

We had another birthday recently, and old monster Nostalgia took advantage of the occasion to dig in a little deeper. Nostalgia has always afflicted us. Lately it has seemed less embarrassing, since one senses at this time a nostalgic yearning all over the land-- a return to basics, a search for roots-- a simpler way of life. In such an atmosphere of thought, this little history took form, prompted by the fact that soon the old buildings that substantiate these memories will be gone, victims of time, floods, decay. A great many of the people who made things happen in the old buildings in our village have long since gone to Greater Places and Buildings. Yet some of the old structures still stand, their once-proud facades reduced to skeletons more or less. They get their messages across--that here was once a thriving, happy village. Happy, it still is. Thriving, as we think of in the commercial sense, has given way to a quiet, community atmosphere. But at one time, why we could go "downtown!"

Ararat was and is the name, taking it from the pretty river that flows through the fertile valley. And someone took the name Ararat from the Indian name, Tarrarat, which was given the river. Before the village became Ararat, however, it was called Forge. This was because of a large iron foundry which was there as far back as 1780. (Remnants of the forge still stand.) It was to Forge that our Granddaddy, Joseph Robert Forkner, came to be the first Depot Agent and Postmaster. (There are all ways of spelling Forkner; some spell it Faulkner. We spelled it Forkner, and it is thus spelled on his headstone 1849-1900.) But before Granddaddy died, he saw many changes in the community of Forge, (established 1880 and renamed Ararat around 1903). Granddaddy came there because the ASY Railroad came there somewhere around 1888. And the ASY made a big stopping place there because it was a good distribution point. The ASY constructed one of those charming "Swiss Alps" stations with a platform all around, large brackets at the corners and along the heavy roof, an arched-top ticket window, and many, many other goodies. And it was nicely graveled in white stone all around except under the beautiful sucamore trees with their gray and white bark matching perfectly the gray of the station with its darker gray and white trim. It was a beauty and was the center of activity for our little town. Being innocent of the fact that someone should provide entertainment for us (as seems to be the case today) we all (the children and young people of the community, as well as some adults) made our entertainment by sitting on the platform waiting for the train to come by. Waiting to hear the engineer's friendly toot as he approached. Waiting to see who got off and who got on. Waiting to wave at all the other passengers peering out the windows, wondering who they were, where they were going. Waiting to see the lovable conductor, Captain Sonny Shelton, smile and wave to us. If we missed the school bus going to Pilot Mountain, we could always ride the train. And miss the bus we managed to do on occasion. The grounds of the depot were the scenes of our community ice cream suppers with string bands playing the real country music, such as "Red Wing" and "Listen to the Rockingbird."

When the depot was there, Ararat was truly a very busy little place. There was a long switching track (or sidetrack) and there were always many freight cars there with their cargos of fertilizer, seed, and other farm supplies. An old picture shows a train loaded with twenty-three cars of fertilizer for W. L. Chilton Fertilizer Company. Ararat had several fertilizer warehouses, and farmers came from many miles around for their supplies as well as general merchandise. Before the building of the bridge, this meant that many people had to ford the river to reach Ararat. The first bridge was a swinging bridge, later replaced by a wood and steel trussed bridge. (A sleek new bridge now has replaced that bridge.)

Of course, most of the growth of Ararat took place sometime after Robert Forkner came to Ararat. When he came, there were no homes in the immediate vicinity of what is now the village, although people had lived around there since the 1780's. Granddaddy built a home on the hill opposite the depot. It was not a large home but had some interesting features such as the two front doors and an outside door to each room. With screen doors in place this arrangement made the house much cooler in summer. Also with four boys and four girls in the family, this assured privacy and also came in handy when Grandmother took in overnight guests--these being the salesmen (or drummers, as they were called) and others who arrived by train and needed overnight lodging. Robert Forkner also acquired other land in the vicinity so that he could have some land for each of his children as they grew up and married. And, in fact, all eight of them lived in Ararat for at least a part of their married or adult lives.

Ararat began to grow and how! It was soon to become one of the major trading areas for all of Surry County. The row of store buildings took shape. The upper two-story wooden building was built by Robert Forkner and his son, James (Jim) Forkner, and was operated by Jim as a general store. It stocked about every item imaginable. At the lower end of the row were the Bryant buildings. The Bryant Family was among the very early families to move to Ararat. Other early families were the Key, the Marsh, the Norman, the Marion, and Mills families. The Rev. T. W. Bryant was the ^{later} postmaster as well as a successful merchant. His general store with seed and feed store adjoining stood at the end of the row. Also here was the post office and the "central" (telephone) office. In the center of the row were the Key stores, operated by Mr. W. J. Key and his son, Mr. E. J. Key. Their first operations were in a large wooden building with the

~~wooden building with the~~ customary adjacent building for hardware and farm supplies. After the elder Mr. Key's death, the business was continued by his son, G. J. Key. Mr. Key kept the wooden building for farm supplies, but went just above and built a brick building with all the finest features of the day, and stocked it with the best merchandise available. It enjoyed great success for many years during Ararat's "business boom." Mr. Key and his sons also operated a tobacco-curing blue pipe business. Later Mr. Key served as postmaster for a number of years.

The brick store building and adjoining one were later purchased by the Bryant Brothers business. The lettering on the building reads "Bryant Bros. est. 1908" Mr. T. W. Bryant, with the help of his sons, ran the store for several years. Mr. W. C. Bryant bought the store following the death of his father, the elder Mr. Bryant; and then his nephew, Floyd Bryant, operated a general store in it as well as serving as postmaster for the postoffice which was also re-located in the building.

But we are getting ahead of our story. For, in the beginning, at the time the little row of stores was in operation, business in Ararat was truly diversified. At the other end of the village, Robert Forkner had built another general store and a hardware store. Also a son-in-law, Everett Nelson, had opened a casket factory. (Mr. Nelson was later to form a partnership in what became a well-known funeral home operation in Mount Airy.) And, back in the row of stores just below the first wooden store building, Mr. J. V. Marsh, a surveyor, built another general store. This was later owned and operated as a fabric, dress, and millinery shop by a very enterprising lady named Miss Minnie Lowe. Later, our father, E. W. Mills, who had married our mother, Stella Forkner in 1914, purchased the store from Miss Lowe. Under his ownership it has served many purposes. He first operated it as a general store. Then, as automobiles became more numerous, he put in gasoline tanks. The front was changed to accommodate a massive roof, as it seemed in those days all gasoline places had heavy, projecting roofs. Dad built huge rock columns to support the heavy roof, which is no longer there. Dad has always loved to try different things. At one time he operated a barbershop in the building. And, while it was a general store, Dad also ran a little eating place in the back with the best hot dogs in the world. We can still see the little stove with the gas burners. For a time the old building also served as the post office. After retirement from farming, Dad started using it as his woodworking shop. It has survived age and floods, and inside there can still be seen traces of the original wall paint left over from the days of Miss Minnie Lowe.

With the trains still coming, Ararat continued to flourish. Mr. T. W. Bryant ~~was~~ ^{followed} Robert Forkner as depot agent. Mr. Bryant was a very able man. In addition to running his own business, he served as depot agent, postmaster, and was widely known as a Methodist circuit minister, serving many churches throughout Surry County. A daughter, ~~was~~ ^{was} and

wife, and a great-grandson and family still live in Ararat.

Ararat also had a tobacco factory. Robert Forkner built a large two-story wooden building for the manufacture of plug tobacco. Though we don't know too much about the processes involved, we know there were huge presses and lots of licorice to sweeten and hold the tobacco together. We've heard our mother tell how she and the other children slipped into the factory and ate licorice until they were sick. To this day Mama can't bear the smell or taste of licorice. Robert Forkner also believed in education. And just below the factory he built a two-room school for the children in the community. He hired private teachers, who roomed in the community, and the little school operated for quite a while. After the tobacco factory closed, a larger school was opened in the factory building, and children came good distances to school there. The original two-room school was sold. It was added onto and turned into a residence, which was occupied for many years. Now it stands at the upper end of the little row of buildings where it was moved to be used as part of a furniture craft shop operated by Davey Hill.

There was something else for which Ararat was well known. Baptizings! Since no rural churches had their own baptismal pools, churches from miles around used the Ararat River for their baptismal ceremonies. On a Sunday afternoon the horses and buggies and later the cars lined the roads in all directions bringing folks to watch the baptismal rites.

The post office at Ararat has always been a busy one, serving a wide area. We want to mention here the C. W. Marion Family. Mr. Marion moved to Ararat to be the rural mail carrier. Mrs. Marion was a teacher. Also the Norman Family. Mr. Norman was a son-in-law of W. L. Chilton, a pioneer businessman and farmer in the area. Mr. Norman operated a general store and fertilizer business for many years in what had been the Forkner-Nelson hardware and general store, later erecting his own building. There have been many more who have lived in Ararat and added to the joy of our lives. But since this is by no means a complete history, we mention just these few. Currently speaking, however, we will mention that a grandson and his family live in the Forkner homeplace, making four generations to live there.

No history of a hometown can be written objectively by one of its own. It is bound to become muddled with nostalgia, and one finds oneself leaping back and forth over the years from our father's and grandfather's day to our day. Our day was much later, of course, but we remember the good times. We remember when we could walk to the stores, and purchase about anything we needed, and in most cases see it wrapped up lovingly
in brown

paper with the storekeeper holding the string in his teeth as he wound round and round. Ironic it may be that in this age when we have been told that bigger is better and have seen the development of huge shopping centers that gasoline costs may again spawn the return to rural and smalltown shopping areas.

Although we have been covering primarily the business ventures in our village, we do want to mention the churches which played such an important role in the community. The original Quaker Meeting House has been enlarged and still serves the Quakers. The Methodists had bought the old tobacco factory after its school use was over and turned it into a church building, later erecting a brick church farther up the road. The old factory-school-church building was then taken over by the Masons and used for many years until it finally came down to be replaced by the present Masonic Lodge building. As with most of the old structures, the old factory building bore out the saying, "Use it Up, Wear it Out." Most of the old buildings have worn out. And so that the young who live in Ararat today might know that "that was the way it was," we have attempted here to preserve in memory the identity of the old buildings.

What changed Ararat from a bustling little town to a quiet rural community? Many say it was the discontinuation of the railroad station. Many say the automobile. The depression. No one really knows. It was probably just a change in America's lifestyles. Perhaps we will again see the return to lifestyles similar to those once lived in villages like Ararat, North Carolina.