

Richmond County Historical Society

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

August Newsletter

The manufacture of chewing gum in Rockingham in the early 1890s is a relatively unknown venture which showed much promise. It was somewhat before its time. Chewing gum didn't become popular nationally until just prior to World War I.

The earliest known mention is found in the July 3, 1890 issue of the *Rockingham Rocket*. A paragraph in the newspaper says without doubt that "the Southern Sweetgum chewing gum is the purest and best in the world. It is manufactured by the Rockingham Drug Co."

Almost a year later, the newspaper's April 2, 1891 issue states: "Nearly every shipment by rail has carried off a number of boxes of the chewing gum manufactured by the Rockingham Drug and Manufacturing Co. It goes over the state and over a large portion of the South."

The owners of the Rockingham Drug and Manufacturing Co. are not identified.

The beginnings of chewing gum in the United States date back to 1869 when exiled Mexican former president Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna, known for his victory over the Alamo defenders, arrived in New Jersey to spend his last days. He brought with him a ton of Mexican chicle. He sold the chicle to inventor Thomas Adams of Staten Island, New York. Adams unsuccessfully tried to invent a substitute for rubber from the chicle. That didn't work, but one day he saw Santa Anna put a piece of the chicle in his mouth and begin chewing. This had been done by the people of Mexico dating back to the Mayans.

Adams invented a gum-making machine and began mass producing a chicle based gum. It was not until 1884 that sales soared when he hit on the idea of putting the shape of the gum in sticks. Adams later became part of the American Chicle Company.

It is likely that the Rockingham entrepreneur bought a stick producing gum machine from Adams in about 1890. Chicle was also purchased for manufacture of the gum.

The name of the chewing gum produced in Rockingham was "Southern Sweetgum." This hints that the gum was flavored with the resin from the sweetgum tree.

Whatever the formula, the product was of such success that it attracted the interest of Winston-Salem businessmen. They bought the local company and moved it to Winston-Salem on Feb. 13, 1892.

Mention of the chewing gum business is mentioned in a booklet by J. E. Spencer who lived and had his photographic studio in the building now occupied by Arts Richmond, the old McNair Furniture building.

The building was constructed in 1871 by W. I. Everett on property owned by William Pickett Leak. It was called the Leak-Everett store and sold general merchandise. Everett later bought Leak's interest and the store became Everett's Hardware and later Rockingham Hardware. Everett eventually sold part of the building to a New York newcomer to Rockingham who opened a department store with the name Boss Racket.

"Boss Racket" was the unusual name of a large department store, probably located on the ground floor of what became in 1910 McNair Furniture.

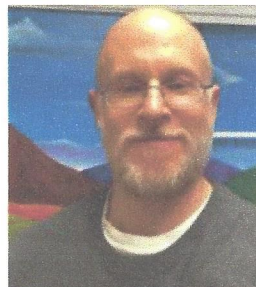
Another indication that this was the location of Spencer's studio and the chewing gum factory was a chance question by R. Carol McLean to Malcolm "Buddy" McNair a number of years ago.

The two were upstairs in McNair Furniture. McLean noted two quite large, heavily built tables. Asking McNair about the tables, McLean received the reply that it was thought they had something to do with making chewing gum. "There used to be boxes of old chewing gum scattered about," McNair commented.

The upstairs space was later cleaned out for use by the furniture store, the tables and boxes of gum disappearing.

Our Next Meeting

The Richmond County Historical Society will next meet on August 19 at seven p.m. in the Rockingham City Hall. The program will be presented by Dr. Joe Cole. Dr. Cole is an AP Assistant Professor in the Dept. of Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. He has a Ph.D in Philosophy from Duke University. His talk will provide an overview of



Dr. Joe Cole

ethical issues and questions around the intersection of two great challenges for human civilization in the 21st Century: War and Global Warming. How might we rethink our relationship to the natural environment?