

How 'bout that other Elkin 'paper?

By Stephen Harris

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"The Tribune" has served as the chronicler for Elkin - the newspaper of record, as they say in the business - since 1911. The 'paper has changed much over the many years and decades, but unchanged is its eminence here in the hometown.

But what about that other Elkin newspaper, the 'paper whose news got down to street level? The news that most often got repeated on the party line of the telephone. The 'paper packed with names, and chances were every issue would mention someone you knew at least vaguely or somebody you knew did.

That other 'paper was the "Chatham Blanketeer," the in-house publication of the old Chatham mill. Written by and about those who worked at the big Elkin textile plant back in its heyday, the "Blanketeer" reported on 9-by-12 white glossy pages that got folded and tucked into metal lunch buckets, back pockets and purses and carried to home, town, church and beyond.

While "The Tribune" presented its view of Elkin, the "Blanketeer" reported on family events, births and deaths, retirements and promotions. The kind of news that tended to get tucked away in old photo albums, family Bibles and such for safe-keeping.

The "Blanketeer" ended its run in the 1992 with the demise of the Chatham mill. But the 'paper's important role in helping tell the story of Elkin is finding new life on the internet.

DigitalNC, a website available courtesy of the UNC-Chapel Hill University Library and with an address of <http://www.digitalnc.org>, has some "Blanketeers" from the Elkin Public Library collection available for all to see again. The 137 issues from 1933-40 are available with a couple of clicks of a computer mouse button.

The site also has a collection of 509 "Tribune" issues from 1914-43 and a handful of issues of earlier Elkin newspapers dating back to the 19th Century.

So what was the difference between "The Tribune" and the "Blanketeer"?

Well, for instance "The Tribune" reported in 1973 that some upstart high school senior named Stephen Harris won a college scholarship and planned to take it to school Down East.

But the "Blanketeer" went a step further and also reported on his old man, who worked in the mill's spinning department, complete with an uncomfortable photo of him taken in the "Blanketeer" office. For, after all, it all would not have been possible without him.

I like my old "Tribune" clipping of the scholarship announcement that I keep in an old photo album. But I love my copy of the May 21 "Blanketeer" from that year with its snapshot of a sheepish Dad.

While still a teen-ager Dad tried for a year to land a job at the Chatham mill. Then after he got his dream job at the mill he had to turn around and leave for the military as America mobilized for World War II.

So I introduced myself to DigitalNC by looking up the Oct. 1, 1940, issue of the "Blanketeer." I found a report on military officers here from Winston-Salem explaining the new conscription law, "a subject of keen interest," as the "Blanketeer" described it. I bet.

A year later Dad was on his way to Fort Bragg. Most of the young men in the mill would soon follow a path into the military.

The "Blanketeer's" news reports were not always so serious. I noted with bemusement an item in the prior issue, on Sept. 16, in a lengthy "Around The Mill" column. I learned that: "Wonder why Alma Couch isn't going back to school this fall? Maybe she thinks that marriage may teach her more than books."

Under the title "Mule Spinning," I learned that "Bud Masten is really a ladies' man. He spends half his time talking to the girls."

Then, after only about five minutes of reading, I struck gold. By chance I spied an item about my own family:

"Mr. and Mrs. Ples Haynes (sic) and family and Mr. and Mrs. Curt Luffman spent Sunday at Pilot Mountain visiting Mr. and Mrs. Colonel Harris." My uncles and aunts, all.

Colonel Harris, Dad's big brother, was the mystery man of the family to me. I remember seeing him only once, at his home in Kernersville, when I was little. About all that I can remember from that visit is looking at Colonel and thinking about how much he looked like Dad. Then my uncle died in 1963 when I was 7.

And now my uncle of mystery up and appears in the "Blanketeer." How 'bout that?

What other surprises await in the "Blanketeer" treasure trove? Give it a look. If you have any roots here, I bet you'll find a surprise, too.

Stephen Harris returned home to live in State Road.

Link:<http://elkintribune.com/article/20140825/news/308259996/>

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