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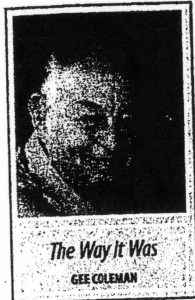
COMMENTARY

1 - WEDNESDAY, APRIL 27, 2011

Hillsborough banded together to fight fires

This week, we will use another part of Miss Sue Hayes (1881-1976) memories of Hillsborough in her lifetime as furnished to me by Don Cox:

"In the early years, the sidewalks were paved flag stones and, except for a small area at the intersection of King and Churton streets, the streets were dirt. The large, round flint stones that paved this limited space were said to have been laid by Lord Cornwallis to get his army out of the mud.



"The dirt roads were not bad in the summer, but, when the snow and rain of winter came, the red mud was bottomless. In the middle of the blocks, downtown, there were stepping stones, flat stones set on end, about a comfortable step apart. This was fine as long as one didn't slip, but woe to the man who lost his balance! Off came his rubbers and stuck tight in the mud. When he finally rescued them and reached the sidewalk, hands and feet were covered in mud.

"Where the telephone exchange is located was Mr. Crabtree's shop. Mr. Crabtree said he was a wheelwright,

but he could do anything. Was there a knife to be sharpened? Take it to Mr. Crabtree. Had a trunk key been lost? Send for Mr. Crabtree.

"He helped me in all my needs, but my chief interest was in watching him work on wagon wheels and, after they were repaired, replace the tires. The mended wheel was placed across two sawhorses and then was laid on a circle of burning chips until it was very hot and expanded. It was then dropped over the wheel and hammered into place. To cool it, water was poured over it, and how it did sizzle!

"Next door was a blacksmith shop, and frequently a countryman would have his horse shod while the wheel was being repaired, and then he would drive home, as good as new.

"As there were so many frame buildings in the business district, there were, naturally, large fires, and, on many occasions, the situation looked rather hopeless. This opinion underestimated the fire-fighting ability of the citizens. As soon as a fire was discovered, the alarm was spread by ringing the courthouse bell, and, when the sound was heard, every man—the young and old, able or unable, drunk or sober—ran to fight the

fire.

"Some people brought their own buckets, and any merchant who had buckets for sale contributed his entire stock. The wonderful town pump was the only source of water and it worked continuously, one man spelling another. If the fire had a good start, it was impossible to save that building or those adjoining it, but it was remarkable how well the fire was kept from crossing streets or vacant lots. Men climbed to the roofs of the buildings in the greatest danger and, on the exposed side, hung wet blankets and poured water over them continuously. Water was also thrown on the side, below the blankets, and on any ledge that caught fire. It was hot work and hard work, but the whole town never burned, and the water supply was never exhausted."

And, to the best of my knowledge—according to Miss Sue—that's the way it was.

Gee Coleman is a Hillsborough native who has lived in town his whole life—except for three years in the U.S. Air Force during World War II. He has owned and worked in several local businesses, including Orange Farm Equipment, Coleman's Hardware and The News of Orange County. He can be reached at coleman.is.gee@gmail.com.