

A SHORT HISTORY OF THORSEY  
BY  
Pauline Poole Howard

Thorsby is the youngest town in Chilton County and has a most interesting history dating back to the year 1895. This is the year that three men came down from the North in search of a suitable place to start a community to which people in the cold northern climate could locate in a milder climate. These men were well impressed with this section of the country and they decided to form a land company which was named the Concordia Land and Improvement Association. They were able to buy four or more square miles of mostly wooded area from The Louisville and Nashville Railroad Company whose line from Birmingham to Montgomery ran through the center of the property. The three men who formed this land company were Mr. J. F. Petersen, Mr. E. M. Faegre and Mr. T. T. Thorson for whom the town was later named. They came from Iowa and Indiana. After the land was bought they lost no time in starting a settlement here. They had it surveyed and laid out mostly in ten acre tracts, cut some timber from each tract, broke up the soil and planted and trellised a few acres in grapes on each tract. Since there was no stock law at that time cattle, hogs etc., had free range, therefore these 10 acre tracts were all fenced in using fat pine posts and cut lumber. In the meantime advertisements were placed in the newspapers of many northern cities and this brought many people here.

Scandinavian immigrants, upon coming to this country, had settled mostly in the North and midwest and the winter months in that section were so cold it made working conditions bad and also many suffered from bronchitis and tuberculosis. When they heard about this Scandinavian or northern colony being formed in the heart of Alabama with its desirable climate and fertile soil many families made their way South. The men who formed the Land Company sent agents back north to tell the people about the wonderful climate and how fruits and vegetables could be grown so easily. According to Mr. Carl Turnquist, now deceased, they gave lectures, gathering the people together in neighbors' yards preaching about this land. Beautiful pictures of beans, grapes and other fruit were shown to illustrate just how fertile the soil was. Railroad tickets were reduced in price to encourage the people to settle here. Some of those who came were disillusioned and went back, but most of them stayed. Of these were mostly Swedish, Norwegian and Danish, but there were also German, Dutch, Irish and English who came. The trades and talents of these new settlers were varied. Some were carpenters, interior decorators, bakers, tailors, brick layers and others--thus it was not long before the town was going forward with vigor, and as timber was cut and crops planted, houses were built along the architectural lines of the northern and mid-western homes. Many of these houses are still standing and kept in good repair.

Thorsby got its name from Mr. Thorson, one of the land agents - the last "by" meaning "town" in Swedish.

The Land Company built a nice three story frame hotel with verandas for each floor all along two sides of the building. This hotel was located just west of what is now the Wilburt Marcus home on the hill overlooking the town site, which was all at that time on the west side of the railroad. Thus land seekers had a good place to stay while shopping around for a home site.

About the first industry started was a saw mill and a year or so later a planing mill and wood working factory was developed by Mr. Villadsen. He made doors, windows, sashes and other building supplies. Also two wineries were installed to process the grapes which had been grown on the several hundred acres at the height of the business. The wine was marketed in distant cities - much of it going to Georgia. Peach orchards were soon planted. Mr. Martin Petersen, a Dane, introduced the growing of peaches to this area in 1903. The peach crops soon suffered because of insects and diseases, also blight - because science had not then learned how to fight these things. However, for a few years bumper crops were harvested and mostly shipped in carload lots to Chicago and other northern cities. The Thorsby Fruit and Truck Growers Association was organized in 1908. Strawberries proved to be a money-making crop for this area and each Spring many carloads of strawberries were loaded at the depot destined for northern cities. After several years strawberries on a big scale were discontinued because of the drop in price. In later years peaches were re-introduced in Chilton County and many acres were planted bringing in good income for many families. Chilton had first Peach Festival in 1947.

In its early days Thorsby had, besides the planing mill, saw mill and wood working factory, a cotton gin, canning factory, blacksmith shop, bakery, flour mill, bank, carnation farm, the wineries, as mentioned before, a brick yard and a cotton warehouse and fertilizer factory.

The Commercial Club of Thorsby was organized in December, 1904, for "the purpose of promoting the best interests of Thorsby and vicinity and giving encouragement to all movements for its betterment." Also the Ladies Auxilliary was formed in connection with The Commercial Club, its object to assist the Club in any way possible and especially to assist the ladies of new families settled here.

Prosperity and contentment seemed to reign in this newly settled place and the native Southerners who were also hardworking people worked with these new settlers to make Thorsby a productive, pleasant place to live. These hardworking, fun loving Scandinavians settlers were patriotic people and every July 4th you could see American flags waving from the houses and picnics with plenty of lemonade and shipped in ice cream could be looked

forward to as well as a parade headed by the Thorsby Band playing patriotic tunes, followed by a "Surrey" decked with flags and Uncle Sam in uniform with Miss Columbia beside him dressed in red, white and blue. Another Surrey followed with political dignitaries such as the judge. Many of the residents were musically inclined. Mr. J. O. Johnson, who at one time was a member of the Chicago Symphony, came to Thorsby in the early 1900's and organized a band. At one time the band consisted of about twenty-five members. A pavilion was erected for the public to enjoy outdoor concerts.

Miss Kirkeby, another musician from a northern state, built a large home for the purpose of giving piano concerts. A feature of this home was two large sliding doors to give ample room for the concerts. The windows on the front are large and open out onto a large front porch. This home still stands and is owned by Mrs. Rascoe Maddox, widow of our beloved former Thorsby Institute teacher, later Principal of the Thorsby High and Grammar Schools.

Many families could be named and their special contributions to the town enlarged upon if time permitted. I spent my lifetime here in and near Thorsby and many of the Scandinavian settlers and the activities of early days of Thorsby are still vivid in my mind. For instance, the native language being talked in the stores and on the streets as people would meet and have a conversation with gestures and laughter fascinated me. The little fat Swedish groceryman, Mr. A. M. Johnson, who always wore a little black skull cap and had a friendly smile, gave me a piece of candy often when I pressed my nose against his candy case eyeing all the goodies.

The first original town site was about one-half of a mile south of the present town. This place was called "Strasbourg" and had a post office that was later abolished in favor of Thorsby. The town of Thorsby was incorporated in 1901. On the 6th of May of that year an ordinance was passed to adopt a code of laws for the town and a charter was drawn up. Since this time it has had a Mayor-Council form of government.

The town of Thorsby burned in 1914. At that time the hand pushed fire wagon was much too inadequate to fight a fire of such size, and all the stores were burned to the ground. This was a hard blow and set back but courageous people went to work and built it back. Things have not always been easy--There have been dark days when diseases hit fruit crops, when prices have been low and the small farmer had to abandon the farm and go to the city to work in order to support his family.

It is interesting to talk to older Thorsby residents like Mr. Grover Bice now in his 80's who has seen Thorsby grow up thru the years. He recalls the first acetylene lights about 1910. The first water works 1912. In the early 1920's Thorsby residents enjoyed electricity for the first time, but only from sunset until 10:00 o'clock at night. This electricity was generated by harnessing the motor of an old Fordson tractor to a generator. Later, a

Mr. Alt came down from Birmingham and devised a better way to generate electricity and serve more customers and for a longer period. This was by using steam from the boiler at the cotton gin. This is the present location of the Vaughn Feed Mill. Mr. Bice also recalls the making of bricks at the Forsman brick yard west of town and the hauling of the bricks in an oxcagon. These bricks were used in many homes as foundations and chimneys as well as in business houses such as the building formerly used as the Town Hall built in 1918 and now the location of a new insurance agency. He recalls seeing the growing of carnations in the field prior to the building of the first greenhouse at Howard Brothers in 1908. This was one of the first flower growing enterprises in the State and during the years following many carnations were shipped to various places to be used in floral designing. Later the Howard Brothers added other flowers and potted plants in addition to carnations and went into the floral designing business which continued until 1950 when Mr. & Mrs. Charlis Howard retired and under new management the business later became Thorsby Florist.

Education was close to the hearts of the early pioneers. Especially were they anxious that their children should have good instruction and from the beginning they were staunch supporters of the public schools. Much progress was being made in the development of the town and establishing of churches and education became an important factor in the community. The people of Thorsby were determined to educate their children. A grammar school and a normal school were established.

Early in 1901 a Thorsby Normal and Collegiate Institute was established by Professor R. A. Rascoe. In the two years it was maintained the school became widely known and was well attended, but difficulties beyond control of its promoter caused its suspension and for four years the buildings were practically empty. While this school was in progress it contributed greatly to the cultural advancement of the town. In the Spring of 1906 a group of men, Mr. S. E. Norton, Reverend G. E. Bates, Pastor of the Congregational Church, and Reverend Almon Clark, State Superintendent of Congregational Home Missions, met and incorporated, the property was bought and a school of academic grade was opened September 17, 1906 known as Thorsby Institute--the first school of high school rank in Chilton County. The main auditorium was named Bates Hall. This fine school provided many students with Christian education and instruction. Students came from miles around to attend, many boarding in the boys' or girls' boarding department and if they could not afford to pay the tuition fee they permitted to work on the premises as much as they needed to to enable them to obtain a high school education. Strict rules were laid down as to behavior and habits and if these rules were not observed the offenders were not permitted to remain in the school. The standard was that of the best high schools as recognized by the general Education Board and the Carnegie Foundation. Thorsby Institute was on the accredited list of the University of Alabama, The Alabama Polytechnic Institute, Howard College, Piedmont College and other schools of equal rank. The curriculum and character

of work done there were such as to prepare its graduates for admission to any college or university in any state.

Thorsby Institute had an excellent library which not only served the school, but the entire community had access to it. The school meant much to the community as well as to the surrounding area. When at its prime many cultural opportunities were brought to the student body and made available to the entire community and county. People came from far and near to attend Lyceum courses and to hear lectures on various subjects as well as to hear excellent musical programs. The music department was above average and always headed by a conservatory graduate.

For a period of time the Congregational Board gave money to help support the school but later it was dependent on contributions from different churches and donations from individuals who became interested in the work the school was doing, aside from the amount received from the small tuition fees.

The school had, besides the main two story building known as Bates Hall, a girls' dormitory which was originally built as a hotel and housed about twenty young women, and two dwellings which constituted the boys' dormitory were located a short distance from the school. One was bought with the school property and the other was built by the Institute, partly by student labor. These buildings accommodated about twenty young men. The furniture was donated by friends. The first Principal of the school was William J. Lampie, succeeded by S. B. Groves, N. W. Henson, S. H. Herbert and the last up until 1957 Miss Helen C. Jenkins.

The school suffered a great loss in 1924 when the main building, Bates Hall, was destroyed by fire. The new building, Helen Jenkins Hall, named for the Principal, Helen C. Jenkins was erected and ready for use in the same year. Another great loss was the large girls' dormitory, which was the original hotel. It burned the year 1917. Miss Helen Jenkins gave fifty years of service to Thorsby Institute in helping young people get an education. She served as Principal for forty years and gave freely of her time and money and her memory will live on in the hearts and minds of many people who have been influenced and benefited by the efforts of this modest lady. Her portrait, along with the portrait of another great educator and friend to this town and community, Mr. H. Rascoe Maddox, hangs in the entrance hall in this school they both loved and served so unselfishly.

After more than fifty years of service to the youth of our town and other places, and as education had progressed rapidly and public schools enlarged their athletic programs, fewer students chose to attend Thorsby Institute. By this time also it became harder to raise funds to operate the school and as adequate teachers willing to work for low salaries became fewer it was necessary to make a change. The Board of Trustees, realizing that (as stated in the T. I. Bulletin Oct. '57) "this is a fast changing world and to keep abreast of the times we must yield to progress and march forward with time." The Board decided to offer the main building and dining hall plus the tract of land on which they are located to the Chilton

County Board of Education with the understanding that it be used for a public high school. It was stipulated at that time that in the event it did not continue to operate as a high school after a two year period the property would revert back to the control of the Thorsby Institute Trustees. Thorsby High School opened in 1957 with two T. I. graduates on the faculty and has remained as such with the addition of a large gymnasium, Vocational Agriculture building, modern football field and an active athletic program.

The Thorsby Elementary and Jr. High School was built in the early twenties. Grades 7 through 9 were transferred to the high school in 1957. Grades 1 through 6 are now taught in this building.

Churches have always been important in the lives of Thorsby residents from the beginning. In the latter part of 1896 the Norwegian Lutherans organized and held their first service in an old store building with Reverend Engh, their first minister holding services in their native language. In 1902 plans were made to build a Norwegian Lutheran church. Mr. Ole Lefstead, an early settler, drew up the plans and a beautiful church was built and impressive services were held in the Norwegian language. A few years later as many moved away and the membership became too small to afford a minister, the Norwegian Lutherans united with the Swedish Lutherans. The church was sold to the Congregational church which was active until 1957 when it became impossible to operate because of small membership. The building was later sold to the Thorsby Masonic Lodge and is used for their meetings and the Eastern Star meetings.

The Swedish Lutherans, who had been meeting in the public school building and in the Baptist church, built their church in 1902. They also held their services in their native language. Their first minister was Reverend Hedburg from Minnesota.

The women of these churches have been active in mission work and the Lutheran Ladies' Aid and Congregational Ladies' Aid, as well as the Ladies' Guild (which supported Thorsby Institute) have played an important part in the life of the community.

With the passing of many of the members of the Lutheran Church the membership became too small to continue to operate and the building was sold a few years ago and torn down to make way for progress for the Alabama Telephone Company.

The Thorsby Baptist Church, organized in 1901, is the first Baptist church in the Thorsby area. This church is now in its third building since that time, the first being the two story wooden structure that was later sold to the town for a public school. The second church building was also a wooden structure and located in the area of the Earl Marcus home. The third is the white masonry structure presently used.

In the year 1955 the few Methodists in Thorsby met for services in the Lutheran Church until 1956 when they built a small, modern

brick church where services are now held twice monthly and Sunday School every Sunday.

About the mid 1930's Thorsby residents saw the modern public water supply and the sewage system installed. Natural gas was installed in 1953. A great improvement to Thorsby was the paving of most of the streets in the town. Many new modern homes have been built during the past few years and continuing growth is indicated.

Thorsby has the following businesses: a fully stocked Drugstore with a registered pharmacist, a modern dry cleaning plant, a service station, two garages, a tractor company with a complete sales and service department, a welding shop, two modern peach grading and packing sheds, a large wholesale distributorship of fine Western lumber, one large modern grocery store, an antique auction house, a building supply store, The Bank of Thorsby, established in 1919, the main office and exchange of Alabama Telephone Company, three beauty shops, two barber shops, an insurance office, a TV sales and service shop, two dry goods stores, the Thorsby Milling Co., a seed and fertilizer store, one cafe and one drive-in sandwich shop, two washaterias, a real estate company, a florist shop, a nursery business and two greenhouse ranges, a mobile homes sales, a concrete construction company and a fruit stand and grocery.

The Thorsby Manufacturing Company, making ladies' blouses and other apparel, was established in 1958 and now employs 158 people.

The new modern Municipal Building was completed in 1968 with facilities for a mayor's office, council room, auditorium for public meetings, and a public library. The library, under the supervision of the Cahaba Regional Library Service, was established in 1963 in the old Town Hall with the town clerk serving as librarian. Books were donated by the Homewood Library as well as by individuals, and the board members met and cataloged these books. The attractive new library has proved an asset to the town and surrounding communities.

I am indebted to Jewel Peterson for letting me copy much of this information from her "History of Thorsby" which she compiled as a special assignment when she was a student at Alabama College now known as Montevallo University.