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Memories of Beaufort in the Nineties

By Thomas H. Carrow

(This is the fourth in a series of sketches on Beaufort during the 1890's).

XIII

Food

Where there is life, food is an important question. It may be true that man cannot live by bread alone; nevertheless, he doesn't thrive very well without it. Everything considered, it is probable that man devotes more energy to securing his "daily bread" than to everything else combined. Thus, I am constrained to mention something about the food our people consumed in the nineties.

"Meat and bread" was not only the principal diet, but for many, it was almost the exclusive diet. I am unable to say what proportion of the bread consumed was made of wheat flour and corn meal respectively. It seems to me that the poorer people were, the more corn meal they ate, while the better advantaged ones ate more flour. As a child I could not, or thought I could not eat corn bread, and I knew of many others who felt the same way. I think that corn meal sold by the peck at 15 to 20 cents. Flour sold at three cents per pound or less. Thus corn meal was only about one-third as costly as flour. A popular brand of flour was Wylie Smith. Corn meal had not reached the status of a brand. As far as I can tell, there has been no change to speak of in the quality of corn meal and flour. My mother's biscuits and corn bread were just about the same as those made by her great grandchildren today.

But when we come to meat, especially beef, there is a different story. Range cattle were used for food almost exclusively. Rarely were they "fattened" as they are now. There were no refrigerators and, therefore, beef was invariably consumed within a day or two after it was slaughtered. It was, in consequence, often tough and had a grassy taste.

Lamb and mutton were handled in the same way with the same result. With pork it was different. A great many people, even in town, kept a pig and fed it well till it reached maturity. Pork, it seems to me, was just as palatable in the nineties as now which is another way of saying hogs were well fed. Every farmer and many town people put away a barrel or part of a barrel of salt pork. My guess is that fully 75 per cent of all meat eaten was fresh and salt pork.

Salt pork and collard greens with corn dumplings thrown in were popular. But my recollections is that, as a general rule, vegetables were not consumed by Beaufort people to the extent they are today; salad, rarely ever. There was one exception—sweet potatoes. Everybody, I think, ate them in abundance as long as they lasted. White potatoes, "Irish" as we called them, were not nearly as popular as sweet potatoes.

Fish was a mainstay. Seems to me our family had fish on the average of three or four times a week. They were more plentiful and less expensive than beef. The quality and the variety were just the same as now, but I notice the present price is almost prohibitive. How often I have craved a "mess" of spots, hogfish, corned mullets, trout, flounder, or blue fish "just out of the river," cooked like my sister cooked them, dipped in cornmeal and fried in pure lard.

I am reminded of a very pitiful situation I witnessed many a time. It was not uncommon for fishermen to make a good catch only to find a glutted market and starvation prices. Occasionally the opposite was true. In any case, the lot of the fisherman was always hard. They had to "buck" the winds and tides with their sailboats, not to mention the calm, which necessitated rowing to and from the fishing grounds. It's a far cry from a canoe equipped with a sail and oars to the motor boat used at present by the fishermen.

My recollection is that before rubber boots were available, the fishermen stood overboard up to their waists in the water when they made a haul, even in moderately cold weather. That required plenty of fortitude.

A good percentage of the men on "back landing" and "down east" engaged in fishing. My impression is that their vocation gave them a kind of uniform mein, something like running a locomotive stamps an engineer.

Coming back to food, there's one item I must not omit—watermelons. A lot of new strains have been developed since the nineties, but there never was and there never will be one superior in color, flavor, and saccharine quality to an old-time Bogue Sound watermelon. To me, and at least to many of my colored friends, the Lord did his level best to please the palate when he made a watermelon, and nearly everybody in Beaufort liked them and ate them. Even a big one cost only a nickel, or at most, a dime. God save the mark!

XIV

Music

It is my very clear impression that there was considerable musical talent in Beaufort in the nineties. Unfortunately, it was not developed to the extent it was in the following decade. I remember very well the faces of those who sang well and played the piano or the organ. I also remember how well several played the mouth organ, banjo, or guitar. The tunes were mostly ballads and hymns; there were few classical performers.

Miss Lottie Roberts had considerable ability at the piano and Miss Lucy Davis did also. The late Mrs. Sallie Duncan Dickinson accompanied us children on the organ at her home. Mrs. Nathan Carrow performed the remarkable feat of playing the organ at Sunday services for the Episcopal church choir, although she did not know a note; she played by ear. Miss Maud King was the soprano and a very excellent one, and Mr. Jake Gibble, Jr., was the basso profundo in the same choir. Mr. Jim



TOM PRIDDEN

Wood for fuel was sawed by hand. Pictured here is one of the well-known sawyers in Beaufort during the 1890's.

Davis, a tall handsome man, a regular attendant at church, had a fine bass voice. His daughter, Etta, also sang well.

Coming down the street to the Baptist church, I recall that Miss Lucy Davis was the organist and that Jinx Rice was the bass, and a very powerful bass it was. I am not sure whether Leslie Davis had arrived at the choir stage before I left home or not, but I do know that in later years he had a fine tenor voice and did sing in the choir. He also played the fiddle. In fact, the John Davis's were a musical family.

In the Methodist choir there was Mr. John Wolf who played his cornet with considerable éclat while Miss Fannie Dudley (later Duncan) displayed a fine soprano voice and a remarkably attractive appearance. I am sure she would have excelled on the stage. Miss Maud Dudley had a lovely contralto voice.

I enjoyed music more at Mrs. Arrington's than elsewhere. She was the piano teacher of Beaufort, the only one I remember, and she had a lovely daughter, Maggie, who married Cecil Taylor. Maggie could not only play the piano and lead the songs for the children, but she was so winsome that all of us boys rather envied Cecil who captured her fancy at an early age. She had lovely long black curls and a lovely complexion—and no paint either! I recall a song that was popular with us children that Maggie sang with much feeling. It ran:

Doris was a village maiden,
Little did she know,
Save the sentence I had taught her,
Oh, I love you so . . .

A very popular waltz at the time was "Over the Waves." Rag time had not arrived, but there was a popular song that approached it, "All Coons Look Alike to Me," and another one, "There'll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight."

The following songs were popular: "On the Banks of the Wabash," "Nelly Gray," "Tenting Tonight on the Old Camp Ground," "Old Black Joe," "Swanee River," "The Mocking Bird," and "In the Gloaming." "Turkey in the Straw," and "Georgia Camp Meeting" were popular as dance pieces. The latter was preferred for "cakewalk." There was a tune called "Fisher's Horn Pipe" that was a standby for square dancing.

Negroes are rhythmic in both body and mind. They displayed this predisposition to my great satisfaction when I was in my teens. There were a number of negro men, I judge in their early 20's, who used to get together in the evening and sing. "Bud" Washington had a fine bass, and some of the Davis boys had melodious voices. Their opportunities for instrumental music were limited, but one fellow, "Bill" Kelly, was a marvel with a banjo. In the evening on a summer night, he would come down town, stand on the corner and pick his banjo endlessly to the great delight of the young men and to some of the older ones too.

A banjo is suitable for clog dancing, and some of the colored boys were expert at it, but they didn't even require music for clogging. A clapping of the hands, especially if done by a number and in the right time, would serve the purpose. I think my own penchant for clog dancing was absorbed from the colored fellows. I would watch them and envy them and then get off by myself and imitate them. Thirty years later at our annual Railroad Convention in Chicago and other cities, I was able to amuse my colleagues by giving them an exhibition of the clog I learned in Beaufort in the nineties.

As everyone knows, music stirs religious emotions. Thus, I have seen colored congregations swayed to the point of frenzy, first by the overpowering oratory of a clever preacher, then by the simple spiritual songs that were the vogue among the colored people in the nineties. I recall a night in the colored Methodist

Church where some of us children had gone to witness the spectacle, seeing the whole congregation standing around the penitent ones who had been converted, singing and shouting in delirious excitement.

I think it no exaggeration to say that negroes, especially women, sang while at work in the fields, in the home, and elsewhere more generally than white people did. Their repertoire was very limited and largely hymns or so-called spirituals, often jumbled. But the songs always had feeling.

The whites were also susceptible to the effect of hymns, at revival meetings in particular. When the time came to render "Almost Persuaded," those who had hesitated until then, would go up to the "mourner's bench" and confess their sins and wickedness, as I did on one occasion. Evangelists are all psychologists along musical lines! Shakespeare said it: "The man that hath no music in himself, nor is not moved with the concord of sweet sounds, is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils."

My theme has been music. So it is pertinent to add that with musical instruments provided and teachers available, the boys and girls that came after our generation soon learned to play and sing on a much bigger scale than my contemporaries did. It was "in" our people and it came "out" at the first opportunity.

I forgot to mention the brass band that had a rather uncertain existence. When it played on the sails up and down the harbor, it seemed to be music from Heaven to us children. The strains of the bass horn, played by Mr. Mayo, whose cheeks looked as if they would burst, stood out above the rest as the boat with its white sails glided over the water. "If music be the food of love, play on" . . . the young folks, in close proximity to each other would think, especially if it were in the moonlight.

XV

Sails and Sail Making

"Sailing, Sailing Over The Bounding Main," was one of the most popular songs with the boys and girls of the nineties. We never went on a sail on which this song was not sung with all the enthusiasm of youth.

Now, a sail, when hoisted to the top of the mast, boomed out and "full" of wind is a graceful sight and making a sail in proper dimensions without its bagging is a fine art. It was also a very important business in the pre-motor boat era and even more so before the advent of steam boats. There may have been others, but the only sail maker I remember was Mr. James Whitehurst, who lived in the northwest section of Beaufort. After he cut the canvas to very accurate measurements, the several strips were sewed together. He would then lay the sail out on the grass in the street and measure and cut the rope that was run around certain parts and securely sewed to them.

There were three principal types of sails: a sharpie sail, a skiff or canoe sail, and a sloop or vessel sail. Mr. Whitehurst was a highly intelligent man and had a fine reputation as a sail-maker. Imagine anyone spreading a sail across the street in this automobile age!

In these days of super power from steam and combustion engines and electric motors, we are likely to forget what a boon the invention of the lowly sail was to mankind.

When I think of the sailing boats that plied the inland waters and the vessels that plied the main, it gives me a nostalgic feeling; of all the memories that punctuate a varied life, none are more delightfully impressive than those of sailing both small and large boats. It's an event in a child's life to learn to row a boat. It is a more impressive experience to steer a small sailboat. It is a dream come true when the captain of a sailing vessel "gives" a boy the wheel and tells him to steer a sailing vessel by the compass, with, say, two gibs, a foresail, a mainsail and a topsail all afloat. I can remember well the first time I did it. It was on the good ship "Cherubim," Captain Ben Congleton, in 1896, as we cleared the sea buoy bound for Baltimore.

A power boat maintains her course in the sea with a sort of uniform undulation. But either a little boat or a large vessel under sail, gracefully lunges down the incline of the wave and partially pauses as it rises to the crest, the driving force of the wind being in a state of constant variation because of the unequal thrust of the waves, the angularity of the sail to the wind, and the position of the rudder.

When a boat careens, it is the result of one force, the waves, the extent of which is proportionate to the size of the waves; when a sailboat careens, she is subject to both the wind and the waves and the judgment of the man at the helm who is constantly appraising the stress of the wind and the force of the waves without a moment's inattention. What can be more delightfully thrilling than to be at the helm of a fine boat in a sou'wester blowing strong enough to submerge the leeward gunwale, but without danger of doing so if the helmsman anticipates what may happen and regulates the movement of the boat accordingly.

Power boats? Fine! But for sheer pleasure, give me the rollocking main under a sail in a stiff breeze.

XVI

Homes

Food, clothing, and shelter are the three major requisites for living. I have touched upon the first two. I will now make some reference to the homes of Beaufort in the nineties.

The best houses used for human occupancy, with very few exceptions, were built prior to 1890, but I have no information as to dates. Beginning at the west end of Front street and coming all the way down to the Inlet Inn, there were very few, if any, vacant lots.

Ann Street was also built up almost continuously from west to east. The streets running north and south from Front to Broad were also fairly well built up. The more pretentious dwellings were in this zone. In all of Beaufort, I recall only one

brick dwelling, but after the big fire on Front Street in 1888 the stores were made of brick.

It would be interesting to know how many dwellings were built before the ravages of the Civil War. I gather from fragmentary memories that a good percentage of the people in Beaufort were well fixed financially, prior to the War. Some, I believe, made their money in ocean-going vessels, and some in trading tar pitch and turpentine, and some in cotton and other commodities.

Under any circumstances, the Duncan house, at the extreme west, the Manson house, the Davis house, the Nelson house, the Perry house, now occupied by J. F. Duncan, the William Sabiston house, the Tom Thomas, Sr., house, the Fuller house, the Dill house, all on Front street, represented what seems to me to be rather fine specimens in house architecture. I fancy they lean toward the English type. Same is true of the John West Noe house and the Henry Buckman house on the extreme west end of Ann Street, the Saunders house, the Forlaw house, the James C. Davis house, the Net Taylor house, the Maybelle Macé house and others on Ann Street.

On leaving Front and Ann Streets and the few cross town streets I have mentioned, with few exceptions the house construction was very plain and simple and often very small for large families. There were a few exceptionally fine houses, away from the elite section. For example, the Benders Jones house, the "Benny" Jones house in the northeast section; the John Rumley house and the John Dill house, to mention only a few. I should also include the Norcom house where "Miss" Carrie has lived, to my knowledge, for some 60 years, and the Roberts house on the corner of Ann and Craven streets.

The home furnishings, compared with what the people are using today, were modest. I can't remember any bed springs. I think I never slept on them till I left home. In a number of homes, there were very handsome pieces. Pianos were usually ornate.

Feather beds were in universal use. I am of the impression that even very poor people managed to have feather beds. I can't say where the feathers were secured or what kind they were. It does seem to me that the feathers from geese were used, but geese were not very plentiful. I have no recollections of feathers being sold in the stores. I imagine many families accumulated them over long periods from their own pickings of geese or other fowl.

I remember that a man with an outfit for cleaning feathers came to town and did some business. Seems to me he exhibited some bugs he got out of the feathers in the process of cleaning in order to encourage patronage. Feathers are unique in that they don't wear out. I imagine there are plenty around 50 years old, perhaps 75.

I recall very definitely that some of the less fortunate, both white and colored, made beds of straw; that is, dried grass from the fields. It had one merit, a delightful odor, but it soon became packed rather hard. I know of a young colored fellow who for a time slept on the hay in the barn of a farmer for whom he worked.

I have slept in hundreds of beds all over the world, but on a winter night with no heat in the room, the best bed I ever slept in was my childhood feather bed, making due allowance for my childish prejudice.

I do not recall that lawn mowers had come to Beaufort up to 1900, and pretty lawns as maintained by the late Claud Wheatly, Sr., at his Front Street residence were rare. Indeed, I don't know how a lawn could have been maintained except by the grazing of sheep or cattle.

Many women kept pretty flower gardens. Roses and narcissus and daffodils were the most popular flowers with mignonette around the borders. Cape Jassamines (gardenias) were "imported," it seems to me, a little while prior to 1890. I recall the fragrance of these flowers on the John Marshall place just out of town, when I was a wee bit of a boy. It could be detected a mile away as you approached the farm, a kind of preliminary to viewing a beautifully-maintained home.

Speaking of dwelling houses, I notice that some now going up in Beaufort are of brick construction and have all the modern facilities available anywhere in the world. I also notice that some of the newer places are suited to the pocketbook of the occupant, but nevertheless have the latest electrical and plumbing facilities, thanks to scientific development. The poorest people in Beaufort and everywhere else in the U. S. A. today have more facilities and conveniences for living than the rich did in the nineties.

Of all the things I remember about homes, both white and colored, the most vivid is how some women, no doubt aided by their men folks, kept their places inside and out scrupulously clean and neat. Shining examples were "Miss Lydia Ann" Noe and Mrs. Celie (David) Williams, who lived in the northwest section of Beaufort. Nearby lived "Miss Sallie" Whitehurst who belongs in the same classification. How I loved "Miss Sallie's" biscuits and molasses. "Miss Liddy Ann" also looked after my appetite and in addition gave me wormwood for my health in the Spring! God bless her soul! She had four fine daughters and one son; Annie the youngest, was one of my playmates.

Bodily cleanliness was an obsession with me even as a child. Thus, I recall a Beaufort institution, the wash woman. Nearly every family of any means had a wash woman who called for the clothes, washed and ironed them in her own home and returned them, usually on Saturday. My recollections is that 50 cents would pay for a family wash. I have often wondered how they did as well as they did, remembering the lack of water and other facilities. There were no washing machines, and the old-fashioned washboard, Higgins soap, a flat iron heated by a wood fire were all the facilities available. They often sang or hummed as they moved up and down the board.

(To be Continued)