

Richmond County Historical Society

'Those who don't remember their ancestors don't deserve to be remembered!'

March 2018 Newsletter

Lynn Salsi, storyteller and author, will entertain us as our guest speaker at the March 19 meeting of the Richmond County Historical Society, Rockingham City Hall at 7 p.m.



Lynn Salsi

In presenting a program of stories covering North Carolina history from the 1600s to the present, Salsi weaves a narrative of well-known facts and humorous anecdotes bringing her unique point-of-view to every presentation.

Humorous, yet factual tales include ducks at work, no bath in the house, the state of the state song, North Carolina's first all-female political caucus and that there is no truth to the rumor that NC's first symphony was a jug, a washboard and a washtub.

An award-winning author, teacher, playwright and historian, Salsi has written over 15 books for adults and children. For one publication she was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.

She brings her books to life through her passion for storytelling. She will be selling her books.

Did you know...

there is an abandoned cemetery at the very end of Ashe Street, off Richmond Road, Rockingham? Pat Franklin and May MacCallum of Richmond County Historical Genealogy recently visited the hidden, weed-filled cemetery surrounded by a wire fence to photograph the tombstones of the prominent H.H. Covington family dating back to the 1840s. That family has been confusing to research because the initials "H.H." were used for several generations in that family. Five tombstones are marking resting places. The Society's Cemetery Survey lists a Dawkins marker which was not found. The survey does not identify the location except as off Richmond Road. Now you know. May they rest in peace.



What is this biplane all about? See the back page of the newsletter.

The WACO 90 horsepower biplane was used by Vernon Ratliff in 1928 to take passengers, two at a time, aloft for \$2.50 each from Foxport Airfield.

\$15 airplane ride at Battley Dairy

Observers on the ground in Richmond County in the early years of the 20th century were fascinated with the arrival of aircraft overhead. The airships became a new novelty.

Clayton Carriker and his family were picking cotton when they first saw an airplane: "We sat and talked about that thing the whole evening," he recalled as told in the Richmond County Historical Society's book, "Mixed Blessings."

Alice Snead Douglas saw a blimp not knowing what it was, just something shaped like a peanut, going slow and making a little purring sound like an airplane.

Dirigibles passed overhead regularly following the U.S. 1 route from New Jersey to Florida, said Thomas K. Thrower Jr. of Rockingham.

"Mixed Blessings" stated that by the 1920s barnstormers set up shop at Battley's Dairy. For \$15 anyone could buy a ride. In downtown Rockingham, balloon rides were offered.

Flights were also offered at a place called "Watson Heights." Because planes could land on grassy surfaces, it was possible to land and take off at many locations around the county.

The first airport, which local historian Joe McLaurin referred to as a "flying field," was developed at Foxport on U.S. 1 north of Rockingham at its southeast corner intersection with Wiregrass Road.

It covered over 28 acres and included a gas station and café. It had a dirt landing strip, a dirt parking area, and a small wooden hangar that could hold three or four planes. The landing strip was between 1,500 feet and perhaps 2,000 feet long.

Private airplane owners went there to give flying instructions to new students. It was private and owned by Ludolph Glenn Fox, a Rockingham pharmacist, whom McLaurin said was not a pilot. It was used until the public county airport was built. Then it was sold to John McNeill for an automobile race track with a dirt surface.

Thrower gave an account of his recollections about the Foxport Airport saying: "Some weekends were very active at the airport when they had air shows. Students, paratrooping and passenger rides were very entertaining. I wanted to go up in an airplane, so when I was 10 years old mother let my younger brother and I go for a ride. It cost 50 cents.

"We flew in a classic three-engine Ford Trimotor. It carried 15 passengers. We sat by a window and up, up, up we wide-eyed boys looked as the plane circled over Rockingham, and our old home of East Rockingham, then on to Hamlet before flying back to the airport. "What a thrilling experience for a 10-year-old boy! From then on I knew that I wanted a career in flying because I love exploring the skies."

McLaurin said his father, Bert McLaurin, learned to fly off the field. "Many early 'air shows' were held there," he said, "they were great and exciting events drawing many, many people for miles around. I can remember in the early 1930s, when I was just a child, the air shows would attract such crowds that some of the churches would have members there selling food, etc., to feed the people, and to make money for the church. There would be such crowds at the airport that I could hardly see anything except what was happening over my head."

In 1931, the Carolinas Good Will Air Tour came to Foxport Airport and featured 27 planes from sports models to large cabin ships for multiple passengers. Pilots performed stunts, and there were parachute drops. The goal was to get people air-minded.

The possibilities were not lost on Rockingham Mayor William G. Pittman, who in 1931 began working to promote a county airport. Pittman had learned to fly an airplane at the Foxport Airport.

During military maneuvers in the early 1940s, Thrower said of Foxport: "The U.S. Army filled the airport with observer airplane support soldiers who slept in pup tents all around the airplanes for about six months on war training exercises. My brother and two other neighbor kids made friends and hung out with a lot of those soldiers. We thought we learned a lot about airplanes and army things."