

Russellville, S.C. and Camp Manufacturing Company ~

It is thought by today's locals that W. P. Russell was the patriarch of Russellville, and instrumental in beginning the community of Russellville, S.C. This is contradicted by one family member, who says it was Theodore Russell, a cousin of W. P. Russell, who was the founder. Regardless, we're telling the story of John M. Camp, Jr., who came to the area in 1922, where he found W.P. Russell operating a ground mill beside his cotton gin five miles west of St. Stephen. Camp bought part of Russell's farm and built his mill a half mile to the north of Russell's store, which had served as a post office since 1916.

For newcomers to Berkeley County, Russellville is located on what used to be the old Murray's Ferry Road (modern day S.C. Highway 35) going north approximately five miles from Bonneau, toward Santee River.

In his autobiography, John (Jack) Madison Camp, Jr. tells us about his family and their lumber mill village history located in Russellville. "We moved to Franklin, Virginia in 1921, but we soon moved again. We went to the St. Stephen area of South Carolina, where Daddy had been assigned the task of building a new mill and mill village. These itinerant sawmill communities had a motto, "Cut Out and Get Out." There was no reforestation program and no cry for it at that time."

When the Camp's moved into a new location that had a good stand of timber, they would keep cutting for some time, as was the case in the Santee area of South Carolina. The mill made a huge difference in the area, for sure, providing employment and a great economical boost. The plan was to work there for maybe fifteen to twenty-five years. The company laid down a center street, then set up a water tower that could be used for potable water uses and to supply the village that was soon to be built.

"They left room on the center street for the schoolhouse that my father built for the employee's children. The Russellville community didn't have a school in that area of Berkeley County at that time. Teachers were imported, much to the glee of all the single men in that area."

Camp says it seemed to him that St. Stephen's main reason for being was that the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad came through there. And that was of course true, but not the main reason. Church and religion was of utmost importance in early colonial time, so the "old brick church" was actually the primary reason for St. Stephen's existence, and how the town got its name.

Just north, maybe a mile, of the little village of Russellville, made up entirely of Camp's employees, was found a community club, a Parent-Teacher association, a home demonstration club, a two-story school building (see photo) in which two teachers (one of which was my Grandmother) taught and trained the young folks, and where on Sundays the auditorium served as a church and Sunday-School room, a two story hotel that would have been a credit to a much larger town, and twenty-two cottages, actually, they were homes for the employees, painted (!), and each with front and back yards that had been beautified.

Each year a civic contest was sponsored by Camp Manufacturing among its homemakers. A first prize of five dollars and a second of two-fifty were offered "to the one making the most improvements in the home grounds or to the one keeping the grounds most satisfactory." Consequently, each yard turned out to be a bit of a garden, where kids romped and played, while their mothers sat on their screened porches (usually shelling peas and beans during summer months), passing away each day, pleasantly visiting one with the other of their neighbors.

Each home was screened and equipped with modern conveniences of lights and water, and practically each boasted a radio, and many with automobiles. The mill village of Camp had an electric system that drew its power from the company generator. Odd to us today, was the fact that at 9 o'clock P.M. the lights would blink once. At 9:05 they would blink twice, and at 9:15, all the current would go off until the next morning about daylight. Reason being, simply, the generators had to be shut down to maintain them.

The Camp family had lived in Virginia since before the American Revolution. The lumber business was started by P.D. Camp in Franklin in 1870. He later took into the firm his brother, R.J. Camp and J.L. Camp, and organized the Camp Manufacturing Company. All of the original members of the firm have passed on, and company tasks left to their sons.

Most likely, an important explanation of Camp's success in business was its tenet that it is just as important to develop men as it is to manufacture lumber products. The heads of this firm always maintained that character building is superior to anything else.

Respect for the Sabbath was one of their policies that "must be held inviolate." The story is told that when the Camps began their endeavor in the lumber business, the company had rented a tug to pull the logs up the river (this was in Virginia). The owners of the tug explained that they operated on a seven-day a week basis, and that

is what they charged for. Camp replied that he understood this, and he expected to pay for seven days' usage . . . but, he also intended to tie up the tug at 12 o'clock Saturday nights, where it would remain until 12 o'clock Sunday nights. Thus, after six-days a week, his plants, over those many years became silent on Sunday. (The only exception to this rule was boiler maintenance.)

Camp Jr. said at times his father would allow one of his hometown friends to come and visit him, and this was always a great and exciting occasion for both. They would stay in the men's dormitory on the upper floor of the company store building (see photo). This was a big wooden building (I don't remember if it was painted), covered in tongue and grooved siding (we call it "bead-board" now) that was made in the mill. The men's dormitory consisted of several rooms and a big common shower and bathroom for the visiting men. The more permanent employees took up residence there in very modest rooms. Less permanent residents stayed over at Mrs. Nixon's Boarding House that was only a few hundred yards away. There was some heat from individual wood fed heaters in the company storerooms, but there was certainly no air-conditioning.

The Company Store was a big two-story building, with three chimneys. Any of life's supplies you needed were available. A major part of the first floor was a large porch out front. It was covered, not screened, and there were benches around the porch for people to sit while waiting to go into the store, or just to enjoy some community life.

Camp's company store had a problem (as all general stores did), rats. Rice, flour, cornmeal, seed, etc., were being stored for use and sale. Cats were used from time to time, but probably were intimidated by the size of some of the rats. So, the company decided to use ferrets to keep the rats under control. They were slender, quick, and very aggressive. The ferrets had beautiful fur but were not very friendly. They would bite a person as quickly as they'd bite a rat. Nevertheless, they were necessary, and they seemed to keep the rats under control.

Camp's homes ("quarters" to the locals) were close to the company store and arranged so that the houses faced each other across the main street. There was a rumor going around Russellville that all the children born on one side of that street were boys and all those born on the other side were girls. If a couple wanted to change the sex of the next child, they would just move over to the other side of the street. Oddly enough, that seemed to work for a long period of time.

The schoolhouse (see photo) and the boarding house were located at opposite ends of the street. Mrs. Nixon, the lady who ran the boarding house in St. Stephen, was a good manager. She furnished lots of good, very plain food to many hungry millworkers. Mill workers with no family could dine at the boarding house and be adequately nourished. Jack Camp, Jr. says "Mrs. Nixon also had an attractive daughter whose name was Elsie, who became fast friends with my older sister Virginia." Teachers were allowed to have meals at the boarding house, offering variety, and a change of conversation for the men there.

Camp's boarding house cook was Joe Poseskie, and Jack remembers Joe cooking frog legs. A lot of people ate frog legs, but they were sort of dangerous to cook, because reflex action left in the dead limbs caused the legs to kick the grease out. That often burned the cook, and needless to say, Joe didn't like that.

The health of the Camp village was insured by company physician, Dr. Carroll, also the community doctor when I was young. Located between the white mill workers' quarters and the black's quarters that were located farther down the same street, the doctor's office was approximately 200 feet from the company store. Many of the medical problems originated from emergencies at the mill, so he would go right into the place where there had been an accident and treat the patient there. Then he would take them to Moncks Corner to Berkeley County Hospital, or Charleston, depending on the care required for them. It wasn't until the mid-fifties that Dr. Sam O. Schumann came to Camp village to practice medicine.

Camp Manufacturing Company in Russellville became Russellville Lumber Company, owned by Williams Furniture Company, then Southern Coatings and Chemicals in Sumter, S.C. In the middle 1960's, Georgia-Pacific Corporation bought the Russellville Lumber Company property and began establishing the complex consisting of a plywood plant, chip-n-saw plant, particleboard plant, chemical plant, and forestry division . . . all at Russellville, S.C., employing 500+ people.

Resources: From his book *While You're Up, A Memoir*, by John M. Camp, Jr., *Charleston News and Courier*, and personal remembrances. Keith Gourdin



Top: Street view at Russellville, showing line of well-kept cottages
center: School building; bottom: Postoffice and general store.

Photo from Charleston News & Courier



Camp School Students and Teachers

Photo courtesy of Keith Gourdin