

Roseboro: A Glimpse into the Past

By Cameron Sutton



Sampson County is a patchwork of small towns knitted together by roads and great green fields. Picture it as a quilt of greens and browns, interspersed with the reds and bright spots of lights that comprise the few towns therein. Roseboro would be at the top left of this quilt, one of the brighter intersections of color, but one that often is overlooked.

Roseboro is the second largest town in Sampson County, likely due to its location. For just over a century

it has been a crossroads, a place where others cross through on the way to their real destinations, and where some few chose to stay. Before Roseboro, though, there was Owenville.

Most people don't know Owenville even existed - it's easy to forget when the scant few buildings that it comprised have largely been pulled back into nature, a symbiosis of the man-made and the natural that few notice anymore. Owenville stood roughly between modern-day Salemburg and Roseboro. However, it never recovered from the blow it received when the Cape Fear and Yadkin Valley Railroad Company built a line going from Fayetteville to Wilmington, putting a small depot in at a crossroads just south of the small town. The place where this company built their depot soon grew and Owenville shrank as the convenience of the town springing up around the railroad lured more people to move. The railroad also gave rise to several other small towns like Garland, Steadman, and Autryville.

Contrary to what its name may imply, the town's name did not come from any particular flowering blooms found nearby. Rather, it honors John M. Rose, the secretary of Cape Fear and Yadkin Valley Railroad Company. Roseboro's name came, when it was incorporated as a town in 1891, out of thankfulness towards the railroad company that gave its residents jobs and a community. Shortly thereafter, Roseboro got its own post office and a handful of businesses, including Sampson County's first drug store, Tart & West Pharmacy. The pharmacy's building, as far as I am aware, still stands – a small clapboard cottage that looks more like the witch's gingerbread house than a place of business.

Several little details make Roseboro stand apart. For one, it's always had an organized system of government – something which is rare for a town so small. It also had one of the first automobile dealerships in the county, a fact which produced an article in *The Sampson Democrat* which worried that the safety of pedestrians was in danger from the amount of cars out on the roads. Roseboro has had a bank since 1909. The Bank of Roseboro, incidentally, had the distinction of being the only bank in Sampson County not to go out of business during the Great Depression. Every other bank went under.

One event that stuck out happened in December of 1921, just before the Great Fire of Roseboro, which swept through four businesses in Roseboro's downtown. It came to be known that Representative Tom Owen had, as the article in *The Sampson Democrat* put it "moved the boundary lines of Roseboro just far enough to relieve himself and some of his neighbors of the burden of certain taxation." This was brought in front of the Counties, Cities & Towns Committee by fifty out of Roseboro's eight hundred residents – or, if one does the math, 1/16 of the population. Legislative committee hearings were held

at the request of the fifty angry residents, with just four others to support Representative Owen's actions (likely his neighbors). In a unanimous ruling, the territory lines were switched back around, much to Owen's chagrin.

Something even more peculiar than that occurred in Roseboro just under a century ago, though. A man rolled into this sleepy town on the train – a strange man, carrying a black bag and more mysteries than anyone alive knows. This man, William L. Payne, shook the Roseboro community from the moment he arrived in the 1920s.

Dr. William L. Payne, as he called himself, was immediately notable due to his foreign accent, charismatic mien, and unusual walking stick "which supported his slight limp." He claimed, rather boldly, to be illegitimate son of Kaiser Wilhelm II, "the exiled German emperor." He moved to this small town for reasons unknown, though speculations abound. He went on to establish a short-lived silkworm nursery, which was met with approval from local residents. For the next few years, doomed to be the last years of his life, he sparked interest and controversy in equal measure.

Roseboro at this time was a thriving market town, a center for the community which now boasted of several businesses not found elsewhere in the county. The first automobile dealership was found not in Clinton, but in Roseboro. It makes sense that an enterprising man such as Payne would look here and see a place where he could thrive. How he chose to thrive, however...

Payne soon had investors interested in his proposed silkworm venture, largely comprised of prominent businessmen in the community. This was a little ways off, though. While he waited to collect the funds and ship the silkworms themselves from far-off China, Payne took a job at a local junior women's college, Pineland College. It's believed that this is why he originally came to the area. This school, in nearby Salemburg, was run by a conservative Baptist preacher and his even more devout wife.

It goes without saying that the ladies at Pineland College collectively fell in love with the romantic and mysterious stranger, who had most unusual teaching habits – he took the young women out for midnight 'field trips' and told highly inventive stories. The good Pastor and Mrs. Jones were, of course, shocked by his behavior, and he was soon out of that job.

His silkworms, which did eventually arrive, turned out to be a massive failure. Though the allure of making silk was enough to draw Payne in, the massive undertaking of caring for silkworms proved not to his taste – not to mention how very expensive the practice was. Payne drifted around Roseboro, renting a room in a local home where he was found dead on his bed at the age of 41. It's said he was found in full military regalia, with all his medals displayed, but there was no sign of the black bag he'd brought to town – which he'd claimed held some of the Kaiser's crown jewels. With his death there are far more questions than answers. Roseboro was rocked by this man, but who was he? A conartist? Perhaps the truth will never be known.

Regardless, life went on. The introduction of Highway 24, which runs through Roseboro and on through parts of northern Sampson County, neatly cut off the growth that Roseboro had, until that point, enjoyed. This highway, as well as the shifting of technology toward the automobile as the main way of transport, put the railroad in a permanent decline. For the eighty-odd years or so since then, Roseboro has remained remarkably unchanged. In a sense, it's amazing it did not go the way of its predecessor, Owenville. It has remained much as it was in its early booming days – a small town with a small, tight-

knit community – but it has never truly faltered. Roseboro remains a bastion of small town life, bisecting the road between Clinton and Fayetteville.

Coming across these events in history books and records felt like I was reading a story by William Faulkner, or some other master writer of small town Southern slices of life. It's interesting to connect all these little events, noteworthy on their own, with a town the size of Roseboro. Everything that happens creates a ripple through the pool of time, and even now, residents of Roseboro are affected by the tides of the past.

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