Life on the Pamlico

Mr. Bill Hackett, BCCC Pioneer

Jenny Cutler (left), Mr. Bill Hackett, and Erica Whitley, with Mr. Hackett's "best friend"

Introduction

By Erica Whitley

"You can't do a cotton-picking thing without education!" says Mr. Bill Hackett, a former member of the Beaufort County
Community College Board of Trustees. Mr. Hackett certainly knows what he’s talking about when it comes to education. He attended public school as a boy and then attended Oak Ridge Military School in Oak Ridge, N. C., as a young man.

Mr. Hackett was born in Haslin, N. C., a small community between Washington and Swan Quarter, in 1908. His grandmother served as Haslin’s postmistress.

Mr. Hackett has led a very interesting life: he remembers the Great Hurricane of 1913 (he was five years old!) and was in New York the day of the stock market crash in 1929.

Mr. Hackett’s silver hair, cowboy boots and hat, and courtly manner are reminiscent of a true Southern gentleman. The homey atmosphere, with books everywhere you look in his living room, set us completely at ease. These things, along with his knowledgeable conversation and sharp wit, let us know we were going to have quite an interesting visit.

Mr. Hackett served on the Board of Trustees for sixteen years, until he retired in 1985. He went with the former BCCC president Charley Byrd to look at the property BCCC is now located on. Mr. Hackett is immensely proud of BCCC and is “delighted with its growth.”

Life: Ron Champion suggested a year or so ago that we ought to interview you for our magazine. Several other people have mentioned that. What I want to do is tape record this and then these students will write up our interview. And also when we get the story done, I’m going to bring it to you and let you read it.

Mr. Hackett: I don’t think it would hurt me if it slandered my character [laughter]. Turn on that light over there, honey, so you can see.

Life: Thank you very much.

Mr. Hackett: Yes, sir.

Life: Mr. Hackett, when were you born and where did you grow up?

Mr. Hackett: I was born in Haslin, N. C. I’ve got to tell you about Haslin. Now, before Belhaven was ever thought of, they hadn’t even cut the net stakes off Belhaven when Haslin was the post office here. And I saw you come in here from that direction. You came to Belhaven and then came out here.

Life: No, we missed your sign and went for a ways and then came back.

Mr. Hackett: Did you go all the way to the big two-story house?

Life: Yes.

Mr. Hackett: That was the house I was born in. The road has been changed somewhat and the house has been moved back to the south a little bit, but that house was where I was born in 1908. And this was in Haslin. I just barely remember that the post office was in the corner of our yard, down there.
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There are elderly people in the country side that still remember and call this Haslin, along here. And, of course, Pantego was going, but these days were prior to my being in the world, except I do remember that the post office was in the corner of our yard.

Life: Did your family have any connections directly with the post office?

Mr. Hackett: My grandmother was postmistress, and this was a halfway point between Swan Quarter and Washington. It’s about 30 miles to Washington and 30 miles to Swan Quarter. Of course, roads have been changed somewhat now and have been redirected and straightened and so on, but this was about the halfway point. People traveling out of Hyde County could make it to Haslin in one day and then on to Washington the next day. This was with driving horse and buggy.

Life: Before many people had cars?

Mr. Hackett: Yes, before there were any cars, I’m talking about.

Life: About 30 miles a day was about all you could do?

Mr. Hackett: Yes. It took a good driving horse to make 25-30 miles a day. He had to be a pretty good horse. And, of course, bad weather made it even worse because everything was dirt road and that made it even worse still, for instance, up here in the Beech Ridge, which is about a two and a quarter mile stretch of roads where there are no houses, just woods on both sides. It belongs to N.C. Pulp Company now, but it was privately owned back then in those days. That road is crooked, very crooked with curves. The reason for that is that when they built these roads, people ran their cattle, livestock outside. In other words, if you had a farm, you had to fence against other people’s livestock. And these cattle had been travelling in these woods to find the high ridge. And when the people built the road, they just followed the paths that the cattle had made, and they didn’t have any further engineering to do because that was the best way for the road to go.

We get off on these tangents, but it is important to know and understand something about this countryside and how it got the way it is.

Life: When growing up as a young boy, do you remember things that were particularly influential on your life or exciting? Particularly things that may be quite different from people today growing up?

Mr. Hackett: Well, this was pretty wild territory because there was such a small proportion of the land there that had been cleared to the point where they could use oxen and horses and mules to farm a little bit. I had a shop down there, and I had a lot of those old farming implements. They were wooden, and they just simply wore down to nothing. Many of the farm implements were homemade, made out of wood, of course.

Life: Mr. Hackett remembered a severe storm that occurred when he was a boy.

Mr. Hackett: That farm down there had a cotton gin on it. And the shelter—it was called the gin shelter—was still a good
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shelter when I was a boy. I quite well remember it. It blew down in 1913 in what was known as “The 1913 Storm.”

*Life:* Was that a hurricane?

*Mr. Hackett:* Yes.

*Life:* Was that the one that flooded in Washington, where the streets were filled with water?

*Mr. Hackett:* Yes. That was 1913, but I remember it. They ran big gas boats up and down the streets in Belhaven.

*Life:* Is that right!

*Mr. Hackett:* Yes.

*Life:* Was the 1913 Storm worse than Hurricane Hazel in ’54?

*Mr. Hackett:* Far worse because of the tremendously high tides. We’ve never since had a tide like that, never before so far as I know.

*Life:* Did the storm just come all of a sudden? I guess you weren’t prepared?

*Hackett:* My grandfather and my daddy went to Washington that day. They went by train. There was a train that left Belhaven at 6:00 in the morning, went straight to Washington. Incidentally, it took it about an hour to make that run. It came back to Belhaven after dark.

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My grandfather and father came back on the train. It was raining, but the wind hadn’t started to blow so hard then. My daddy had a brand new top buggy. This was a horse drawn vehicle that had a top to it. Now, this was some doings! That was the Cadillac of the day! He told my grandfather no, that they’d best go home because my mother was home with my sister [age three] and me [age five]. So they came home. My mother had the foresight to leave the place where we lived, which was a house down on the corner of the end of what is known as the mile road, which butts into this road, about a mile over to 264. And so when my daddy found that my mother was up at the old place, at her father’s and my grandfather’s, they came up there.

I’m going to inject something else here. That top buggy, of course, had curtains to it.

*Life:* How many people could ride in it?

*Mr. Hackett:* Two comfortably. Of course, in those days you could sit in your daddy’s or your mother’s lap, or sometimes children rode in what they called the foot of the buggy, which was just in front of the seat.

Well, they pulled the buggy under the shelter and put the horse in the stable and fed it and so on and so forth and went to the house. They were both about wet, but September wasn’t cold and people didn’t mind getting wet in those days as they do in this day and time. But, anyway, [laughs] the wind had finally started to blow. It backed that buggy out from under the shelter and then blew the barn and the shelter down [laughter]! And
the gin house, the cotton gin at that time.

Life: Just blew it down?

Mr. Hackett: Blew it down! That was a big barn, an old one but a good one built out of solid heart cypress. It would have never rotted.

The barn that was put back to replace it was also built out of cypress, what they call "pecky" cypress. You could buy cypress boards with little worm trenches in them called "pecky." You could buy boards this wide [a foot] for fifty cents a thousand board feet. Of course, you can't conceive of anything like it this day and time. Anyway, the cotton gin went in the September storm. And the gin shelter, which hitched onto this barn, it blew down. And that was the end of the cotton gin.

Now, the power that was used to turn that gin was horsepower. This was a ramp, just a very gradual ramp and a stanchion. A stanchion is where you lead an animal to. The weight of the horse just walking turned the cotton gin. And, of course, the man that had the cotton gin, he got some of the cotton and all of the cotton seed. Of course, there was nothing to do with cotton seed in those days, no by-products or anything else. Cotton seed meal hadn't been heard of. They knew that animals would eat cotton seed, but there was a drawback: you had to be very careful in feeding them because animals couldn't take a whole lot of that protein. And if I ever knew what they charged to gin a bale of cotton, if I was ever told, I don't remember it. But, anyway, my great grandfather cut that farm down there out of the woods, and there were some very fine men on that farm.

Life: Did you go to school in Pantego?

Mr. Hackett: No, I never went to school in Pantego. I went to what they now call Haslin. This whole community was Haslin, with the post office as the center, understand. There was no free delivery then. You had to come to the post office to pick up your mail. It didn't make any difference whether you lived five, six or ten miles from the post office. If your address was Haslin, you came to Haslin to pick up your mail.

There was a little one-room schoolhouse out there near Fred Latham's lane. After you go out that mile road, what's called the mile road to 264, you turned left like you were going on to Swan Quarter in Hyde County. F.P. Latham had a niece that was a schoolteacher, Miss Mary Chauncey. I went to school two years when I was six and seven years old. I went to that school, and I walked that two and a half miles. There was another family, two boys and a girl named Lanier. They let me walk along with them. I went there my first and second year. And the third year I went to Belhaven in the third grade. I wouldn't go or didn't want to go. I had two aunts; they were schoolteachers. I went to Belhaven in the third grade, but when it came time to go in the fourth grade, I wouldn't because I would have had to go to school to my Aunt Alice. That would have been certain death [laughter]. So I went back to this little school in the third grade. After that I did go to Belhaven, but I never did graduate from high school. There were three or four obstreperous boys, and I was one of them in that school. And the parents of all three of us decided they would send us off to school. And they wouldn't send us to the same school either!
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They sent Richard Jones to Blue Ridge School. My cousin Joe Simmons they sent to Christ School, an Episcopal school up there at Arden. And I went to Oak Ridge. Do any of you know where Oak Ridge, N.C., is?

Life: No, sir.

Hackett: It's almost equal distance from High Point, Winston-Salem, and Greensboro. It's right out in the triangle those three cities make, and the post office was Oak Ridge, N.C. There were two families that built that school. When I went to Oak Ridge in 1925, it had already been there one hundred years.

Life: Did you finish there?

Hackett: Yes, I did. You had to finish or get killed. There wasn't any foolishness about it. There were about one hundred boys that went to that school. That school, even in that day, cost one thousand dollars. It was a steep fee. But they wanted a sure enough strict military school.

Life: Did you wear a uniform?

Hackett: Yes, sir. You wore a uniform, and you'd get in deep trouble if there was a button off or a flapping sleeve or anything else. They were strict.

Life: Do you think that was a good experience for you?

Hackett: Oh, yes! It was everything in the world! I thought I was tough. Oh, I really thought that old Bill Hackett was tough! But I found out that I didn't know what tough was at Oak Ridge, and we loved it.

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Do you know the Leach family in Washington?

Life: No, sir.

Hackett: Well, the Leaches I grew up with are all dead. But there are still some Leaches in Washington. John Leach, from Washington, and I went to Oak Ridge together. Of course, John had been two years to McCauley [school]. He changed and went to school at Oak Ridge. And John graduated my freshman year at Oak Ridge, and I had another year. John was a year or two older than I, and we rode a train [to school]; it took all day long in 1925 to get to Oak Ridge. It took us from six o'clock in the morning till eleven o'clock that night to finally get there. We went to a place called Kernersville, which was seven or eight miles the other side of Greensboro. There was a jitney there that you could pay fifty cents or something to take you and your baggage to Oak Ridge. And we got to Oak Ridge about eleven o'clock at night, as I recall, on September 6, 1925. And they issued me my books that night. Absolutely no foolishness! There was a boy that had been to Oak Ridge for two or three or four years named John White. There was a professor that lived on every floor of the dormitory except the third floor of Brooks Hall, and John White said to the headmaster there, he says, "Hackett can go on the third floor of Brooks Hall," where this boy looked after things there. And I thought that was a nice fellow. I thought that would be soft and easy. Come to find out, it was the toughest place on campus. You could get killed on the third floor of Brooks Hall, and there wouldn't be anything said about it at all! Of course, I'm exaggerating there, children, but they were tough. There was no "I guess" or reckoning about it!
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The bugle blew at 6:00 in the morning. I had to be at reveille fully dressed with my tie on, with every button buttoned, with the stars shining. And your day started right then. Little snow on the ground, about that deep [hands apart to show several inches of snow], didn’t make a bit of difference. You got out there for 15 minutes and did calisthenics, deep breathing exercises. Then you went to the mess hall. We were supposed to be able to go to reveille and eat breakfast by 7:00. Then you had an hour to clean up your room, make up your bed, sweep, take care of everything, everything to its place, and get to class by 8:00. And you better be there, no “I guess” or reckoning about it! You’d better be in that classroom at 8:00, or you had to have an awful good excuse. They weren’t unreasonable; they were just strict. Just simply, you went there to learn, and, believe me, you did!

Life: Did you go to college after that?

Mr. Hackett: Yes, I went to [N. C.] State College two years. I went the full freshman term, and the next year I went home at Christmas time. I had a younger brother and sister that had to go to school, and I didn’t go back.

Life: Did you get into the cattle business soon after that?

Mr. Hackett: Not right away. I got a job with the North Carolina State Inspection Service. I had worked for them during the summer after I’d been to Oak Ridge my freshman year. I worked inspecting Irish potatoes. They still inspect Irish potatoes. For instance, this black land area of Terra Ceia grew tremendous amounts of Irish potatoes, and I worked for the North Carolina State Inspection Service. I think I got paid about $30-$35 a week. I worked the first summer I was home from Oak Ridge. The next summer I was home, and I had worked with them till I had a pretty good job. It was a part-time job; it fitted in with going to school pretty good. And so I worked for that same job when I stopped school. The next late summer or early fall after we finished Irish potatoes here, I went to New York State in what they called the Finger Lake District. This was right along Lake Erie from Erie, Pennsylvania, to Buffalo, New York. That was the main line of the New York Central Railroad, and these old Italian grape growers grew these Concord grapes that you see in all the stores. And in the early fall I was up there on that grape deal, and when we finished that, I had gotten to the place where supervisors thought I was a pretty good inspector. And I had two or three boys that went along with me.

Life: You were working for the state?

Mr. Hackett: I was working for the State of New York in New York. Each state had its own program, but it was the Federal State Inspection Service. That’s what it was called in that day. I don’t know what they call it today; I don’t even know that they have such inspection now. I don’t think they do. But, anyway, I was working there on that grape deal, and the supervisor in Florida called up the supervisor in New York and asked him if I was there. And Marx [federal inspection supervisor in New York] told him yes and also told him they had three other North Carolinians here inspecting grapes. The grape deal was about over then. And old man Strauss [federal inspection supervisor in Florida] in Florida knew it, and he wanted us in citrus fruit in Florida. We were making $55 a week.
This was 1929. We were in New York State the day of the stock market crash in October when the ticker tape was four feet deep in Wall Street, and people were jumping out of the second story window and so on and so forth. It was a terrible time. We were in New York State right then, and soon after that, on a certain date, we were supposed to wind up that deal in Concord grapes. Then we were going on to Florida. One of these boys had a little Wippet automobile. I know these children don’t remember, but you might.

Life: I’ve heard the name.

Mr. Hackett: It was built by Overland. It was one of the first cars that had a rumble seat, where two could sit. The four of us could ride in that thing comfortably. On Sunday in the grape deal we’d go to Buffalo and cross the Peace Bridge into Canada and spend the day in Niagara Falls and travel around some and learn about the country. We’d come back across the Peace Bridge late Sunday and go get a night’s sleep and be ready Monday morning to go to work. Well, old man Strauss had told me and the supervisor over the telephone that he’d pay us the same as we made in the State of New York, which was $55 a week. In that day and time, that was better than average. About two days before we left there to go to Florida, Mr. Strauss called up again and said that because of the times, he could only pay $35 per week. This floored me because we’d planned for some time now on the trip to Florida where it would be warm in the wintertime. All of us, we didn’t throw our money away foolishly. We hung on to some money all the time, all of us. I told those boys, I said, “I’m going to tell you something right now.” I said,” Wintertime is getting cold in western New York, frost on the ground in the mornings and what not.” I told them that I wasn’t certain at all that we could live in Florida on $35 per week. I didn’t know anything about the country, and I was inclined not to go. And they all just simply had a round table discussion. He promised us one thing, and, for all I knew, we’d get to Florida and he’d say he’d give us $25 a week. I told the boys, “I’m not going; I’ll go home if nothing else turns up.”

But we came down to New York City, and we got a place to stay in Brooklyn. An elderly lady had a nice house, and she told me flat out, “I don’t have anything but good folks in my house.” She said, “I don’t want drinking.”

I said, “Well, we don’t drink.” And the truth of the matter was, we did once in a while if we could find some drink, but that lady would never have known it. She was just as nice to us as she could be. We had two big, nice rooms there. We didn’t tear up anything, and we behaved ourselves and didn’t have a ruckus or roughhouse or anything.

Life: What kind of work were you doing in New York?

Mr. Hackett: We weren’t working. We went to New York City to find something to do. We had looked for several days; none of us had ever been to New York before. You could buy a scrambled egg, cup of coffee and two slices of toast for 15 cents. And that was our breakfast. They had little short-order joints all over. You could just go in there and get your breakfast in 10 minutes. We all ate one good meal a day. Not much lunch, but we got a good dinner. It cost less than a dollar to get most anything.
Life: How old were you then when you went to New York?

Mr. Hackett: I was then twenty-two. I told the boys one night we’d take all the newspapers and we’d go to our room and we agreed and look at the help wanted columns in all of them, page after page after page in the newspaper. And we boys, all four of us, were looking for jobs, but there just wasn’t any such thing that any of us wanted to do or could do. One night we were sitting there, and I told them, I said, “I’m going to tell you what I’m going to do.” I said, “Tomorrow I’m going to quit looking for a job in this country; I’m going to see if I can find a job outside this country.” I went to talk to the folks at United States Rubber, and I talked to other people. I went down to the United Fruit Company docks, and they owned a steamship company too. In fact, they owned two: they owned the Great White Fleet and Elders and Fife Steam Ship Company out of Liverpool, England. I went down to that place and out in the lobby of this tremendous office building. It wasn’t but about two stories tall, but it covered a lot of ground. I went in there, and there was a boy sitting in there, George Merryfield, that I later knew in the tropics. His job was to turn everybody around that wanted a job and send them right back out the front door. He did that to me that first day. And that night when I got to thinking about it, I said, “I’m going down there.” I told those boys, I said, “I’m going down there tomorrow, and if he tries to head me off,” I said, “I’m going to walk over him!” And I could do it too! There ain’t no reckoning about it. I could do it, and I did. I walked right on by him. I said, “Buddy, don’t you bother with me. I’m going to talk to somebody in this place that can tell me something.” I said, “I’m not looking for a job in the United States; I’m wanting a job outside this country.”

And I kept on walking. I opened one of these doors, and there was this great long corridor with smoke-glass doors on either side, must have been 100 feet long. And I was walking along there, and an elderly lady came out of a office. There was a little recess in the wall where you got a drink of water. She had come out to get a drink of water, and, of course, I had my hat in my hand. I was well dressed, and she says, “Can I be of any help to you?” She must have been 50 years old.

I told her where I was from, and I told her I knew how to work. I told her I had some education and that I wanted a job. I says, “I quit looking for a job in this country; I want a job outside this country.”

She says, “You go to the end of this corridor, the last office on the right, and knock on that door, and that will be Mr. George P. Chittaden, one of the vice presidents of United Fruit Company.” She says, “Mr. Chittaden will talk to you.” Mr. Chittaden was just as nice an old man as I ever saw in my life.

He told me, he said, “Have you got any money?”

I says, “Yes, sir, I have a little money.”

He says, “You got money enough to get home on?”

I says, “Yes, I can get home, all right.”

He says, “Now, you go home where you can live cheap.” This was in either late October or early November 1929. He says, “We’re going to hire a few young men after the first of the year.” He says, “You go home. You probably won’t hear from me in January, but you will hear from me.” That’s all he told.
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me. Of course, we talked a considerable time. He asked me all about my background: how much education I had, if I lived on a farm, if I had worked on a farm. I told him I sure had and told him what I had been doing. About the middle of February, I got a letter from them, from Mr. Chittaden. He told me to get a complete physical examination by my family physician and that the company would pay five dollars, no more and no less [for the examination]. Dr. Ellis Winstead examined me. Of course, Mr. Chittaden sent me a questionnaire for the doctor to fill out. I mailed it back to Mr. Chittaden back in New York, but the home office of the United Fruit Company is at One, Federal Street in Boston; it was one entire block. And I sent that questionnaire and medical report back to him, and pretty soon I had a job. He told me to be in New Orleans on the eighteenth day of February [1930]. I think this was the early days of February or the tail end of January that I was hearing from Mr. Chittaden. But, anyway, I went to the tropics to grow bananas for United Fruit Company. I had my 23rd birthday on the Abangaris. We were in the Gulf of Dulce, and they swore they were going to throw me overboard. I about halfway believed them before it was all over.

Life: Where did you work in the tropics?

Mr. Hackett: I went first to a place, Tela, Honduras. [That's] Spanish Honduras.

Life: What did you do down there?

Mr. Hackett: Grow bananas. Did nothing in this world but grow bananas!

Life: How long were you down there?

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Mr. Hackett: I was down there six years. I came back up here when I was 30 years old.

Life: What did you do then?

Mr. Hackett: That's when I started farming. My grandfather had become very old, and he was feeble. Hogs were two cents a pound.

Life: This is right in the middle of the Depression?

Mr. Hackett: Oh, yes. Of course, things were just beginning to look up a little bit. I had a little money that I had saved. I believe that the ship I came back on came into New York, and I came on home. I know that I came to New York because they lost my steamer trunk, and I was up there with just a suitcase with my clothes and boots and everything else was in my trunk. Instead of Belhaven, they had read Baltimore, and I had the devil's own time ever getting my trunk! I mean I had a time! They finally found it about three or four weeks late, but, anyway, I started to farm.

Life: Was this livestock?

Mr. Hackett: No, sir. My granddaddy didn't have any livestock at that time.

Life: Did you use a tractor?

Mr. Hackett: I farmed with mules. We [my grandfather and I] went to Washington. Anybody would sell him anything in the world. All he had to do was write his name. He didn't have anything in this world but property; land is all he had. We
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bought two pairs of mules. And this black [family] that lived there and worked on the farm, they were tickled to death [with the mules].

Uncle Fred Latham at the time was paying 75 cents [a day]. Everybody got mad with me because I said if a man won’t worth a dollar a day, I didn’t want him. I had boys to do something, and I grew a crop of Irish potatoes. Harry Latham was a good friend of mine. I was born the day that Harry was ten years old, had the same birthday, just ten years apart. Harry said, “Yes, Bill, I’ll furnish the seeds and the fertilizer and everything, and you furnish the land to do the work. He says, “If we make any money, we’ll have some, and if we don’t, we won’t be killed. I said all right. And I made a good crop of Irish potatoes and made a little money. And those Irish potatoes fed the labor; everybody had all the Irish potatoes they wanted! I don’t know how long you can live on Irish potatoes alone, but they lived with Irish potatoes! From there I went on to have livestock. You’ve got to have fence [for livestock]. At that time the cheapest kind of fence you could have was an electric fence.

Life: Is that right!

Mr. Hackett: Sure! You just took one strand of wire with posts 50 to 60 feet apart and insulator on it. Oh, I became a master at putting up these electric fences! Of course, you had to. If it got grounded, you didn’t have any fence. In other words, you had to keep it clean under them because the grass grew up on it. The grass would get wet, and that would ground out your fence and run your battery down. But that thing sat there and ticked all day and all night and you could train young pigs and you could train the wildest boars to stay behind that fence.

Life: Would it shock them?

Mr. Hackett: Oh, yes! When they hit that electric fence, it would shock them good, and they’d back off. Any livestock would.

I had two or three milk cows there when I got there, but there wasn’t a bull on the farm. I found out there was a man in Hyde County who had Hereford cattle. They weren’t pure bred, but they were pretty good Hereford cattle. I bought a calf from him so that I would have a sire.

Then it got to where barbed wire was cheap, and I put up a little creosoting plant. I found out there was a man nearby that had a little ground sawmill that he wanted to sell, and I bought that mill from him for $600 or $700. I bought a war surplus gasoline, eight-cylinder power engine to turn that saw mill. We had plenty of timber, and just as soon as we would get out of the crop in the fall of the year, I’d put the boys in the woods cutting timber. I sold that lumber to Snow Lumber Company in High Point. They wanted it for making furniture, and they would take it cut. The thicker you cut it, the better they liked it. And, of course, you can’t ship green lumber when it’s hot weather. You can only do this in the wintertime.

I mean that I dressed that mill up, too! I worked on that mill until I had it in perfect condition. That power unit would really turn that mill. I could cut 1,000 feet of lumber an hour.

Life: About what year was this?

Mr. Hackett: This was the ‘40’s, after World War II. And that power unit was World War II surplus. I had to put a pulley on
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it, but there was a good machine shop in Belhaven and Mr. Carty fixed that for me.

Life: How has the community changed in Beaufort County from when you came back from Central America?

Mr. Hackett: Very little.

Life: Is that right!

Mr. Hackett: Yes, very little. As I said, a farm tractor or two were beginning to come around. Ford built a little tractor called a Fordson, and there were a few of them around. But they didn’t have any that you could break ground with or pull a harrow with. Rubber tires for farm tractors hadn’t been thought of. There weren’t any around here.

You remember, Franklin Roosevelt was elected President in 1932, and I want to tell you that things began to pick up right away. Did you ever remember what the WPA was? Works Progress Administration?

Life: Right! We interviewed a fellow a couple of years ago who was in the CCC. [See August, 1989, issue of Life on the Pamlico.]

Mr. Hackett: Yes!

Life: That was really interesting.

Mr. Hackett: That’s right! There was a CCC camp right down here in Hyde County.

Life: That’s where he was.

Mr. Hackett: I’ll tell you, it was a wonderful experience.

Life: Do you think the government would do well to have something like that today?

Mr. Hackett: No, I don’t believe it would work today because people know too much. The economy hasn’t got down to where anything like it would work. Folks in this country don’t want to work anymore. As some people are saying today, “Well, I’m a working and struggling and straining and paying a lot of taxes and everything else.” These people that are “shuffling” their time away are living just as well as I am and don’t do anything! You hear a lot of that this day and time. You didn’t hear that in that day and time. And those CCC boys up there, they learned a lot. They learned a lot building roads and building bridges, and, of course, it was all by hand.

Anyway, Sam Mallison of Mallison Implement Company, that’s still out on River Road, I think, but they don’t call it Mallison anymore, started selling John Deere equipment, and I bought one of the first John Deere tractors that ever came to the eastern end of Beaufort County. Now, there was one or two boys up there on the road going down to Aurora that had bought tractors. That tractor was on steel wheels, a little John Deere. People from all around would hear that thing a bobbing, a putt-putt-putt-putt, and they’d come to see. I could pull a three bottom plow with that rig. But I didn’t believe in turning plows, so I plowed with tiller. I had a John Deere disk tiller, I could break more land with that tractor in a day than you could break with a pair of mules in a week!
Mr. Hackett: Yes, sir! And I’ll tell you that people came from all around to see that thing. I praised that tractor. And the more I praised that tractor, the more they sold. I remember there was a man, a good farmer from up there in Terra Ceia, Wilkinson Station, named Levy Kech. Levy and I became good friends. Levy came down here and said, “Bill, I got $800, and I can buy one of these tractors from Sam Mallison. Is this tractor as good as you say it is?”

I said, “Levy, I have not told you one single word that isn’t the truth about this tractor!” They burned kerosene. You started them on gas and got them hot, then shifted over to kerosene. They had more power on kerosene than they did on gas because the kerosene burned slower and it furnished more power. I farmed with that tractor one year, and I swapped that in and gave Bill Lurvey, I believe, $400 and got the next size up, which was an A. Oh, that thing was a monster!

Life: Did it have steel wheels?

Mr. Hackett: By this time they had rubber tires.

Life: When did you get married?

Mr. Hackett: If I don’t get this right, I’ll get killed! Lib and I got married in 1938, in 1938; I believe that’s right.

Life: We wanted to ask you about the college. You were on the board of trustees for a long time. How did you get involved?

Mr. Hackett: I was on the board of trustees for sixteen years, and I know you want to know what year I got on there. They gave me this plaque [looking at plaque], 69-85; that is sixteen years, isn’t it?

Life: Right. So you were there during the great growth of the college.

Mr. Hackett: Oh, we were growing up! Charley Byrd was the first president.

Life: He was the president before Mr. Blanton?

Mr. Hackett: That’s right. Charley had some faults, but I’ll be dog goned if he won’t a go getter too! There’s no why, yes, or reckon about it! Charley Byrd did a wonderful service for Beaufort County. He did some things they didn’t like and all this. If it was expedient for Charley to stretch the truth a little bit, he’d do it. But I was up there when we had classes in an abandoned old school out there at Old Ford going towards Williamston. Anyway, we had classrooms over the old fire station there on Market Street. We had classes anywhere. The Board of County Commissioners, they were all friends of mine. Charley Byrd found out about 70 acres of land up there where the college is now. Charley found that land, and I went out there with him and looked at it as did others. Anyway, I just thought that that was a good place. It was priced within reach, and so I just bored down on that thing to buy that ground and we got that land. It wasn’t long before Charley Byrd had a contract going to build the original building there. And from that, the college has just progressed and progressed and grown, and I’m delighted with it! We had a good board. The man in the lumber business from over there in Chocowinity was in the board. He lived in Washington. I can’t remember
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his name because I can’t remember things like I wish I could. But he was a wonderful man. He and I believed just alike. In other words, we believed strongly in education. You can’t do a cotton-picking thing without education! I could see that school was working, and we were seeing it everyday. We were turning out folks that knew how to do something. And I just tell you there’s nothing in the world to take the place of education!

Life: Are you pleased with the service of the college?

Mr. Hackett: I am delighted with that school. I was on the board when the Learning Resources Building was built; I was chairman of the building committee. We had tremendous difficulty with that building ‘cause the contractor put some coarse rock as filter underneath that building, and we had a water pipe to pull loose under the bathrooms in that brand new building. That flooded underneath it with water, and that coarse rock that that boy had put under there, with dirt over the top of it, that dirt fell away from the floor in the building. We finally cut a hole in the bathroom floor. The folks came there to work on the plumbing, and, bless the Lord, they cut a hole there this big [spreads arms]. I got down there, and you could look under there and see right under there a space that much and there was nothing! I said, “The building is going to fall in if we don’t do something right quick!” We hired a man, I believe, from Richmond, and he bored holes all in the floor all over that Learning Resource Building, two inch holes, and he had the machinery to pump what’s known as slurry. It’s thinly mixed concrete; that’s what it is. They pumped that slurry under there and I was there everyday. That slurry would come up in those holes, and when those holes filled up, we knew that we had it solid. It’s got the best foundation of any building in the county!

Life: One thing I always like to ask people with a lot of experience, elderly people who’ve been around, what kind of advice would you give these young students here? How do you think they could have a good life like you’ve had? What would you suggest?

Mr. Hackett: Children, of course, you’ve got the opportunities today that I didn’t have; they didn’t exist. I believe firmly that anybody that goes to high school and gets a high school diploma or even gets close to a high school diploma has got sense enough to know that you can’t do anything in this country without education. You cite me any terrible difficulty that there is in this country today, or any other country for that matter, and I’ll talk to you about it, and I’ll guarantee when we get to the bottom, it’ll be ignorance. Now, I know that well educated and smart folks do terrible things, but there’s a lesser percentage of them [who do terrible things]. Not only that, but educated people really contribute. Every day of their lives they contribute something. And without education you don’t do that. What am I going to contribute if I go over here to this man and I haven’t even got sense enough to run his machinery, a combine, a tractor, a threshing machine, or a heavy plow or anything else?

Life: You think our problems in this country are attributable to a decline in education?

Mr. Hackett: Yes. Education has never reached a point in this country that I think that it should have reached. There’s just
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too many slipping through the cracks. And I know some of the shrewd crooks in the country are highly educated people—and you’re going to have some of those—but you’ve also got some well educated people around them that are going to catch them before they get very far.

Life: Do you think today the Japanese and also the Germans are having such economic success because of their superior education?

Mr. Hackett: There’s no question in my mind about it at all,none. The Japanese haven’t got the resources, but they’ve sense enough to come over here to get our resources. They come over here and tell us what kind of soybean to grow for their export market. We’ve got folks right here in this county, and the counties adjoining, that are growing that soybean. I don’t reckon there’s any illiteracy at all in Japan.

Life: They also don’t have any unemployment from what I’ve heard.

Mr. Hackett: I don’t like them. I don’t like their methods. Pearl Harbor cured me with the Japanese. I don’t trust them. But, of course, they say now they can be trusted. But the businessmen in this country can’t do business along side of the Japanese. They’re just simply shrewder or something. Their products must be better ‘cause they can sell them. They can sell them all over the world and do.

Life: Let me ask you this. Say when you were 15 or 16 years old and today, what in the life style and the values and changes you think have been the biggest change that you’ve noticed?

Mr. Hackett: Well, that’s a difficult one. I have to come back to a lack of stress on religious education.

Life: It’s not here now like it was?

Mr. Hackett: No, sir! I think, if I was raising children this day and time, if these children here were mine, I would advise them and I might even use stronger language than advisory language, to tell them to affiliate themselves with the church. I think that the church is having a difficult time. We haven’t got enough coordination. The churches lack coordination today. They aren’t reaching enough people. They aren’t getting enough young people.

Life: And that’s different in your view from the way it was when you were young?

Mr. Hackett: Yes, sir. It’s entirely different.

Life: And that’s a change for the worse?

Mr. Hackett: That’s right. They say, “Well, Bill, what are you going to do with him [young people today]? He’s selling dope, he’s using dope, he’s smoking dope, he’s doing all this.”

I said, “If he had an education, he wouldn’t be using dope.” And the bulk of them would not.

Life: Of all the places you’ve been and lived, do you like Eastern North Carolina the best?

Mr. Hackett: I don’t think there is a place on earth that I have
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ever been that’s better. If there is, I’d be there!

Life: What do you think it is about this area that is so outstanding?

Mr. Hackett: Well, it’s according to what you like. But if you like excellent climate, if you like the wide open spaces, if you don’t like to be cluttered up, if you have always had room to breath and move and you weren’t bumping elbows with your next door neighbor and this sort of thing, you could still do all that in Eastern North Carolina.

Life: Do you think the people here are more friendly because there are smaller towns and not as many?

Mr. Hackett: Yes, that’s one thing. And if a man wants room here more than just an acre of ground to build a house on, he can get it. We are getting along good in Eastern North Carolina in comparison to some other places. We don’t have industry here like we might have. We’ve just got the pulp company and Texas Gulf Sulphur. But I’ll tell you something, and you and these girls will live long enough to see it. We’ve got these great peat beds down here. That peat isn’t good for a thing in this world except you can dry it and burn it. There should be a plant down there in the heart of that peat country to generate electricity. There’s peat down there that would generate the electricity for the entire half of Eastern North Carolina for a hundred years.

Life: Is that right?

Mr. Hackett: Yes, sir!

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Conclusion

By Jenny Cutler

Our visit with Mr. Hackett was very interesting. He taught us about the early days of Belhaven, which was called Haslin when he was growing up; and we learned a lot from his telling us about the many trips he made to find work. Mr. Hackett is a very hard working man and, despite his obvious education and sophistication, is an unpretentious, good-hearted country man. He now lives in Belhaven with his wife and sidekick dog, which he found as a stray and raised. He still raises cattle and takes each day one day at the time. Mr. Hackett seems to think the world has changed right much since his time, but he thinks education is the most important factor of the world today and believes we all should go as far in school as we can.