

## BYNUM

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the community. It was housed in a long, two story, wooden frame building with a three story tower. The Bynum brothers sold their mill to the Odell Manufacturing Company of Concord, NC, in 1886 and in 1916 it was destroyed by fire.

By 1918 Odell built a long, brick replacement structure and added a number of brick and frame extensions and outbuildings over the years. Bynum developed into a busy mill village, starting with 14 houses built by Luther and Carney after the mill opened in 1922. The Odell Company built additional houses in 1922 and 1928 bringing the total to about 43. Between 1976 and 1978 the Chatham County Housing Authority used a grant to purchase the mill village houses from Odell Manufacturing Company and sell them to the tenants. The mill continued to operate until the 1980s, although in its later years Odell was a division of Tuscarora Yarns.

Until it was rerouted to the west in 1952, Highway 15/501 went right through Bynum's business district and over the narrow 1922 vintage bridge. It carried mill traffic, school buses, and Trailways inter-city buses. The highway, now known as Bynum Road, had four stores, a filling station and even a movie theatre in its business section. Most of the local residents knew one another.

The relocation of Highway 15/501 and the closing of the mill in the



The water pipe beneath Bynum Bridge ultimately saved it.

PHOTO BY FRED VATTER

1980s brought a sharp reduction in traffic through Bynum. Some houses of former mill workers were sold to newcomers. The commercial buildings on the west side of Bynum Road were vacated and in warmer months are largely concealed behind a thicket of shrubbery and saplings. For a long time only the Bynum General Store, which served as a post office and community meeting place survived, but it too closed down. It now serves as the venue for the Front Porch Music Series. The vacant, abandoned cotton mill sits forlornly on the river, overlooking the community for which it once was the lifeblood and unifying thread.

A flurry of excitement aroused the people of Bynum in 1998 and 1999 when the North Carolina Department of Transportation

announced that the concrete and steel reinforcement rods supporting the 1922 bridge over the Haw were rapidly eroding and could only support traffic for a couple of years. The DOT insisted that its only options were to remove the bridge altogether, or to restrict its use to pedestrians and bicycles, or to replace it with a new two lane bridge.

Federal guidelines for subsidizing bridge replacements do not cover one lane bridges. The DOT's traffic count led them to believe that the cost of a two lane bridge was not warranted. They also said repairing the existing one lane bridge so that it could safely support vehicular traffic would be extremely dangerous to workers.

The DOT hearings concerning the bridge's fate divided the Bynum population into two hostile groups. The

long-time residents favored a two lane bridge, perhaps recalling their once thriving community, and felt that it would insure a flow of traffic to support the Bynum General Store and Post Office. Most of the newer residents, who had not seen the community in its heyday wanted to keep the old bridge, restricted to pedestrians, to retain Bynum's "quaint" and quiet atmosphere. The debate between the two factions became quite acrimonious and a News and Observer reporter noted that at one point the "Y" bomb was dropped—the anti-traffic backers were "Yankees."

The problem became academic when a DOT engineer noticed a pipeline suspended under the old bridge. It connected the Chatham water system with Pittsboro's system. A state law enacted in 1955 had made the relocation of utility lines under bridges DOT's responsibility if the lines were owned by counties or small towns. This expense when added to the \$3.4 million anticipated cost of a new two lane bridge would make the cost prohibitive in view of the volume of traffic it would carry.

The existing 1922 bridge, without the weight of vehicular traffic, would be safe to retain for pedestrians, and that was the way DOT elected to go. The end to the "Battle of Bynum" was dictated by an eight-inch pipe.

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

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