston, 2,500. These combined with the 20,060 from Siler City makes a total of 39,795 rabbits shipped from western Chatham County between November 1, 1911, and January 31, 1912. The average price paid for rabbits by the dealers this season was 8 cents each, which indicates that the farm boys and others in western Chatham County selling rabbits that season received about $3,183.

At the start of the 1916-1917 season, the price of rabbits at Siler City opened at 20 cents each but was down to 15 cents at the end of November. The high price may have been owing to World War I. In years past the opening price had been 5 cents to 8 cents per rabbit. Dealers in Siler City got from 25 cents to 30 cents a rabbit delivered in Richmond, Virginia. The ultimate consumer there paid an average of 40 cents per rabbit.

The Chatham rabbit was making news beyond the borders of the county near the end of the year 1903. The *Charlotte Observer* carried an article by a traveling man just returned from Raleigh, which was copied in the *Chatham Record* of December 24, 1903: "They are suffering terribly from an over-consumption of Chatham Rabbits. In an eating way, it's just rabbit all the time in the State Capital both at the hotels and in every household."

Chatham Sheriff J. R. Milliken was interviewed by a reporter of the *Raleigh Evening Times* in the fall of 1907 while in the capital city. Naturally, the conversation turned to rabbits, and Sheriff Milliken said, "People treat our rabbits as a joke but really the cottontail forms a big item in the commerce of the county." The editor of the Siler City *Grit* of November 3, 1909, said, "Numbers of state papers have made light of the Chatham Rabbit, saying it was the medium of exchange in the county, and other various slanderous statements."

Shipments of Chatham rabbits to northern states were recorded as early as 1886, and continued through the years. The *Grit* of October 6, 1909, carried an advertisement from a Mr. G. O. Sanders at Boston. He wanted 3000 rabbits by December 1 and would pay eight dollars per hundred for them as usually prepared for shipment. Confirmation that rabbits from Chatham County had gained national recognition was provided by the president of a Raleigh bank, who reported having seen "Chatham Rabbit" on the bill of fare at hotels in New York City, Baltimore, and Norfolk during a trip to northern states early in 1914.

The extensive rabbit market appears to have ended about the time of World War I or soon thereafter. No information on the subject for the year 1918 was encountered. The 1919-1920 season opened with dealers offering 15 cents to 30 cents for rabbits, and ended at 20 cents, but no figures on the number of rabbits shipped that year were found.

Some time after 1920 the local sale and eating of rabbits was diminished by reports of a disease among them. This was probably *tularemia*, which could be contracted by humans while skinning or cleaning rabbits.

The rabbit population of Chatham County is on a long-term decline, although some efforts are being made to prevent this trend. The 1991-1992 hunting season for rabbits was from November 23 to February 29. The daily limit was five and the season limit was seventy-five. Informal inquiry has revealed that the native rabbit continues to be eaten occasionally by people who relish Chatham rabbit and regard it as a favorite food in season.

The **Chatham Historical Journal** is an occasional publication of the Chatham County Historical Association. Its purpose is to disseminate items of historical interest about Chatham County. Material, which should be previously unpublished, may include photographs, private papers, church or organization records, monographs, or letters. Items should be of reasonable length and should include sources of information.

Back issues are available while they last: Vol. 1 (1988, No. 1, 2), $2.00; Vol. 2 (1989, No. 1, 2), $2.00; Vol. 3 (1990, No. 1, 2), $5.00; Vol. 4 (1991, No. 1 - 4), $5.00. Correspondence should be addressed to the Secretary, CCHA, Box 913, Pittsboro, N.C. 27312.

A Chatham Native Son: Wade Hadley

[This is the second of a two-part article based on interviews with Mr. Hadley. Tapes of the interviews are on file in the Pittsboro Memorial Library.]

Boyhood and Education

The school where I first started was located where the town hall is today. That would be about six or seven blocks, but we all walked to school morning and evening, and we came home for lunch. Then a new school was built just two blocks from my home, and I entered the new school [Paul Braxton] in the eighth grade. Some of the boys and girls from the country outside of town were coming here, and of course they would bring their lunch with them. A few of them drove a car, and one or

two rode a horse or mule back then. There were twenty-seven students in my high school class that graduated in 1927.

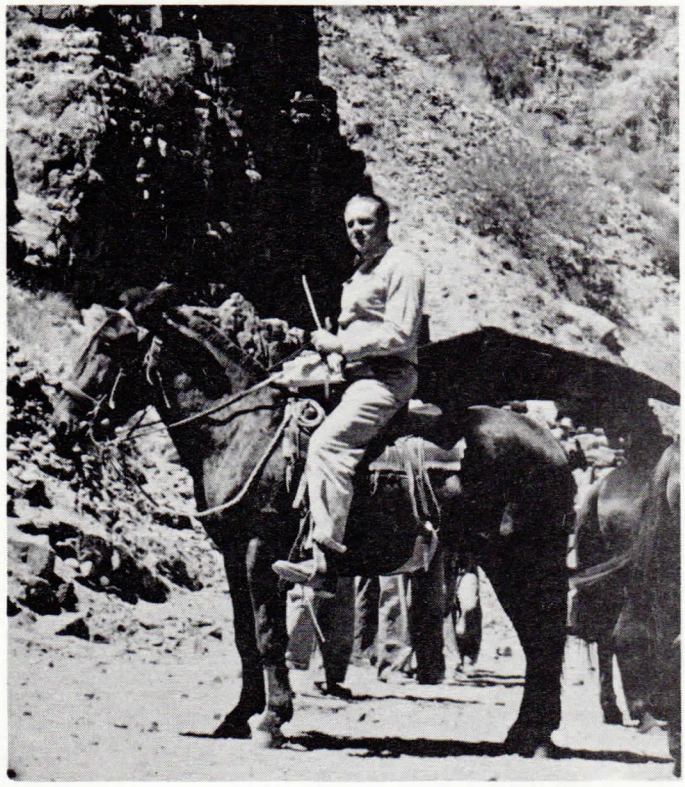
Actually, going to school was something you **had** to do. There wasn't too much ambition. I guess the best-known teacher we had there was the Latin teacher; we all had to take some Latin in those days. That was kind of interesting. I enjoyed picking up Latin because so many of our English words have Latin roots to them. A lot of the courses were just so-so. I never was attracted to sports.

The time seemed to pass rather fast, especially in the summertime. We used the old traditional swimming hole. There was a creek down south of town where we could go swimming, and then the favorite place was Hackney's Mill, which was on Rocky River. There was a place below the mill that they called Baptizing Hole, where the Baptists from Love's Creek Church had their baptizing after protracted meeting. As we got older and bolder, we went up and swam in the pond above the dam. And we'd go on hikes, tramp through the woods, pick blackberries, and in the spring of the year fly kites. Kite-flying -- that was an active sport. In the evening, the younger ones played hide-and-seek, or capture lightning bugs; and then of course we had the motion picture house in Siler City you could go to now and then.

My folks worked out a scheme for me [to earn money]. My father always kept a vegetable garden, and I would help them with that. When the string beans came in, they'd let me take a bucket downtown and sell them, and keep the money from that. The grocery stores were wanting fresh vegetables for their stock, and there was a man who operated a hotel and boarding house down there who would buy some for his table.

[I mentioned] that I worked down at the wholesale house. Since my father owned it, we thought about whether I ought to get into that family business or not. But it was apparent that I wasn't temperamentally suited for that type of work -- buying and selling. I was more [interested] in science, so I went over to Chapel Hill and, with my father's advice, the science of geology. He knew old Professor Cobb -- he was head of the geology department for a long time -- and I registered in the school of geology in the fall of 1927. I followed that as a career, and I've never regretted it.

I finished at Carolina in '31, with my bachelor's degree, and went to Cornell University after meeting a graduate student from there. I was leaning toward paleontology, the study of fossils. I stayed on at Cornell for two full years and was elected to the honorary scientific society, Sigma Xi. While I



In the Grand Canyon, August 1941

was at Cornell, I read a bulletin from Louisiana State University that really got my attention, so I decided to go down there and enter the graduate school. Those were the most enjoyable of all my student years. I got a little assistance, [with an appointment] as curator of the museum in the geology department -- the rocks, minerals, bones, and stuff like that.

Professional Career

One summer while I was down there, I got a job with an oil company during the summer vacation. They had discovered a new field near Lafayette, and I went over there as a sample washer. I got my first job in the spring of 1936, with what was called the Pure Oil Company, and moved to Fort Worth, Texas. After two years there I transferred back to Baton Rouge, and then was sent to the new office in New Orleans in 1941. After twelve years I [decided] that the next twelve years would not be much different, so I started looking for another job. I kind of had it in my head that I wanted to get into foreign work, so I landed a job with a subsidiary of Gulf Oil Company in Caracas, Venezuela. I went there in the spring of '48, and it turned out well; I was always glad I made that decision. I worked in Venezuela for fourteen years, going out on assignment to the big fields over in eastern Venezuela, and then in the west at Lake Maracaibo. I spent my last six years at the headquarters of our Latin American division, which was in Coral Gables,

Florida. I retired after twenty years with Gulf, in '68, and came back to Siler City.

Mines, Mills, and Gleanings

Soon after I returned home after retirement, Chatham County was about to celebrate its bicentennial. I heard that there was a group down in Pittsboro planning to write a county history, and so I went down there and joined them. That was my first contact with the Chatham County Historical Association. After coming back, naturally I was casting around for some worthwhile activities -- something to do, a hobby, pastime -- and that suited me quite well. So I participated in the assembling of the history book of the county, which was published in 1971.[1]

I enjoy learning of events which took place earlier than the span of my memory.

Well, I got deeper and deeper in it, the longer that time went on, and since then I've set up what I call my "Chatham County Notebook." Whenever I run across a stray bit of information pertaining to the county, or to towns and places in it, I jot those down.[2] Gradually background information built up there; there are around four hundred notes now. One great source is old newspapers. And then talking with other people. And courthouse records; there's a lot in the courthouse.

I have been led on by an interest in abandoned past activities such as mines, quarries, water-powered mills, and so forth. I enjoy learning of events which took place earlier than the span of my memory. One of my primary interests is Ore Hill. It's now called Mt. Vernon Springs, but the iron mines were there, and I've spent many hours rambling over that place, seeing the old shafts and ditches and trenches.

Then there was coal mining. I've always been interested in the coal mining down in Deep River valley, John Wilcox starting it, and then the Egypt mine. There was the Coal Glen mine, where they had the big explosion in 1925, where 53 men were killed. I remember that when I heard that happened, I went right down there and saw it. What did I see? Well, just a great crowd, standing around the mouth of the mine. The Department of Mines, or something like that up in Washington, D.C., sent down a rescue squad. They were traveling in a railroad car, and I got there just as that car was coming in. I remember seeing the first members of the rescue squad going down into the mine, with their uniforms and lights on their heads. This was a sloping mine, and the railroad cars ran on a track, pulled by a cable and run by a steam engine.

There were talc mines around Glendon. Talc is used to make talcum powder. And in old automobile tires -- when we used to have inner tubes, you put powder between the casing and the tube to reduce the friction. All these facilities, except coal mines, were abandoned long ago, and there's just something fascinating about the old abandoned activities. Mill sites are numerous, and since they built a dam, those are pretty permanent structures. They get breached and broken away but you can always find remnants in there. And the mills were on stone foundations; you can find those. I got interested in this river navigation project[3] and went to a lot of those old sites. So that's just one of the things that kept leading me on.

Of course, I'm interested in a lot of other things -- anything that happened before my span of memory. The record of a county's history grows with the passing of time. Some of today's events may be recorded as history a hundred years from now. The resources available at any one time are fixed, and non-renewable, in some way comparable to an isolated lode of some mineral within an area, say gold for instance. After the rich and easily accessible veins of ore are exhausted, we turn to leaner ones, and then to near exhaustion. In mining terms, we progress from a state of bonanza to a state of borrasca.

An account of past events in the life of an area is one definition of history. As the account progresses we trend toward minor and less important events. I feel that our progress in Chatham County history has now progressed to the stage of making better known obscure information rather than presenting it for the first time. That's why I proposed the **Chatham Historical Gleaner** as the name for the main publication of our county historical association.

NOTES

1. *Chatham County, 1771 - 1971*, edited by Wade Hampton Hadley, Doris Goerch Horton, and Nell Craig Strowd, Second Edition. [Durham, N.C.: Moore Publishing Company, 1976]

2. See back issues of the *Chatham Historical Journal* for examples of "notes" polished by Mr. Hadley into articles.

3. *The Story of the Cape Fear and Deep River Navigation Company, 1849 - 1873*, by Wade H. Hadley. [Chatham County Historical Society, 1980]