Jane Dalziel Wood

Local Relief Project

In the autumn of 1931 the Block Messenger System in Wilmington, North Carolina was created for War Relief work and revived by the Board of Directors to assist in the unemployment situation. The general plan was to have a representative in each city block who was known as a messenger, to collect small change each week from voluntary contributors. These sums were received weekly by the general treasurer, Mrs. F. W. Gerken. During that year we turned our funds of $3,600 over to Citizens Committee which was employing the unemployed men in building a road around Greenfield Lake.

The second year, after the Federal Government began to match funds, we women decided not to participate, but to use our organization for fact finding, for collecting money and redistributing it where our messengers reported need.

One of our requirements was a garden for every family that could find ground. We helped them to do this and provided fertilizer, seed, sprays, and had large areas broken up by deep plowing.

The fact that they now had vegetables seem to suggest to a number of the men whom we were aiding, that they would be quite self-sustaining if they had white side meat to cook with their cabbage and collards.

One of them, Mr. Paul Johnson, who was in very poor health, took the trouble to get the name of the owner of a large tract of land on Eagles Island in the Cape Fear River and asked me, as chairman of the Block Messengers, to present their request to our board of Managers, for a start in cooperative hog raising.

Our Board was pleased to see this evidence of private initiative and agreed to provide the essentials, turning the management of the plan over to me and our Vice-Chairman, Mrs. J. Wallace West, and of course, the treasurer, Mrs. F. W. Gerken.

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Jane D. Wood, circa 1897
Courtesy UNCW William M. Randall Library
MS 172 T. F. Woods Family Papers Box #9
We acknowledge and thank Beverly Tetterton and the Special Collections Department of New Hanover Public Library for permission to print Jane Dalziel Wood’s report on a local relief project. We also thank Susan Taylor Block and Cathy Myerow for their assistance and last Andrew J. Dutka of William M. Randall Library, University of North Carolina at Wilmington for his help on the Wood photographs.

The final page shows a Depression Era Christmas card sent to Marie Rehder Gerdes. The drawing is initialed J. D. W.

Ms. Wood and her block collectors helped raise the funds to build the drive around Greenfield Lake and planted there azaleas, camellias and dogwoods.

Manuscripts and primary source accounts for the Bulletin are welcome and may be submitted for review. We are actively seeking submissions. Enjoy.

Jane D. Wood, circa 1912
Courtesy UNCW William M. Randall Library

**Jane Dalziel Wood was born in 1877** in Wilmington, the daughter of the late Thomas F. and Mary K. Sprunt Wood. She was educated in Wilmington and at the Salem Female Academy in Winston-Salem, NC. She taught many years in the Hemingway School and was active in civic and religious organizations. Her memorial date is March 6, 1956. The Wood family home stood at 201 Chestnut Street where Ms. Wood lived most of her life. New Hanover Public Library now occupies the site and library staff can tell you Ms. Wood still receives letters from charities seeking her help.
I wrote therefore, to Mr. Woodward of Richmond for permission to use his land and he gave it willingly, only asking that no trees be cut and that the level of the land be not changed. As there were no trees, the first condition was easy, as to the second, the level was changed, but not by us.

There were about a dozen haggard men in the company that gathered to discuss the plan under the feeble glare of a kerosene lamp in Mrs. Watson's house in Bellwill Alley. We could see the island from her front porch, but the cotton mill cut off the view of the river that lay between. Behind Alligator Creek which abounded in alligators and made it dangerous for chickens or pigs to venture into the swamps. It was decided, therefore, to enclose about twelve acres for the livestock by running a wire fence to form a large rectangle, the back on the creek and the fourth side the natural boundary of the river.

The ground to be enclosed was rich in tuckahoe, the roots of which grow often as big as melons, and it was believed by the men that the hogs could subsist on the roots in winter, and in the summer the lush vegetation together with the garbage which they would collect and carry over the river in boats, would fatten them for fall killing.

These men were all of early English stock, familiar with the river having lived on it and in it all their lives. They owned two or three homemade boats and had no difficulty in crossing the broad Cape Fear under usual conditions.

We pointed out to them that they would have to build a shack for shelter and although our agreement required two men to stay in it every night to protect the hogs from thieves and from straying into the creek, we were willing for them to take turns watching. It was also agreed that two men must remain on the island all day to watch for river pirates and to keep the stock from misadventure. This was the most unpopular part of the contract, but at last a dozen men signed it. Until they did we refused to invest any Block Messenger money in the plan.

The lumber for the shack etc. cost $62.76 which included posts for the fence and wood for the pig pens.

All the work was done by the men. They sunk a deep well and the Board provided a pump for $1.69. A stove was required when the weather got cold and one of the men furnished it, but the Board paid for the setting up equipment $1.55. It required hard work to get the fence placed securely and it cost from first to last $76.86.

Not until the very last nail was driven did we feel that it was safe to purchase the hogs, but at length we bought a boar, four sows and a litter of pigs all accustomed to conditions similar to those we were providing. The boar proved to be not a good buy and had eventually to be killed and we replaced it with another making the total cost of hogs $54.88. We were much bothered at first because we knew nothing about hog raising and had to depend upon the men and did not always understand their terms. As the three sows farrowed we were told that corn and middlings must be supplied until the sucklings were weaned. This was an unexpected expense and the feed bill for the two years that the enterprise lived amounted to $44.55 besides a few dollars the men contributed themselves without our knowledge and against the agreement, because they had promised to make the project sustain itself by selling off stock when it was necessary to raise cash for essential hog feed. We bought all that was needed until the herd was self-supporting and from then on we wanted no money spent for any purpose.

Mr. Johnson thought it would be wise to inoculate the hogs against cholera and the serum cost $8.75, so this brought the total expenditure by the Block Messengers to $251.02.

When the weather had settled into dependable cold about Christmas time the men had their first hog killing. The sucklings of the spring were the shoats of the winter. They were not really fat enough, not heavy enough, but the men had not consumed sufficient meat in so long that they felt justified in killing off six hogs leaving, of course, the original stock intact.

All the home-made boats were requisitioned for the killing. Men and women neighbors went over to the island after the slaughtering; they scalded the carcasses in huge pots and scrubbed the hides clean. After they were gutted, the fat was scraped from the entrails and the latter taken to the boats where the women sewed up the rents with heavy thread. Somehow they managed to keep a fire going in the middle of the boat to warm their hands when they could no longer sew for cold.

Long trailers of guts swung out from the boats like banners and the water was coaxed through the casings which were afterwards turned inside out, repaired where necessary and later boiled until snow white. What was not needed for sausage links was eaten as chitterlings.
The animals were cut up and the men drew lots for their shares. The lard brains, liver and chitterlings were divided by agreement. Although the destitution in the alley and in all that part of town was great, the men did not share their meat with anyone who had not contributed garbage except with an elderly woman whom they all admired for her pluck and her excessive missionary zeal in propagating a religion, that, strangely enough, not one of them took any stock in.

Right after the hog killing Mr. Johnson announced that we would have to get another foreman. His health was very poor and he required meat other than pork. We had thought we might let him raise goats on the island, so that mutton would be available, but it seemed unfeasible. He became acquainted with a man on the Greenville Loop road who would let him till some land on shares and there was a house better than his present rented home which he was unable to hold, and he was to have the use of it free for as long as the arrangement lasted. He wanted us to let him have two stocked sows to start a herd.

Mrs. West and I hardly knew how to handle this request so we put it up to the men and after some discussion it was decided that Mr. Johnson might take two shoots and anyone else who wished to leave could do the same, but new persons taken in their places could not expect to share on a par with the original partners. This was to cause a lot of trouble later on when newcomers found that they could not share and share alike with men who had built up the project and gone through the hard trials of the early stages.

It seems just as well to tell here what happened to Mr. Johnson though it took three years to bring it to pass. He made good at Greenville and after his sows farrowed he bought two other sows. In two years he had raised five hundred pigs. He gave his family all the meat they wanted and from sale of hogs he bought two cows. He sold milk and had enough for his own requirements. Finally he was able to rent a comfortable house on the highway where he continues to raise children, vegetables and flowers, in a contentment and beauty. They have a cow, his wife sells flowers, he has a car and rides to his work. He is a carpenter by trade.

Mr. Lee agreed to act as foreman in Mr. Johnson’s place. He and his wife were country bred. Like all the people in the section described, they had worked in the cloth mill in the neighborhood. The mill closing had thrown them all out of employment, but knowledge of farming stood the Lees in good stead.

Mr. Lee lived exactly across from Eagles Island and there was room enough around his house for the carts and small wagons used in collecting garbage. He took the greatest interest in every detail of the work and assumed the responsibility of caring for the stock when illnesses interrupted the men’s daily schedule. When a member resigned from the project because he preferred to resume his job watching for and hooking logs that floated down the river, Mr. Lee found a suitable substitute.

But it was not very long after that when we lost another man who wanted to use his whole time hauling junk to load on the freight cars that ran on a siding between the alley and the mill. He had certain misgivings about the use of this scrap iron that was being loaded on Japanese boats at the Wilmington docks because he thought he might be providing bullets to kill himself, but as he was paid in cash for his work he thought he would risk it.

The herd increased rapidly under Mr. Lee’s management, but we had a serious setback in the spring of 1934.

River dredging was started near the island, and naturally the cargo had to be discharged. Unfortunately the pipe was laid within the fenced off portion of our hog pasture and the mud began to fill it up. The men said nothing about it to me until much damage had been done, and the first complaint was that the dredge floats blocked the little landing stage which they had built and had damaged the pier.

I went to see the authorities and they were most cooperative, knew nothing about this arrangement, had the pipe removed and the pier repaired. They could not repair the submerged fields of tuckahoe that we depended upon. It was also a blow to have the river silt part way up our fence, for it was more difficult to keep the hogs inside the lines.

Of course this had nothing to do with it, but cholera swept the herd in the summer of 1934 killing fifty or sixty shoats and sucklings. We appealed to the Board of county Commissioners. Mr. Hewlett, the county Chairman, was extremely helpful. He gained permission from his board to donated serum for inoculation and permitted Mr. Herring, Farm Demonstrator to apply it. The plague was stayed and the hogs became perfectly healthy.

In that late summer we had high equinoctial gales and one of the youngest members of our group was frightened by the swelling of the river which is always dangerous and cursed with
counter currents which make it easy for a small boat to capsize. This youngster neglected his tasks and angered the men who thought he was too young to be trusted, so he was given two shots and allowed to resign.

*From the beginning of our undertaking we had as an active helper the son of a charter member.* Buddy was not very quick mentally and a little deaf, but he loved to gather garbage and feed the stock. He knew every suckling and shoot by names of his own and could call them as well as anyone. He could handle the craziest craft on the river and never feared wind or wet, but unfortunately he got arrested for drinking. While the men condoned it once or twice at my solicitation, there came a day when they could no longer do so and buddy was given the usual compensation. He had nowhere to keep his two pigs so they were sold and the amount spent for a suit of clothes which made him very happy. He missed the solitude of the island where he could be at peace from a world that he did not quite understand.

In the fall of 1934 we were getting short handed. It was no longer easy to replace the men who dropped out because the government was providing jobs and there was increased business activity. When Mr. Hartz asked to come into the enterprise we thought well of it until he disclosed the fact he wanted to take his swarm of bees with him and hive them in the pig enclosure. We did not know how the bees would get along with the hogs and as no one could tell us, we held out quite a while on Mr. Hartz, but finally let him try his experiment. So far as I know there was no disagreement between the bees and the hogs.

After the winter hog killing of 1934 we still had a hundred hogs counting sucklings and shoots. By the New Year our project membership was reduced to six men. There were dissensions among them. The work had gradually increased while the company dwindled. The last discouragement was a second deluge of mud from the dredge. The discharged matter was now to the top of the wire fence in places and the hogs were able to run wild. An attempt was made to dig the fence out, but it had to be abandoned.

The men relaxed all our rules and the alligators ate some young pigs. Small farmers and gardeners complained that the hogs were rooting up their plants. We did not know how to handle the situation.

Mrs. West and I had many anxious consultations. We did not wish to see the enterprise given up, but the men no longer cooperated with us nor with each other. Instead of exchanging pigs for corn and other requirements of the sows some insisted upon putting up money to buy grain. Others who had no money objected to it and this led to quarrels. It was impossible to settle anything equably.

The women complained that their garbage was not collected regularly and other collectors began to come into the alley and get the best scraps for their stock.

We were at length forced to conclude that the relief plan had accomplished all that could be expected of it. There remained only a closing out of the enterprise. After all, for two years we had provided occupation for a dozen men and many youngsters. We had enlisted the aid of dozens of housewives. We provided a place of relaxation easily accessible to the neighborhood and we gave meat to a dozen families and their dependents at a time when it was grievously needed. Having so many more to feed we only raised three hundred hogs against Mr. Johnson’s five hundred.

After reserving for the Block Messengers the equivalent of the original stock long ago slaughtered, we had a final hog killing and then divided the remaining fifty or sixty head among those entitled to share them. Each man had a start in private hog raising but only those who could make plans for their keep in the country could profit from this. Stock is, of course, strictly prohibited within the city limits.

Mrs. Lee’s sister had a place a mile from town that she would lend to Mr. Lee for his pigs. Mrs. West and I decided, since we had to tear the shack down that we would sell it to Mr. Lee, provided, he would transport it across the river and haul out into the country. We threw in the fencing which was rusted and the posts somewhat second hand. After careful consideration, Mrs. West, to whom I referred the problem, decided that fifty cents was enough for Mr. Lee to pay, especially as he had kept the enterprise going without any remuneration for a year and a half.

From the door of the shack many notices could now be torn. They presented a bizarre appearance in that lonely spot. One of them was: *No bed clothing permitted permanently in the shack.*
The purpose of this was to keep vermin from infesting the shack. The rule was suggested by one of the men after a sleepless night. After that each man had to bring his bed roll every night.

Mr. Lee set up his house in the country. Mrs. West and I had the pleasure of seeing the Lees living in it very happily. At a discreet distance was located the herd of seven or eight swine. All in good condition and promising both food and income.

The County Commissioners agreed to buy the hogs we reserved for our organization at current prices and gave us $102.38 or nearly double what we had paid for them. Deducting this from the original outlay of $251.02 our venture cost $148.64. As we were closing out or relief work, the Board of Managers decide to invest that amount and $75.00 that we had on hand, in an adjustable bed and a therapeutic lamp for the local Red Cross Sanitarium and so ended our relief work, helpful to the very end.

Jane D. Wood, Chairman
Block Messengers

Courtesy Cape Fear Museum