

North Carolina's First and Only Silk Mill
 By: T. D. Burns, Charlotte, NC

The town of Wadesboro in Anson County can claim the fame of having the first silk mill in the South and the only one in North Carolina. It all started in 1888 just off Sikes Avenue where the water tank can be seen from miles away when approaching Wadesboro from the west on Highway 74. The hill on which it was located was previously known as Carr's Mountain, a part of the Uwharries Mountain chain. Prior to being sold for the location of the silk mill, Carr's Mountain was the site for the county fair grounds and a horse race track was also located nearby. The fair was operated by the Dixie Agricultural and Mechanical Association. County records reveal that this property was sold and transferred on December 29, 1890, from James Bradley, trustee, to George Singleton of Dover, New Jersey, Ebenezer Rose, Passaic, New Jersey and Russell Murray of New York. The business operated under the name of Singleton Silk Manufacturing Company.

Brothers Robert and George Singleton were silk producers in New Jersey. Robert came to Wadesboro to be the first superintendent. Amazingly, that silk mill was also the first textile mill of any kind in Anson County. Sometime later, the Singletons started another silk mill in Augusta, Georgia, similar to the one in Wadesboro. One wonders how Wadesboro was selected for the silk mill. John T. Patrick was thought to be responsible for influencing the Singletons to establish their mill in Wadesboro. Patrick was known to be a great promoter of Wadesboro and the general area.

The mill was known as a throwing mill where raw silk was processed for weaving. The silk cocoons were shipped to Wadesboro from Japan and China. It was a mammoth business for Wadesboro and employed between two and three hundred people for around two decades. From that standpoint, it was undoubtedly the largest single employer in the area. However, they used a lot of child labor, which was a common practice in those days. My mother, Ruth Graves Burns started to work there when she was eight years old and continued working there until she was married in 1911. The average pay for the employees was reported to be \$20.00 a month. If I recall correctly, my mother made about \$10.00 a month when first

Name	Position	Born	Age	Job
Graves, William	Father	1858	41	Silk Mill Foreman
" Hattie	Daughter	1883	16	Silk Mill Winder
" James	Son	1884	15	Silk Mill Twister
" Nettie	Daughter	1887	12	Silk Mill Winder
" Ellen	Daughter	1889	10	Silk Mill Winder
" Ruth	Daughter	1891	8	Silk Mill Lacing

Extracted from the 1900 Census report



Child labor was used universally at the mill

employed. Coming from a large family and not living on a farm, it took the salaries of everyone to provide food, clothing and everyday necessities for all of the family. My mother said that she was allowed to keep a nickel a week out of her pay check, which she saved to buy a doll and then had almost no time to play with it. She also spoke about how harsh the children were treated, almost like slave laborers. The 1900 Census, a portion of which is shown in the chart above, listed my grandfather, William S. Graves, as foreman of the silk mill along with my mother Ruth, age 8, and four of his other children employed there, ranging in age from 10 to 16.

Offices for the business operated in New York and the payroll was made there and sent to Wadesboro. The mill originally employed white workers only but business was so good they could not keep up with the orders. Another addition to the mill was built at the foot of the hill and employed up to 75 black workers.

In 1905, Charles Uren from New Jersey came to Wadesboro to replace Robert Singleton as the mill's new superintendent and stayed with the mill until it closed in 1927. The closing of the mill occurred for several reasons. The northern owners had passed away. The machinery was badly worn and difficult to replace. World War I had interfered with their trade. A tuberculosis scare spread among the workers as several developed the disease and died. The working conditions were not thought to be the cause of the disease at that time but some of the workers were carriers of the disease and infected others.

In order to really understand the fascinating operation of the old Wadesboro silk mill, it is necessary to know more about the silk worm and how silk is recovered. The silk worm is a caterpillar of the *bombyx mori* moth that feeds preferably on White Mulberry leaves. This species is now the world's most domesticated animal. It has undergone such artificial selection that the moths cannot exist in the wild on their own. They were taken into human care around 4,600 years ago and are now grown on farms, mostly in China and Japan.

The larvae excrete and enclose themselves in a cocoon of raw silk. The cocoon is made of a single continuous thread of raw silk that averages 1,000 to 3,000 feet in length and occasionally as long as a mile. The fibers are very fine and lustrous. About 2,000 to 3,000 cocoons are required to make about a pound of silk. At least 70 million pounds of raw silk are currently produced each year requiring nearly 10 billion pounds of mulberry leaves as food for the moths. One pound of silk represents about 1,000 miles of filament. The annual world production represents 70 billion miles of silk filament, a distance well over 300 round trips to the sun!

If the animal is allowed to survive after spinning its cocoon, it will release enzymes to make a hole in the cocoon so it can emerge as a moth. This would cut the threads short and ruin the silk. Instead, silkworm cocoons are boiled after the cocoon is completed. The heat kills the worm and the water makes the cocoons easier to unravel. It was reported that one employee in the Wadesboro mill went around the plant with a fire hose daily to keep the raw silk moist.

The cocoons were shipped in large quantities to the Wadesboro mill. Obviously, the young employees had to find the beginning thread of silk on the cocoon and feed it into the machine. This process was known as "*reeling*." The silk filament was then put onto large reels, known as "*swifts*." Unlike cotton or wool, silk is not spun but twisted. Hence the term "*throwing*," rather than "spinning." Throwing involves the revolving of two sets of bobbins at different, carefully adjusted, speeds. This is the reason the Singleton Silk Mill was known as a "throwing mill." The Wadesboro mill produced silk thread only and not the silk fabric.

As one of several young kids growing up in Wadesboro during the 1930s and living nearby, we would occasionally ramble through the abandoned old mill where most of the machinery was still in place. We would pick up some of the old discarded ceramic thread guides to use as ammunition for our sling shots. I have often imagined what a historic treasure that old mill would be today if it had been preserved and maintained as a state historic site and tourist attraction. There are very few people in North Carolina who know about the existence of such a mill in North Carolina. It would be wonderful if the State would erect a historical marker along Highway 74 passing through Wadesboro indicating the nearby site of the one and only silk mill in North Carolina.