

# Farewell to one of Chatham's greatest generation

## Chatham's Historical Heritage

by Fred J. Vatter



Perhaps one of the greatest assets of Chatham County over the years has been the hard work ethic and determination to succeed shown by a rapidly disappearing generation of its people. Many of these folk had humble beginnings, survived a prolonged depression, endured the hardships of war years, and continued not only to survive but also to improve their position in life.

Recently I was saddened to learn of the tragic death of one of these people, John Edward Booth, at the age of 93. While he was working to clean up winter's debris on his farm, a fire spread to a wooden shed and he suffered fatal burns trying to contain it.

I first met Mr. Booth, who preferred to be called Edward, in July 2006 when his daughter invited my wife and me to his 90th birthday party. We presented him with a copy of "Chatham County 1771-1971", a local history book published by the Chatham County Historical Association.

Edward was still an active, vibrant man and thoroughly enjoyed the day. His daughter, Kathryn, described him as "acutely observant" and found it impossible to make his party a surprise. Realizing that Edward Booth had

been born in Apex, but close enough to trip over the county line, and subsequently lived and worked in Chatham most of his life, I asked if we could arrange an oral history interview. Mr. Booth graciously agreed but requested that my telephone call to set up a date should be made before 7 a.m. or after 7 p.m., and explained that "otherwise I'll be out back working in my sawmill."

A couple of weeks later we met at his home place, "Ye Old Mill Farm" for a pleasant evening of conversation.

John Edward Booth was born July 31, 1916 to Levie Womble and Colin Booth. He was the fifth child of seven children. His father farmed and operated a sawmill. The family moved to the northeastern edge of Chatham in 1928, when Edward's father had an opportunity to harvest timber on land owned by Duke University.

As a young man Edward suffered from severe muscular and neurological problems. He recalled about 63 visits to Dr. and Mrs. Tucker of Durham for massage therapy. His mother was very protective of him because of his health problem and until Edward reached 14 years of age she would not let him work in his father's sawmill. Edward



John Edward Booth

said that his father showed some resentment over his inability to work.

The first school Edward attended was a one room, one teacher school which had seven grades. After a year it was consolidated with Bell's School. When he was 15 years old Edward was required to drop out of school and work to help support the family. After three years he was determined to return to school and graduate. That wasn't so bad, according to Edward, because his age allowed him to get paid for driving the school bus and he met Swanne Bailey who would later become his wife. Ed also became his class valedictorian.

He was enrolled at N.C. State University but family obligations made attendance there impossible. Two jobs, with Greyhound Lines and Belk's Department store had been promised to him but didn't pan out. Edward earned money by cutting timber, helping local farmers, and worked for his older brother at Apex Lumber. At the time he earned 17 1/2 cents per hour for common labor and worked a ten hour day if weather permitted. Payday came biweekly and if it had been a good two weeks he received \$17.50 less 18 cents for social security. He pledged to save \$2. out of that amount. Edward was frugal, walking to work and his mother mended his work clothes with patches.

Edward got a start in the sawmill business by purchasing his father's old equipment and saved until he could purchase a new one. At one time he owned three sawmills and had 15 to 18 employees. Edward worked along with them and said that he never asked a man to do anything that he would not do himself.

He sold to the West Durham

Lumber Company and also cut timber for others, taking his sawmill on location and racking the cut lumber on the site. Edward hated to borrow money for the business, but said that he once borrowed \$37,000 to acquire a large tract of timber. He paid half of it back in 19 days and paid off the balance before any timber was cut, explaining that he couldn't eat or sleep well until the debt was paid.

By reinvesting his profits and saving Edward Booth was able to acquire considerable property over the years. When Jordan

Lake was built the Army Corps of Engineers took seven tracts now under the lake and part of his present farm, but he still owned tracts in Durham and Chatham counties.

Edward became a recognized authority on timber management, assessing its value, and maximizing yield. He worked with N.C. State University in the Department of Soil Science and has a Field Learning Laboratory facility named after him.

At the time of my visit, Edward Booth still cut lumber to sizes no longer commonly available but needed to repair older homes. He also sawed damaged trees and owned land and buildings around the county.

Mr. Booth loved people and they loved him. At his party a couple who were tenants on one of his properties spoke glowingly of his kindness and concern. "He even named the house we live in after us", they proudly stated.

The timber business as described by Edward was heavy, dirty and hard work but it paid the bills. He proudly said that the hard work and abstaining from the use of drugs or alcohol are what gave him his long life.

As I shook Edward Booth's hand, felt the callouses, and noted a couple of missing fingers, I felt honored and privileged to have met him and wished that our paths had crossed long before. He now rests peacefully in the cemetery of Mt. Pisgah Baptist Church where he professed his faith and then went out into the world to live his faith.

*Fred J. Vatter is Past President of Chatham County Historical Association and a Board Member.*

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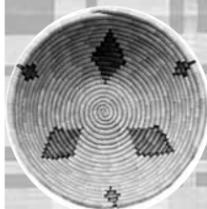
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