

Making It Through The Depression

"They used to tell me I was building a dream,
With peace and glory ahead . . .
Why should I be standing in line
Just waiting for bread?"

The vanquished dreams of the Roaring 20s could be summed up in the lines from "Buddy, Can You Spare a Dime?" a popular song of the Depression era.

Bankers and other businessmen were leaping from windows and the like. But for black people in America, it was just another difficult time that had to be dealt with.

So it was in Winston-Salem. Times were not as hard as in other localities for the simple reason that people continued to smoke cigarettes. As long as they did, the factories of the Camel City were ready to supply the demand.

Prices were not as high. One could ride a bus for a nickel. Buy a chicken for a quarter. But the poverty of the Depression era by no means constituted the good old days.

If you remember those days, we'd like to hear from you about the sacrifices and struggles you and/or your family faced.

The era of the Depression is hard for most younger persons to conceive of. The idea of banks failing on a massive scale and long breadlines is a bit farfetched to anyone who did not live through it.

That observation reminds us of one of the letters which have come in about the Roots series. A young student in the public schools writes that the series opened a world of history he had not previously known existed.

It prompted him to wonder why he had not been exposed to that history in the public schools. A big part

of the reason is the lack of source materials about much of black history, a problem we have faced in our research.

That lack makes us all the more grateful to people like Charles T. Martin, who upon reading our notice about the 59 black grocers in Winston-Salem, brought in a shot of his uncle, J.C. Smith.

We found during his visit that the late Mr. Smith had left a legacy which still exists — apartment buildings still standing on Patterson Avenue and a chapel named in his honor at the First Baptist Church.

Speaking of helpful people, we can't ignore George Booie, who this week brings his first hand memories of some of the city's most interesting characters and of the park that he once managed.

George Black Celebrates 102nd

George Black turned 102 years of age last Thursday, Feb. 22.

No matter how many birthdays he adds to his, much of what he has learned is sure to outlast the years.

Black built Winston-Salem brick by brick, hand-made bricks, in an interview at his home on Dellabrook Road on the occasion of the 102nd birthday.

It wasn't an idle boast, the centenarian can be seen at hospital buildings, factories, banks and much of Old Salem as the output from his hands.

Black just shows what a man can do if you give him half a chance, Black of his life of accomplishment. "I didn't go to school, but what I learned, I learned."

Black learned was the speed to make bricks by hand as fast as possible. "I also learned to be a butcher," Black said as an aside.

Black's father had to come from Liberty to Winston-Salem to retrieve his father from there.

Black hired my father named R.W. Hedgecock related. He stayed two or three days to work and the man who could carry brick, would pay us 50 cents.

Black's father returned for me and his brother. "I never will forget said Black. "We

walked to Greensboro, spent the night and then walked over here. As we entered town, we crossed this railroad trestle. My head started to swim. I had to get down and crawl across."

Within weeks, Black's father had died and the two boys were left to fend for themselves. They continued working at the Hedgecock brickyard, gradually picking up the skill of brickmaking.

Sometime in the early 1900s, Black said he asked his brother, "Why can't we buy us an acre of ground and make brick for ourselves and get what they get and what we get too."

"He told me, George, we're colored and folks won't buy from us on account of us being colored. Then we won't have nothing but brick."

I said, 'Well they'll buy from us if they can't get it anywhere else.'

Black recalls, "I wasn't satisfied." He bought an acre of land near the current site of the St. Benedict's school and church on Hattie Avenue, built a mudmill and began making bricks on the side.

"The man I was working for got wind of it," recalled Black with a smile. "By then, I had half-a-kiln (50,000) of brick. Old man Hine (of what had become Hine and Hedgecock) came and looked at it and was really surprised."

"He said, George Black, brickmaking ain't what you think it is. I told him I thought I had made enough bricks to know what it is, but if I didn't, I said, I'll find out what it is."



George Black and Daughter

It just so happened that a kiln (100,000) of bricks were needed for the construction of the nurses' quarters at the City Hospital (built in 1914). No one was able to supply the bricks but one George Black.

"So I sold those bricks and made more money off than that I had ever made in my life."

From that start, the Black brickyard grew to an operation which employed "at least 18" employees in two brickyards. Black later moved his operations from Hattie Avenue to behind

his current home at 125 Dellabrook Road."

Black himself does not know all the buildings in Winston-Salem constructed with his brick. "People would just come and pick up a hundred thousand bricks and you wouldn't know where they were going to use it."

His brick is in 15 banks in the city, according to historian Louise Hamilton, Baptist Hospital, the Salem College Library, and some of the city's finest mansions.

Black recalls his brick being used in the R.J.

Reynolds plant at 5th and Church sts. and in the restoration of Old Salem.

In 1971, his craft was the subject of a national television show. Soon thereafter, he was sent by the U.S. Agency for International Development to Guyana to teach brick-making.

At the age of 102, George Black has seen a multitude of changes. When he first walked into the city, "There were just some houses on Liberty Street and that was about it."

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Contestant Mozell Hairston is judged during a bathing suit contest at the Robinhood Park during the late 1930s.

Black Communities Emerge

In the "shotguns" of Ragshake, Bloomtown, the Pond and the other black communities which had developed in Winston-Salem by the 1930s, the beginning of the Great Depression meant hard times, but it wasn't the end of the world.

Mrs. Mary L. Fair remembers lay-offs at the tobacco factory where she and her husband worked. Other workers' time was cut back.

"My husband worked just three days and made \$9; I made \$5," she recalled. "But food wasn't high then," Mrs. Fair added. "A 24 lb. sack of flour only cost 75 cents."

The Fairs supplemented their income by selling cosmetics on weekends and by selling fish sandwiches and fried apple pies to their co-workers for lunch.

Before going further, let us explain what a "shotgun" is. A shotgun is a small house with no rooms, so named because a shotgun blast would travel straight through it without interruption.

Although many blacks had built themselves better homes, a lot of families still lived in "shotguns". By the 1930s, the black households had gathered in the following neighborhoods:

- Belview — below Sprague Street in southern Winston-Salem.
- Bloomtown — near Cleveland Ave. between 12th and 14th Sts.
- Columbian Heights — around Winston-Salem State.
- Happy Hill — at the current Happy Hill Gardens.
- Liberty-Patterson — from the black business district eastward.
- Monkey Bottom — on the site of the current bus terminal.
- New Richmond — across Cleveland Ave. between 7th and 9th Sts.
- The Pond — along North Trade Street past 9th St.
- Ragshake — near the site of the Merita bakery at 12th and Liberty Streets.
- Silver Hill — behind the Reynolds High School.

• West End — from Watkins Street beyond the Interstate highway. There was also a small neighborhood called "Five Rows," named because there were two rows of five houses each, near the current intersection of Reynol-

da Road and Silas Creek Parkway. Its residents worked the farms on the Reynolda estate.

Local historian Joseph Bradshaw says there was also a group of black Moravians who lived at the base of Broad Street.

Despite the poverty which afflicted most of those neighborhoods during the Depression, the 30s stand out as the period when two of the most enduring institutions in the black community of Winston-Salem were built — Atkins High School and Kate B. Reynolds Hospital.

The first high school for blacks had begun in 1894 with the renovation of the Depot Street School. It continued to house high school students until 1923. The Columbian Heights High School began accepting students in 1917. By 1922, 10 classrooms had been added and all black high school students attended that facility.

Those facilities proved not to be sufficient. In 1931, with funding from the Rosenwald Fund and bonds from the city of Winston-Salem, "The Winston-Salem Negro High School" was built.

Although the school became Atkins Senior High School at a later date, the dedication program for the April 2, 1931 Ceremonies makes no mention of Simon Green Atkins, the then-veteran president of Winston-Salem State Teacher's College.

The opening of the school was hailed by the black community. The new plant had workshops, science labs, sewing rooms, study halls and 27 classrooms on a 30 acre site (including the 14th Street Elementary School). It was the first school building in the city built with a structural steel frame.

There is a bit of a controversy about who were its first graduates. After dedication, students at Columbian Heights were moved to the new school, although there were only a few weeks left.

The seniors who had spent most of the year at Columbian Heights were graduated from the new school. However, members of the class of 1932 claim they are the first graduates of Atkins.

Also emerging in the community were the black branches of the YMCA and YWCA. The latter had gotten off to a

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Class of 1933 of Atkins High School. A meeting of the class is scheduled for later this year.

