

The Land Beneath the Lake

There was once a time when the Catawba River ran free and wild. Its rambling banks formed the boundaries of several counties, among them Catawba, Iredell, Lincoln, and Mecklenburg all in the southern piedmont of the great state of North Carolina. It was a wild river, winding between the rolling hills. It occasionally flooded its banks in spring and occasionally got a thin layer of ice across its surface in winter. Surrounding it were these rolling hills and miles of forest. Sprouting up on its banks were towns, small towns with names like Cowan's Ford, Long Island, and East Monbo. And in these towns lived people. These people had a long history here and liked it very much. This time was almost thirty years ago.

There was once a time when people had dreams about improving the world around them. Among them was a man named James B. Duke and his dream was to bring North Carolina, his dearly beloved home state, into prosperity. He was going to use the waters of the beautiful Catawba to make a product. It was a product that as yet had no real value but James Duke could see its value in the future to industry. This product was electricity and to produce it dams would have to be built on the Catawba. Dams that would flood the beautiful countryside and change the lives of the people who lived there.

The dams were built and the floods came. Many parts of the northern and southern Catawba were now turned into lakes; however a long stretch in the middle remained the same. In 1957 a feasibility report was done for a new dam that would flood that area. This job was done by a man who already had ties with the company that was now called Duke Power. His name was Bill Lee and his grandfather was one of James Duke's most important engineers during the early years. He later drew up the plans for this new dam, to be called Cowan's Ford. It would eventually hold back the waters of the biggest lake on the river. A lake in LeGette Blythe's words, "twice the size of the Sea of Galilee." A lake named Lake Norman in honor of the former Duke Power president Norman Cocke.

In many ways, the creation of Lake Norman was wonderful. It provides electricity for half a dozen counties, attracts tourists which booms business, attracts permanent residents for the four counties it touches, and provides habitat for many endangered species. However, many people's pasts were lost as buildings were torn down, graveyards were dug up and moved, trees were knocked down, and land leveled to prepare for the creation of the lake. What remained and what was destroyed was entirely up to chance.

Take for example two towns, Long Island and Sherrill's Ford both located on the Catawba river in Catawba county. Long Island was established in 1854 and its location was recorded that date as "one and a half miles southeast of

Buffalo Shoals on the Catawba River." It was named for the nearby island in the river. It was founded mainly for the purpose of giving Catawba county a good industrial town. Three big mills, at least one of which was a cotton mill, were built there within the first decade, making it the first big industrial area in the county. Sherrill's Ford was established in 1831 though it's history dated back to the days when travelers crossed the ford. Some of them liked it so much they stayed, including a large family, the Sherrill's for whom the ford was later named. This was primarily a farming town and the two main businesses were E.L. Sherrill and Son General Store and E.L. Sherrill Lumber. At its founding, the town was said to be "two and a half miles west of the Catawba River from the site of the ford." These two towns are fairly similar in all respects except one. While Sherrill's Ford is still a nice little town made up of Sherrill's, and a few others, Long Island and all its factories are gone, torn down to make way for the lake. Also gone is Baker's Graveyard, probably the oldest burying ground in this area located between Davidson and Iredell County. It was founded when a minister who is believed to have started many of the churches in Mecklenburg county was buried behind his cabin. But now the graves have been dug up and moved to new resting places. The Burton Home, near what is now Westport Peninsula, once famous for beautiful gardens and architecture, was knocked down by a bulldozer along with all the beautiful trees that shaded it in the summer. It could

have remained, the land it was on is now Burton's Island, but a very long bridge would have had to have been built out to it. The beach at East Monbo Textile Plant, formed when the dam which ran the plant was turned off for the weekend creating a sandy beach and shallow water, once served as a playground for the families of northern Catawba County. But it was right on the river, so of course it went. These places now exist only in two places, the minds of the natives who are growing older and dieing and in the names of streets, firestations, boating districts, and names of hundreds of other places. One of these old-timers with the good memory is Helen Drum. She grew up on the banks of Mountain Creek which fed into the Catawba River in Catawba County. Her memories are of her family's farm there with all the stories that come from anybody's childhood on a farm. She can remember how a field that was once used to stack hay was plowed up and made into a potato field because years of rotting hay had made the soil so good. She also tells stories about sitting in the shade on the creek bank eating wild plums and listening to the frogs. Her memories are made even more special by the fact that the creek, the hay field, and the wild plum trees no longer exist. The bulldozer took care of all of them. Her family only had a few acres left after the building of the lake. Helen and her husband turned it into Drum Family Campground and now it is one of the only campgrounds on the lake. They also sold some of the land to Clarence White, who later turned it into Camp Dogwood, which I

will mention later. As I said before, many areas are named for towns that were flooded. For instance the boating district which includes most of the Mecklenburg County part of the lake is named Lemley, which was one of those towns. Also the district in central Catawba County is named Long Island for that little industrial town.

In all this loss, we must remember the good this human change to our landscape did. The lake is now home to a multitude of animals, including several endangered species. It is also a home for many people like myself who have never known any other. It is a weekend and summer home and playground for people who just want to get away from it all. And finally it is a home for many special programs and places like Camp Dogwood for the blind, sponsored by the Lions Club.

There once was a time when a beautiful sprawling lake covered the corners of Catawba, Iredell, Lincoln, and Mecklenburg counties. But then all the fish died from people dumping garbage in it and the water became a breeding ground for bugs so it had to be drained. Could these words be in the future for Lake Norman? Hopefully not. People are wising up and this beautiful landmark to humankind's power over the earth may still remain.

I would like to close with Bishop Nolan B. Harmon's Groundbreaking Prayer, from the Lake Norman groundbreaking ceremony on September 18, 1959, but still just as meaningful today. "Bless this lovely countryside now to be changed by the inflowing of water. May the land lost prove prosperity

gained, and the valleys that can no longer sing with corn,
sing through lofty wires, that carry their strength to far
off places. Let the many-contoured lake that is to be prove
a joyous haven for happy families in its season, be nature's
refuge for fish that swim and birds that fly, its surface
reflecting with untroubled face the peace of quiet and holy
skies."