

Merry Oaks Lives in Past

Once a Merry Little Town

By Truman King

MERRY OAKS—Merry Oaks is a town that was.

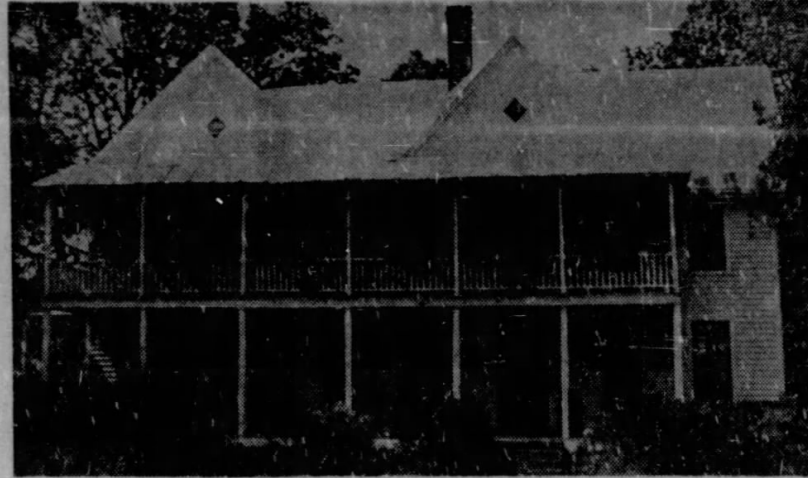
It is not a ghost town, for although it has a few tumbled-down buildings, there is no air of abandonment about the place. Rather, it is something that once was and is no more.

Somewhere along the line, in its struggle to keep up with progress, it was simply bypassed in favor of more adaptable locations.

But, about the turn of the century, it was going strong. Just how long before that it had enjoyed prominence is something that memories are unable to clear up. The old-timers around believe it had its beginnings as far back as the Civil War. Anyway, during the early 1900s it was out in front of most of its neighbors.

The usual mile-square town limits were defined. It was incorporated. It had a bank, a hotel and post office. And it was the shipping point for cotton and timber products, mostly firewood. It was the main supplier of the latter for the warmth and comfort of the nearby Capital City.

It never was very highly populated, even at its peak. But it was the center of activity for miles around. The general stores did a big business, and the railroad depot



OLD ACADEMY—Chatham County's first state-supported high school, now a private residence, appears much the same as it did when it opened, back in 1908.

saw a bustle of shipments. Drummers and buyers dropped off at the hotel for the night during their rounds. And, the rural people for miles around supplemented their living by channeling their farm and forest products through this outlet.

It was the educational center, too. The first state-supported high school in Chatham County was established here and began operation in 1908.

And, like most of the schools of its type it was called an "academy" and served both the students of the community and boarding students from all over.

Earl Franklin, the first principal, who served from 1908 till 1915, recalls his days there with clarity.

"When the school law was enacted in 1907," he says, "local tax money and public contributions, both in money and materials, were used to construct a building, and I accepted the job as principal, beginning in 1908. It never was a big school." He remembers it "averaged between 15 and 30 high school students during my years. They came from the community, and from families elsewhere who could afford to board their children somewhere near by and give them the opportunity of attending high school. We only carried them through the 10th grade.

"But the era was not long in years. Changes took place in the education situation and in the town. By 1917, a couple of years after I left, its days were over as a high school. It was the first such school in Chatham County and the first one to go."

What caused the decline?

Well, the old-timers say coal and electricity cut out the cordwood market. The town of Moncure, located between

the Deep and Haw rivers, was booming with its water-powered industries. The railroad connection, north and south off the Seaboard, tied Moncure in with Pittsboro, and business—and people—moved in that direction. Merry Oaks could no longer compete; it had too little to offer in comparison. And by the end of the decade of the 1920s, it was all over.

Not Much Left

Today, as one takes old U.S. 1 from Raleigh, through Apex and on south, he underpasses the new No. 1 near the edge of what was once a thriving village. But, except for the sign announcing that one is in Merry Oaks, there is little to indicate what once was there.

The old hotel and one of the general stores is off to the left, across the railroad; the old school building, now a private residence, is partly obscured behind the store-filling station; and the post office, close by the highway, is vacant and unnoticeable as such. The ruins of John Womack's shoe shop could be seen, but likely they would be mistaken for a tumble-down shack, now far beyond repair.

But, if a man were to stop and chat with the older residents, he would find himself in the heart of a town that once was.



GENERAL STORE—The old general store is one of several business structures still standing. Like the modern drug store, it carried in stock almost anything a customer might need.