



A mountainside was cut out with pick and shovel to build the Stackhouse residence.

Memories Of Community That Vanished

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"This is sort of a ghost town," Gilbert Stackhouse, 72, said as he took his noon-day rest on the porch of the Victorian house on the mountainside above the French Broad River in Madison County.

The big Queen Anne-style house with its turrets and curving porch looked down on the river bordered by the railroad track.

Stackhouse was born in the house, built in 1900 by his parents, Amos and Hester Stackhouse. He can remember when the big trees which now hide the house when viewed below were planted under his mother's supervision.

The parlor and most of the other rooms are furnished just as his mother left them.

The parlor curtains are the ones his mother, a meticulous homemaker, chose 70 years ago, of lace handmade in Switzerland.

Stackhouse and his wife, Juanita, have lived there since they were married 47 years ago, living first in a spacious apartment upstairs in the 12-room house.

His mother lived to be 89, an elegant woman with a

reputation as a perfectionist who oversaw every detail of the building and furnishing of her home.

She left the house to her son Gilbert and his wife, who have chosen to preserve it much as it was during her lifetime.

The shades are drawn on the guest room upstairs, as they were when Hester Stackhouse kept the room ready for the company which often came to Stackhouse.

It is as if time has stopped in most of the rooms, leaving them as they were when Hester Stackhouse was mistress of the house.

But Gilbert Stackhouse, who has known the house and its surroundings all his lifetime, can sit on the front porch, looking down at the river and the railroad and beyond to a mountain vista, and in his mind's eye he can remember it as it was, when Stackhouse was a regular train stop and the name of a thriving, bustling community of miners and lumbermen and their families.

On a nearby peninsula where the Laurel River joins the French Broad was an old-fashioned mill village, a commissary, combined school and church, and a big logging mill.

The village community was first called Putnam and then

re-named Runion.

The buildings — a store, depot, warehouses, barite mill — are gone now around Stackhouse, and a visitor, looking toward the adjoining site of Runion, can see only the green of trees and shrubs which have grown over the mill houses and buildings as the mountain reclaimed its own.

Gilbert Stackhouse can remember when the Fourth of July was a big day at Runion, boisterously celebrated by hundreds, with "log jumping" in the water by the mill and tub races in the creek.

"On Saturday evenings there would be a big ball game across the river, may be a hundred over there playing ball or watching," he said.

The mountains were covered with virgin timber and the site of the railroad was a stagecoach or drover's road, the Buncombe Turnpike, when Gilbert's grandfather, Amos, bought the 605 acres in 1868.

He had come down from Philadelphia to Hot Springs, then called Warm Springs, just four miles away from the site of Stackhouse.

"He settled down there, at Warm Springs, and got to walking around, walked up this way and found this place," his grandson, Gilbert, said. The big house his

grandfather built burned several years ago.

"The railroad didn't come through until around 1880," he said. "The railroad took the stagecoach road and agreed to build another road but never did get around to it. We have a private siding of our own. Grandpa wouldn't sell them any right of way; he said they could use what they wanted if they put him in a private siding."

"There were six passenger trains a day; four would stop here and the other two would stop if you flagged them. There were about 40 houses around here; my uncle and daddy together owned them. They would rent them to workers at the mills."

His grandfather had bought the land with lumbering in mind, but when barite (a substance used in oil and gas well drilling, in cloth, paper, tires and paint) was discovered, mining became a thriving industry, too.

The mining operation included a mill by the river and two big water wheels, washed away in the flood of 1916. The wheels were rebuilt and before the cement could dry, they were washed away again.

Lead was found mixed with the barite, and the mining of barite as a major undertaking was abandoned.

"Every three or four years, the mines open again," Stackhouse says. "It's been that way ever since I can remember."

The lumbering community of Runion underwent several changes of ownership after Gilbert's grandfather sold the site, 100 acres, in 1896.

Gilbert Stackhouse remembers the wooden sidewalks and the schoolhouse. "They had six months school down there at that time, and six months school up here. I got caught in the middle; I had to go to both of them."

There is also the old schoolhouse on his property, a one-room with cloakroom school where he went to the second grade. For the first grade, his mother had taken him and his brother to the old Weaver College, where they all boarded for the school term. Later Gilbert attended school at Walnut and Marshall and again at Weaver College.

As a boy Stackhouse found plenty of action around the railroad and the river.

He remembers the sound of the old steam engines when they would come up the mountain past Stackhouse. "I didn't like the sound or the cinders either," he said, recalling how you could touch the walls of the big house on the hillside above the tracks and wipe away soot from the trains.

He and other boys in the community would hitch rides on the trains.

"The old steam engines went so slow you could about walk and catch 'em, depending on how heavy they were loaded. They didn't have but about 30 or 40 cars. We'd ride up to Marshall. They'd be coming back empty and going down they'd be so fast we couldn't get off. We would stop at Hot Springs or Newport, and ride back to get off and we would, but as soon as the man

turned his back, we'd get back on again."

His mother never caught him when he was hitching train rides. "If she had, I'd still remember it!" he said.

The kids at Stackhouse and Runion played constantly on the river, he remembers. "Everybody had boats. Several families lived on the other side of the river and worked over here; they had to have boats."

There was also the excitement of constant construction and years of digging around the house Gilbert's father built on the mountainside.

It took a carpenter, Henry Campbell, with his brother, "Boney," as a helper four years to build the house. Stackhouse says, at a cost of \$4,000. The cherry, oak and walnut woodwork was brought in by rail from New York and Philadelphia, as was the furniture.

"If you got anything in here, that's the only way it came, there wasn't any other way," he said.

"They dug off \$20,000 worth of mountain to build the house. That's what it cost my daddy, and he just paid a dollar a day. They didn't have bulldozers back then. They had little flat-bedded wheelbarrows and they'd haul the dirt down to the railroad. He had eight or 10 men all during my young days digging, putting down pipe, getting ready to build the brick building back of the house, from 1900 to 1918, I guess."

Perhaps because of this influence, Gilbert Stackhouse became a licensed contractor, doing commercial building all over the Southeast until his retirement.

He remembers the day when the saw mill and lumbering operation closed down at Runion. It was June 30, 1927.

"It would surprise you how quick those people got out of there when the mill closed down," he said. "I guess 10 percent of 'em left the next day."

In the ghost town, buildings rotted away, some sold for the lumber. They left behind a million feet of poplar logs, seven or eight feet through some of its salvaged years later, he said.

Last fall, with a group from the Madison County Historical Society, he walked down the railroad track, over the hill where Runion flourished, where weeds and briars have taken over.

They found the foundation of the mill and the wood schoolhouse, still withstanding the ravages of time, and the big cement vault where the money was kept in the commissary. The few houses remaining were falling into ruin, the road was disappearing, and only the trestle remained where the railroad came across Laurel River to the mill.

There are no passenger trains passing now, and Gilbert, through long association, doesn't hear the sound of the 24-or-so freight trains that pass by his house.

To leave Stackhouse now, you ride up a narrow, winding road, rather than ride the train as those who lived there once did.

The family's private siding used to hold eight cars. "When I was a kid everybody wanted cars; it was nothing to see 'em fighting over a car."

He remembers when his father would order a car load of flour for the busy store at Stackhouse, where he sold wholesale to Laurel and a store in Marshall. The oddest order, he says, was for a carload of tobacco and snuff.

Stackhouse has been away from his home only for a few weeks at a time during his lifetime.

He likes to be at home with his wife, whom he refers to as

his "sweetheart." She had come from Charlotte to Walnut to teach school when he wooed and won her. "I wouldn't let her leave; I knew a good thing when I saw it. She was pretty and still is," he says.

They brought up two daughters at Stackhouse, Mrs. Bobby (Lexyne) Norris of Arden and Mrs. David (Nancy) Aumiller of Chattanooga, and now have five grandchildren to fill up the big house on visits.

On summer afternoons it seems quiet and peaceful on the porch looking down the

steep lawn to the river, but Mrs. Stackhouse says there is always something going on.

Where the boats used to ply back and forth, there are now river rafts passing by. On a recent Sunday 70 rafts passed, and the Victorian house is always pointed out. Once a friend passing on a raft tried to wave to Mrs. Stackhouse on her porch, and fell in the river.

Gilbert Stackhouse enjoys the way it is now at his home place. "I was always glad to get back home," he said. "The biggest reason was my sweetheart was here."



THE PARLOR MANTEL is of cherry in a style typical of the turn of the century, serving one of three fireplaces in the house. The original draperies with tasseled fringe still hang in the doorway leading to the dining room.



THE ENTRANCE HALL is much as it was when Hester Stackhouse furnished the house after its completion in 1904. To the left is the parlor with its period furnishings and family pictures.



GILBERT AND JUANITA STACKHOUSE hold hands on the porch of the Victorian house which his father built in 1900 on a mountainside above the French Broad River between Marshall and Hot Springs.