

HISTORY OF SALEM IN 2000 WORDS OR LESS

City of Salem - Harrison County, West Virginia by Dorothy Davis (1996)

The following was commissioned by The Salem Area Chamber of Commerce for Homecoming'96. The challenge posed to Dorothy was to create a history of our city in 2000 words or less! What follows was her response. The late Mrs. Davis was a noted area historian. She wrote " The History of Harrison County"

" SOMETIMES WE GAIN, SOMETIMES WE LOSE IN THE GAME OF LIFE,"

or so Samuel Fitz Randolph may have thought when he met up with Widow Swearingen in Southwestern Pennsylvania in the late 1780's and was offered a deed for 400 acres of land her husband John had registered in Clarksburg in 1781. Randolph bought the deed, really a " pig in the poke ". Randolph, from New Jersey, had never ventured into the state of Virginia, let alone Harrison County, where the land lay. Across the Pennsylvania border from Woodbridgetown, where Randolph lived, was a group of settlers newly arrived from New Jersey and members of the Seventh Day Baptist Church. Randolph belonged to the denomination. Some of the settlers kept coming to tell him that they were dissatisfied with their land on White Day Creek in Monongalia County. They wanted to push on to new territory.

" IF YOU ARE WILLING TO TAKE A CHANCE,"

Randolph told them, "I have a deed for 400 acres you can take with you to find the land in the headwaters of the Monongahela River. " The settlers decided to start out. The chance the would-be settlers took was greater than their innocence let them know. No one before the Battle of Fallen Timbers in Ohio in 1795 would try to live beyond the West Fork River of the Monongahela River System. Forts protected people east of the river, but west of the river was Indian territory. Chance saved the settlers who were at the site they named "New Salem" in 1791. After the Indian menace ended in 1795 on Tenmile Creek, a tributary of the West Fork River, an Indian told the settlers that his people could have wiped out the people in New Salem, but refrained from the slaughter for one reason: the settlers wore jackets, pantaloons and hats which told the Indians that they were from Pennsylvania or New Jersey. The Indians hated the Virginians who wore hunting shirts and coon-skin caps. Indians called the Virginians "Long Knives" and killed all of them they could. But the settlers were glad to have eight members of the Virginia Militia stationed in the blockhouse they had built during the winters of 1792-93 and 1793-94. Samuel Fitz Randolph followed the settlers to New Salem in 1793 and immediately set about to have the town incorporated by the Virginia Assembly in 1794. As soon as settlers could leave the protection of the blockhouse, the population of the settlement dwindled because people moved to farms that stretched in an arc through the territory that would eventually be Doddridge County and Ritchie County.

" GIVE US ROADS,"

was the cry of a string of petitions from Salem to the Virginia Assembly from 1800 to 1830. When the Assembly paid no heed, a Congressman in 1810 tried to move the construction of the National road south to bring it through Harrison County. That failed too. Finally on March 19, 1831, the Virginia Assembly authorized a turnpike to be built from Romney to Parkersburg. As chief engineer for the Northwestern Turnpike, the state of Virginia hired Claudius Crozet, a French officer of artillery under

Napoleon. Crozet surveyed the road to run through Salem because the route would be shorter than other routes suggested. In June 1840 the first daily stagecoach arrived at the Randolph tavern near where the blockhouse had stood. Harrison Hursey, who lived in Salem, began blowing the stage horn at the edge of town and rattled to a stop at the door of the Randolph tavern. Hands reached for the reins of the horses and led the animals to the stage barn at the corner of East Main Street and Terrace Avenue. Other hands carried the mailbags inside the tavern and dumped the contents onto the floor from which people grabbed the letters that belonged to them. Best of all, the stage brought the news heard at stops all along the way and at the tollgates which stood at the end of every 20 miles of the road to collect fees from all wagons and coaches and from the drovers who conducted great herds of beef cattle, sheep and hogs to the East.

JUST ADD A LITTLE STEAM...

On April 27, 1830, Luther Haymond, who had never been beyond the borders of Harrison County but was fearless like all teenagers, mounted his horse Christopher Columbus and headed for Baltimore. He wanted to see the sights of the big city. After he had visited the fort which inspired "The Star Spangled Banner", he had a mind boggling experience which he described in his Journal. "This day I visited the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad which at this time is partly completed for 10 miles to Ellicott City and the greatest part of the work required for the construction of this work is the reduction of the hills and the valleys filling in of the valleys so as to render the way level after which there are pieces of timber bedded in the earth crosswise of the road and notches cut in each and about five feet asunder in which there are fastened the rails in a perfect straight line on which are nailed bars of iron that the locomotive engines rest upon. At this time there are pleasure carriages fitted for running upon the road which are drawn by horses or by fixing sails to them blown at the immense velocity of 20 miles an hour by the wind. The wheels to those carriages are about 2 feet in diameter with an edge on the innerside that fits down by the side of the rails to prevent it getting off. Those who will not believe this let them go and judge for themselves and afterward I have no doubt will tell a bigger lie than I have told." It was no lie. All the railroad needed was the steam engine to replace the horse and off it went over the hills and away. The first steam locomotive reached Grafton on its way to Wheeling in 1850. This meant ...

THE IRON COOKSTOVE ARRIVED

Until 1850 housewives cooked all food at the hearth. But when trains carried the iron cookstove to Grafton, wagons could haul the heavy cookstoves into Harrison County. A new day has arrived especially after the Northwestern Virginia Railroad received a charter in 1851 and work began on digging the many tunnels required between Grafton and Parkersburg. "The Great Railroad Celebration" on July 1857 marked the opening of the road and the arrival of the first train in Salem. Crozet had done so good a job with the Northwestern Turnpike that the tracks of the railroad ran parallel with the turnpike most of the way between Grafton and Parkersburg. In Salem, the coming of the train caused the town to move three hundred yards to the west to a level spot suitable for a station and freight yards. The economy of the town improved from the citizens having harvested lumber for railroad ties and from Salem's becoming a shipping point for cattle to supply the beef market in the East.

STEM THE BRAIN DRAIN!

Many children of the Seventh Day Baptists boarded the train after finishing public school in Salem and went to Alfred, New York, to the University affiliated with the church. The trouble was that most of the youths who left never returned to Salem. Something needed done to stop the brain drain. Salem people

heard that the Methodist Church planned to establish a college in Northern West Virginia. So a delegation of Salem men went to the Methodist Annual Conference to urge the conference to build the school in Salem. The conference decided by one vote to locate the college in Buckhannon with the deciding vote being cast because of the fear that the trains running through Salem would interrupt study. "Then we must build our own college", the committee decided. Salem College was born during the summer of 1888 in one clapboard building constructed on the western edge of the town of Salem.

BID FOR THE STATE INSTITUTION....

News reached Salem circa 1895 that the State of West Virginia intended to establish an Industrial Home for Girls somewhere in the northern portion of the state. News also spread that the site chosen would be one that was supplied by one of the towns vying for the institution. A committee of Salem businessmen thought that the top of the hill on the Lowndes Farm west of Salem would be a good place for the correctional center. Mr. Lowndes would sell his entire farm but no portion of it. So the Salem men took a flyer. They bought the farm and offered for sale to local people the eastern part of the land. Thus they added a Third Ward to the City of Salem, paid for all the land, and offered the State of West Virginia the land for the institution. The West Virginia Legislature voted to accept the offer in 1898.

LUCK ENTERS THE GAME

Suddenly in 1900 a well drilled within the city limits proved that Salem sat on a vast pool of oil and gas. Before long, oil derricks dotted the hills and valley of the town. Trains unloaded tons of pipe at the freight yard. Oil workers poured in to produce the oil and gas. Jerry-built houses sprang up to house workers. Teams of horses sometimes sank belly deep into the mud hauling pipe to wells. The boom had arrived and along with it saloons--- one with the largest plate glass mirror in the world ! The church people arose to decry the licentiousness and in return a mob one night popped up with torches to burn the college. Locals saved the college, but not the town a few nights later. December 14 1901, two hours after a temperance group had arranged to purchase the town newspaper office on Water Street, fire broke out in the news plant. The fire spread to burn every business house in the block northwest of Main and Water streets; jumped Water Street to burn Dr. Edwin Wilson's house and front-yard office on the northeast corner of Water and Main streets and every other building on both sides of Main Street to Irwin Street; and then moved on south as far as the railway station. In 1902 brick structures made a new business district. The boom moved on circa 1905 to the financial center of Clarksburg. Belgium glass workers came to the town of Salem in the next decade to ply their skill as window-glass blowers in the factories attracted to Salem by an abundance of low cost natural gas for fuel.

EMPTY PIPES OR " WATER, WATER EVERYWHERE!"

Located on the divide between the Monongahela River flowing north and Middle Island Creek moving to the Ohio River at Parkersburg, wells drilled to supply water for citizen use were more often dry than filled. With a business district constructed over the Salem Branch of Tenmile Creek, a ten-minute downpour could send the creek flooding into the Main Street. The Upper Tenmile Watershed funded by the U.S. Government and completed in 1958 solved the problem by building seven earthen dams to retain the water from a three-inch storm with one reservoir to be used to supply the pipes leading to the town's residences and businesses. Salem has not had a flood nor a shortage of water supply for forty years.

WE WIN AND WE LOSE

Salem City Park ,with ball field and pool, was built in 1971 after the State of West Virginia returned to the City in a 99 year lease what had been the garden plot of the Industrial Home that was in the valley below where the state buildings stand. The gift included the farm house and the barn which is now a city recreation center. The last train ran through Salem in 1988. "Rails to Trails" took over the roadbed of the railway converting it into a trail for hiking, bicycling and horseback riding . Teikyo University purchased the facilities of Salem College in 1989 and turned the educational institution into Salem-Teikyo University. The United States Census of Population reports 248 people living in Salem in 1880; 2920 in 1910 ; 2068 in 1990.