

# A Progressive Image in Transition

**K**ey's 1948 study traced the Tar Heel distinctiveness to the Civil War. North Carolina refused to call a secession convention, and even after it joined the Confederacy, pockets of the state remained loyal to the Union. The difference, according to Key, lay in the number of slaves and the type of slave holdings in North Carolina. In 1860, North Carolina had

fewer slaves (331,000) and many fewer holdings of 50 or more (744) than any other principal slave-holding state. South Carolina, with a smaller total population, had 402,000 slaves and 1,646 holdings over 50. While plantations certainly existed, the baronial structure of the Old South never took hold in North Carolina. Consequently, the Civil War did not shatter the state's economy to the extent it did to much of the plantation South.

When Henry Grady promoted his "New South" vision at the Atlanta Exposition of 1887, North Carolina had the best natural resources and mind set in the region for launching its "Cotton Mill Campaign." Editorials and sermons alike proclaimed the textile mill the "salvation of the South." Financiers raised local capital where possible and solicited funds from the North as early as 1895, establishing a mill at every river fork. North Carolina's plentiful waterpower and cotton acreage provided key raw ingredients. But most important was the abundant labor supply, mainly yeomen farmers working war-ravaged land. Mill agents crisscrossed the mountains and Piedmont signing up entire families for their villages. The contracts promised free schools and houses, libraries and amusement halls, enough to eat, and work for the whole family.

The "New South" dream at the close of the 19th century did indeed put portions of the South back on its feet. Waves of families unable to scratch out a living left the mountains. Population in the Piedmont increased, and cotton farmers had a new and ready market close to home. Mill villages themselves delivered on some expectations, like schools and ball teams. But a 14-hour work day was added to the agents' idyllic picture. Many owners of this era were charitable and knew their workers personally, but a deep-rooted paternalism was born in the process.

Scattered protests took place in the 1890s, the earliest efforts at unions in North Carolina, but they were quickly squelched. There were always more workers ready to take strikers' places and keep up the torrid surge of the industry.

Keeping the spindles turning in a North Carolina mill.



Photo from the Howard Odum Papers, Southern Historical Collection, courtesy of Billy Barnes



**Brothers Benjamin and Buck Duke, strolling the Atlantic City boardwalk.**

"Between Durham and Shelby," wrote North Carolina historian S.H. Hobbs in 1930, "almost every little town has one or more small cotton mill." But this era of the small patron was spawning a new kind of North Carolina entrepreneur. From 1923, the peak of the postwar surge, to 1933, New England lost 40 percent of its mills. The newer, lower-waged Southern industry increased fivefold. Nowhere did growth accumulate more rapidly than in North Carolina. And textile mills were not the only empires springing to life.

A group of powerful plutocrats emerged in the first third of the century who have left legacies still intact in the state. In 1919, 23-year-old Spencer Love risked \$80,000 to seize control of a single mill. By his death in 1962, his investment had grown into the world's largest textile company, Burlington Industries. Its annual sales now exceed \$2 billion, and it is the state's leading industrial employer (31,000). "Uncle Charlie" Cannon carved out a fiefdom not far away at Kannapolis. Still unincorporated today, the Cannon textile center ranks number two in industrial employment (21,000). Two Cone brothers from the noted Baltimore family established their textile chain with a ring of mills around Greensboro. James "Buck" Duke also got into the act. He used stock manipulation, a squeeze on small tobacco farmers and manufacturers, and modern advertising for pre-rolled cigarettes to gain monopoly control of the tobacco industry. When the Supreme Court broke up his American Tobacco into competing companies, R.J. Reynolds was waiting from his Winston-Salem base to rival Duke. Finally, furniture builders settled around High Point and westward towards the Blue Ridge forests, establishing the other labor-intensive industry that still dominates North Carolina.

From 1900 to 1939, North Carolina increased its value of manufactured products 1,397 percent, far more than any other Southern state except Texas, a close second. From a national viewpoint, this meant North Carolina was more modern than other Southern states. From a millworker's point of view, it meant the stretch-outs of 1929, the 1934 general strike (the largest in the nation's history), occasional organized protests but almost always, no bargaining leverage with the employer.

### White People Wake Up

**K**ey also called North Carolina progressive for its moderation in race relations. He explained that the plantation politics of other deep South states did not take hold in eastern North Carolina, where the concentration of counties with more than 40 percent black population was located. North Carolina did not have an exclusively "Black Belt" region like Alabama or Mississippi; the state's eastern counties had concentrations of white tenant farmers as well. Key felt that this white yeoman presence moderated racist structures because of the commonality of experience of blacks and whites. Moreover, the white farmers often served, as Key put it, as the "opposition to the political machine, to the economic oligarchy of manufacturing and financial interest." But another kind of opposition also flared in the eastern counties, a kind which Key failed to identify.

**During the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, national business magazines often featured J. Spencer Love, founder and president of Burlington Industries, on their front covers.**



Photo courtesy of N.C. Collection



Cover of *Collier's Weekly*, November 26, 1898, entitled "A Scene In The Race Disturbance At Wilmington, N.C."

The "Red Shirt" campaign of 1898, for example, left blood stains in Wilmington still remembered in the riots of the 1970s. A Republican-Black coalition ruled the city, maintaining control in the wake of the Populist uprisings of the decade. As black editorialists spoke out and black officials attempted to implement changes, armed white citizens took matters into their own hands. Rioters burned the black newspaper and patrolled the streets. Black officials fled the city or resigned. Others were killed. In the 1900 elections, Republicans were defeated throughout the state. One party—and one-race—politics ruled the state until the late 1960s when the Voting Rights Act of 1965 began to have some impact.

Most importantly, Key failed to mention Ku Klux Klan activities. The Klan appeared in North Carolina in 1867, numbering up to 40,000 members during Reconstruction (1865-76). In 1871, Federal troops were sent to North Carolina to suppress these night riders, and a federal grand jury indicted many of those involved. In the 1870s, the Klan gradually shrunk in size, not because of the indictments but because its goal of white supremacy had been achieved in most areas by the end of Reconstruction. During the 1920s and again in the 1960s, the Klan revived in the state as in the rest of the South. As late as the mid-1970s, Smithfield welcomed travelers with a large billboard reading, "Join and Support the United Klans of America, Inc." While the sign may have been an isolated symbol, the message could not be forgotten by the hundreds of thousands of Tar Heels and out-of-state tourists who passed it on their way to the beach. "Support the United Klans of America" could only serve to implant the impression that North Carolina was the hottest bed of Klan activity.

In September, 1979, the white supremacy movement—and media coverage of it—began a chapter which is still unfolding. Representatives of various Klan factions, the Nazi Party, and the National States' Rights Party met together in Louisburg. A series of such meetings followed where representatives of the leftist group, the Workers Viewpoint Organization (later the Communist Workers Party), appeared. Self-avowed Klansmen and communists exchanged taunts, first with words and finally with gunfire. The shootings at Greensboro on November 3, 1979, stoked growing national attention to still another Klan revival. Post-shootout Greensboro—the marches, trials, investigations, and the 20th anniversary of the Woolworth's lunch counter sit-ins, which helped launch the civil rights movement from Greensboro—made North Carolina an easy target for worldwide coverage. The state's image, rightly or wrongly, suffered.

Finally, Key pointed to North Carolina's educational tradition as perhaps the most moderating influence towards "national norms." The University of North Carolina schooled a number of state politicians. While some leaders emerged through political dynasties, like the Shelby group, no

demagogue, like a Huey Long, took power. UNC not only provided a place where people like Sam Ervin and Thomas Wolfe could rub shoulders in the debate clubs or in the theatre, the University leadership set high standards for the whole state. Building on the activist newspaper tradition that Josephus Daniels had established at the *News and Observer*, for example, the UNC School of Journalism trained a generation of writers for an exceptional group of North Carolina dailies. And the University helped spawn the whole discipline of Southern studies by supporting the work of Howard Odum and his associates at the Institute for Research in Social Science.

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More than any other person, Frank Graham, president of the University from 1930 to 1949, established the tone and standards for this tradition. But ironically, his entry into politics might have served to release the long-simmering racism in the state. During the forties, Graham joined with Eleanor Roosevelt, A. Philip Randolph, and others to work for economic and social progress through the Southern Conference for Human Welfare and other groups. In 1948, Gov. Kerr Scott, known as the "little-man's Governor," appointed Graham to complete a U.S. Senate term. In the 1950 campaign for a full term, Graham faced racist smear tactics not known in

North Carolina since the early 1900s. Willis Smith's supporters flooded the state with handbills reading "White People Wake Up" and with innuendos linking Graham to the Communist Party. Smith defeated Graham, unlocking the race issue for future electoral campaigns.

### Moderating a Revolution

**D**espite Frank Graham's defeat and the unleashing of racist forces, North Carolina maintained its progressive image through the '50s and into the '60s, primarily because of Luther Hodges and Terry Sanford. Both Hodges and Sanford had notable achievements as governors and perhaps because of their accomplishments, reached positions of stature in national politics, Hodges as President Kennedy's Secretary of Commerce and Sanford as President of the Democratic Party's Charter Commission (1972-1974).

Dubbed the "businessman" governor, Hodges began the long process of leading the state into the modern industrial era. After industrialists Love, Cannon, Duke, Reynolds, and the others had firmly established their companies, North Carolina remained an agricultural state with only low-wage industry. But Hodges pulled together the right combination of capital, commitment, and cooperation to launch the Research Triangle Park. Today, the area houses Monsanto, IBM, General Electric, the Research Triangle Institute, the Environmental Protection Agency, and scores of

think tanks including the National Humanities Center. Speculation surfaced in 1980 that the multi-million-dollar silicon electronic industry might become based at the Park. Largely because of the Research Triangle, from 1970-1975, Raleigh-Durham was the fastest growing metropolitan area in North Carolina and thirteenth fastest in the South.

Hodges preserved a liberal image for the state, despite his resistance to the 1954 Supreme Court decision banning school segregation. As governor, Hodges appealed to the all-black North Carolina Teacher's Association to endorse separate schools. He also proposed a voluntary segregation system called the Pearsall Plan. Speaking before North Carolina A&T students in 1955, Hodges attacked the NAACP, using the word "Nigra." Students scraped their feet in protest, one of the early A&T-based actions which eventually led to the famous Woolworth sit-ins in 1960.

Sanford, Hodges' successor in the governor's mansion, was more politic, and more liberal, in dealing with race relations. He kept an open door to protest leaders like Floyd McKissick and supported gradual desegregation. At the same time, he continued Hodges' search for more capital-intensive industry, and he established community colleges, technical institutes, the North Carolina Fund (a forerunner to the federal anti-poverty programs), and the School for the Arts. All the while, Sanford, by inspiring a generation of North Carolinians to dedicate a significant portion of their lives to public service, was building another political plutocracy of sorts. While

This Smithfield, N.C. sign is no longer standing.



Photo by Billy Barnes,

Sanford never developed a political machine in the tradition of the Shelby dynasty, his demonstrated concern for North Carolina did instill a similar commitment in others, persons now sprinkled in various leadership capacities throughout the state. Sanford's combination of political astuteness, day-to-day fairness, and a vision of progressive moderation rang consistent with the traditions that V.O. Key described in 1948.

Building on the accomplishments of Frank Graham and Kerr Scott, Hodges and Sanford set into motion a number of moderating influences within the state, through industrial recruitment, gradual desegregation, administrative innovations, and stimulation of new leaders. But when Sanford left office in 1965, more fundamental changes were beginning to sweep the South. Combining a groundswell of collective, grass-roots protests with a growing national sentiment for social change, the civil rights movement began rattling the chains still binding the region into a unique racial and class structure. The "movement" pursued the revolutionary goal of "freedom now," of a permanent transformation of the South's caste system, primarily

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in the deep South. What zeal that remained for North Carolina was dissipated through the moderating, absorbant structures set into motion by Hodges and Sanford. While some bitter civil rights battles were waged in North Carolina, particularly in Chapel Hill and Durham, no mass upheaval occurred. Statewide protests, as in Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina, took place in North Carolina only a decade later.

During the early and middle 1970s, racial protest exploded in Asheville, Oxford, Charlotte, Chapel Hill, and Wilmington. No longer linked exclusively to the goals of the 1960s-style civil rights movement, the protests focused on economic as well as social reforms, and in the process stimulated a more complex matrix of social transition within the state, both substantive and symbolic. Among the range of events grouped by the *New York Times* feature as "Blemishes on the State's Image," the J.P. Stevens unionization campaign perhaps best illustrates this transition. Pro-union workers active in a 1963 election at the seven Roanoke Rapids mills (where the work force was predominately white prior to

Photo courtesy of N.C. State Archives

THE HIGH HONOR GIVEN TO JOSEPHUS DANIELS BY THE CITIZENS OF NORTH CAROLINA IN RECOGNITION OF HIS LONG AND DEVOTED SERVICE

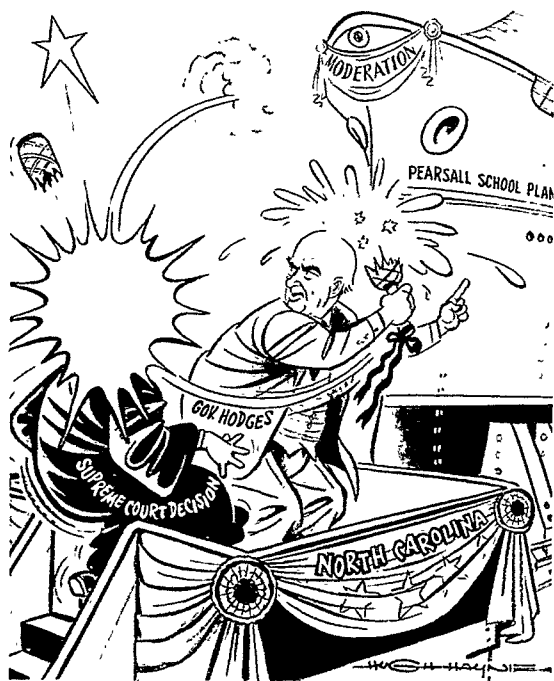


**Feature on Josephus Daniels, then editor of the *Raleigh News and Observer*, in *Harper's Weekly*, March 4, 1911.**

implementation of the 1964 Civil Rights Act) and an influx of black workers, many of whom had been involved in earlier civil rights efforts, combined forces on a sultry August day in 1974 to win a majority of the 3400 votes.

As the union organizing campaign spread throughout the state, churches, civil rights organizations, and women's groups blanketed the nation with appeals to support the Stevens workers. Meanwhile, the Joan Little, Wilmington 10, and Charlotte 3 cases collectively sparked an international examination of the state, causing Amnesty International to ask, "Do political prisoners exist in the United States?" When HEW launched a series of affirmative action campaigns following the Carter election in 1976, the University of North Carolina desegregation case became front-page national news, and education experts within and outside the state took a closer look at what many had considered a model higher education system in the South. Finally, after the Klan-Communist Workers showdown in Greensboro—however coincidental the location might have been—copy-hungry journalists fell into easy characterization of the state which many may have remembered from past travels to the beach as a place that "Support(s) the United Klans of America."

A generation ago, V.O. Key explained why North Carolina led the region in social indices and in image. In 1975, Bass and DeVries, after a re-examination of



This cartoon depicts Gov. Hodges' method of dealing with the 1954 Supreme Court school desegregation decision—a voluntary segregation system called the Pearsall Plan, which Hodges put forward as a “moderate” alternative.

Photo by Billy Barnes



In May, 1964, President Lyndon Johnson visited Rocky Mount to promote his upcoming anti-poverty package with the national media. Johnson stopped at the home of a tenant farmer and then went to the local courthouse where Governor Terry Sanford, as shown above, presented the President a copy of the North Carolina Fund's anti-poverty plan for Rocky Mount.

the social and political indicators, characterized the state as a “progressive myth.” Then in 1978, *New York Times* writer Wayne King, a North Carolina native, appraised the state's image as blemished, its symbolic stature receding. North Carolina, in fact, no longer leads the South in social indicators (as detailed in the following pages). And, as the *Times* story indicates, the state's image has slipped at least to a level of equality with other “New South” states. Social scientists and journalists have researched, catalogued, and reported this transition in North Carolina. But few, if any, have adequately explained the causes of this transformation.

Have the moderate, nationally respectable North Carolina traditions which were established in the first half of the century and nurtured into ongoing structures primarily by Gov. Sanford, resulted, inevitably, in incremental social progress? Put another way, did these same structures ensure gradual progress—however illusive such a term is, when considering emotional as well as economic indicators—instead of more dramatic leaps, which other Southern states experienced in the aftermath of the civil rights movement? If moderating structures did prevent dramatic strides, effectively lowering North Carolina's relative rank in the region, two alternative scenarios could unfold. The traditions unique to the state might sustain a longer lasting, albeit gradual, social progress; or conversely, the traditions might continue to prevent a cathartic,

dramatic spurt of change. In either case, global economics, the energy crisis, and Sunbelt growth are becoming as important to the state as caste and class have been. With its unique history on which to build, North Carolina is moving rapidly into a world community.