

Orange County and the Roaring 20s

From an article in the *Orange Review* by historian Duff Green:

"World War I was over, the boys were back home, prohibition was in full swing and Orange County with the world had settled down for peace ever after.

"The decade between 1920 and 1930 in the United States became known as the 'Roaring Twenties' but this name did not fit the central Virginia area.

"Population in Orange County in 1900 was 12,571. In 1920 it had risen to 13,320. It slipped back to 12,070 by 1930 when the national depression years had arrived.

"The Town of Gordonsville had 594 residents in 1920 and 462 in 1930. Census figures showed a slight growth for the Town of Orange. In 1920 there were 1,078 citizens and 1,381 in 1930.

"The most dramatic change in Orange County from the 1920's to present day 1990's has been in schools. An August 28, 1925 newspaper story in the *Orange Observer* tells of five county high schools. They were James Barbour High at Barboursville, Somerset High, Gordonsville High, Unionville High and Orange High School.

"Elementary classes were also included at each of these buildings but there were numerous other elementary schools throughout the county. The *Observer* listed Thorn Hill School, True Blue, Zoar, Sunny Side, Mine Run, Ehearts, High Point, Rapidan, Madison Run, Bernard, Conway, Lahore, Beaver Creek, Tatum, Nasons, Wilderness, Reynolds and Flat Run.

"There were segregation of races in 1925 and schools for black students were listed at Orange, Gordonsville, Petersburg, Monrovia, Tatum, Za, Bethel, Shady Grove, Rhoadesville, Gee Town, Nasons, Bear Pond, Thorn Hill, Musterfield and Long Branch.

"In all there were a total of 38 elementary and high schools in Orange County during the 1920's. It was probable that nearly every student could walk to class.

"The big news of 1920 was the famous 'shootout' at Barboursville on Monday, July 5 at a pool room in that community. It was a long, hot summer in Orange County that year when Zeb Breeden tangled with pool room proprietor Rufus Watson. They apparently had some earlier words.

"According to an *Orange Observer* newspaper account, Breeden had been ordered by Watson to keep away from his building and the former attempted to enter. When Watson ordered him out, Breeden opened fire with a pistol, one bullet entering Watson's shoulder. Watson returned fire with two shots, one in Breeden's leg and one in his chest. There were additional shots as pool players jumped out of windows and ran through the back door.

"A total of nine shots were fired but it was Breeden who lost the battle and his life. He fell backward through the front door, staggered and collapsed on the front steps.

"Coroner Lewis Holladay held an inquest and a jury ruled that Watson's 'said shots were fired in self defense. This opinion of the jury is based upon evidence of witnesses brought before them.'

"The jurors were Harry Bly, S.D. Estes, E.G. Faulconer, J.L. Gibson, O.D. Edwards and G.T. Mundy. Watson was taken to a hospital in Charlottesville and later recovered.

"Orange was served by three railroads during the 1920's. Main line of the north-south Southern Railway passed through town. The Virginia Central ran from Church Street in Orange to Fredericksburg and the Rapidan Railroad Company ran from Orange to Graves Mill in Madison County.

"Rapidan Railroad ended at the West Virginia Timber Company which later became Kentucky Flooring Company and is now the American Woodmark Corporation in Orange. This rail line primarily hauled logs from the Blue Ridge Mountains to the log mill in Orange.

"Following the 1920 shootout at Barbourville, Orange County residents thought violence was over for a while. Not so. On October 23, 1921, the county was shocked over the shooting deaths of Sheriff Willie Bond and Orange town sergeant Julian Boyer.

"These two lawmen were about the only police officers in the area at that time. Prohibition was in effect and the enforcement of this law kept deputies everywhere quite busy.

"On that October day in 1921, Bond and Boyer hired a taxi in Orange and driver John Sharrer took them several miles from town to the home of a suspected moonshiner. Sharrer let the two lawmen out of his taxi about a mile from their destination. He saw them walk into the woods that afternoon with a plan to catch the whiskey maker in action.

"The cab driver later heard two shots but it was hunting season and he did not think it involved the officers. When nightfall came, however, he began to be worried and drove back to Orange where he informed local officials. A messenger was sent to Sheriff Bond's wife who reported that her husband had not returned home.

"An organized search party went to the moonshiner's property and found Bond and Boyer in the woods. Both had been shot dead by a high powered rifle. The group returned to Orange quickly and a mob of about 500 men was organized and raced to a barn on the nearby property of J.P. Taylor where they learned that the man was hiding.

"The crowd shouted for the moonshiner to come out and when he yelled that he would not be taken alive, it wasn't what the mob wanted to hear. There was gunfire similar to that of the Battle of Mine Run.

“Orange postmaster Manley W. Carter and six others were wounded before the barn was set afire. The moonshiner died, not from flames, but from a self-inflicted gunshot.

“W.G. Buckner of Somerset was chairman of the Orange County Board of Supervisors during the 1920’s. Alex Browning was Judge of the Circuit Court, Willie Borning was clerk of the court and A. Stuart Robertson was commonwealth’s attorney. Manley Carter was Orange postmaster and Robert A. Smith was postmaster at Gordonsville. B.F. Selby, Jr. succeeded Willie Bond as sheriff.

“Other highlights of the 1920’s was the addition of a courthouse tower clock in 1923, the organization of Orange Volunteer Fire Company in 1921 and the construction of a firehouse behind the clerk’s office. A new Orange High School was built on Belleview Avenue.

“Citizens National Bank erected a huge new building on Main Street in 1925 and St. Thomas’ Episcopal Church built a large parish house in 1928. American Silk Mills came to town in 1928 and built their first plant here which began operation in June of 1929. Elaborate James Madison Hotel was also constructed in 1927-28.

“Orange Mayor A.J. Harlow opened his theater known as the ‘Wilbur’ (named after his son) in the early 1920’s and installed the first ‘talking picture machine’ in 1929. It was said to be the only such device in the Orange, Culpeper, Fredericksburg and Charlottesville area.

“People should have known that a depression was coming when the Spring Garden Tea Room on Madison Road in Orange opened a miniature golf course.

“Automobile millionaire Henry Ford purchased the Vaucluse Gold Mine near Wilderness post office in 1929 and the county thought that great prosperity was just around the corner. Ford dismantled an historic Welsh pump and trucked it to his museum in Dearborn, Michigan. He never mined an ounce of gold and later re-sold the property.

“Besides the crash of 1929, noted historian W.W. Scott died that year and R. Monroe Waugh was married. Mr. Waugh later became a county supervisor for 32 years.

“(Our thanks to the Orange County Historical Society and newspaper files of the *Orange Observer*).”¹

¹Green, Duff. “Orange County had few changes in the 1920’s.” *Orange County Review*, December 30, 1993, A-14.

Photographs that accompanied the *Orange Review* article by Duff Green:



"This is probably one of the most famous old photographs at the *Orange County Review*. The auto license plates show a date of 1924 as Orange Volunteer Firemen march east on Main Street in Orange. The local volunteer company was only three years old at the time and held an annual parade and fair on the Fourth of July. The building at right would later become Mrs. Harlow's Robert E. Lee Tea Room [where Eleanor Roosevelt visited in the 1940's]. It was moved down Belleview Avenue in 1937 to make room for the Orange post office. The second building at right was moved in 1938 to make room for the new Orange firehouse. Both of these frame structures have now been torn down. Trinity Methodist Church is the third building at right and the Orange Opera House is the fourth structure. This was later turned into a theater and is now the law offices of Atty. Henry L. Carter. The front yard corner of Orange Baptist Church is seen at far right. The photographer was standing on the roof of Sparks Grocery's sidewalk overhang. This overhang stood for most of the century but was removed about 38 years ago."²

² *Ibid.*



“Main Street of Orange was the center of commerce in this 1927 photo. The license plate of the auto at far left shows the date as 1927. It is parked in front of the Citizens National Bank which was just two years old at the time. The building at right with a balcony would later become Leggett Department Store and is now the Gordon Building which houses Orange County offices. The photographer was standing in the street and shooting east.”³

³ *Ibid.*



“Looking west on Main Street in Orange shows the Orange Hardware Store at far right and the Great Atlantic & Pacific Team Company (A&P) at far left. This is also a 1927 photo and shows the Wilbur Restaurant and Wilbur Theater at right-center on this side of the railroad tracks. All these buildings on the east side of the tracks are still standing today. The photo was probably taken in the summer of 1927 as the circus posters at right advertise a September 29 performance.”⁴

⁴ *Ibid.*