

Bucklesberry, Back in the Day

Kirby E. Sutton (Part 8)

An academically gifted student in grade school, Kirby Edward Sutton (1866-1930) was among the first Bucklesberrians to attend college. With a brilliant mind for business, he worked much of his adult life as a merchant, traveling salesman, and wholesaler.

But Kirby was also intuitively smart when it came to working the land, having descended from a long line of farmers. Eventually, he became one of the most successful farmers in eastern North Carolina as well.

Rather than his accomplishments as a businessman-farmer, Kirby's greatest legacy may have been his impeccably good character. Barely in his thirties at the time, his generosity caught the attention of famed attorney and author, Council S. Wooten (1840-1930):

1903, March 8: "My excellent friend, Kirby E. Sutton....is a young bachelor, and is a commercial traveler, and, like all the knights of the road, he is genial, generous, big-hearted and whole-souled. He does not know what the word stinginess means. The truth is, he [is] too liberal and generous. I would like to have him for a neighbor if he were worth a million [dollars], for I know I should enjoy some of it. He is tender-hearted, and can't bear to see human suffering." (*The Charlotte Observer*)

A giving person indeed, Kirby was nonetheless a wealthy landowner. Yet he never lorded his status over others. To the contrary, he held deep regard for his community and dealt kindly with employees:

1916, August 12: "Mr. Sutton's Bucklesberry plantation is nearly big enough for a principality, and certainly he is monarch of all he surveys in a sense, for there are few men anywhere so popular with their neighbors and his pay tribute in affection. He is said to have enslaved his labor with kindness..." (*The Daily Free Press*, Kinston)

For many years, the annual dinner hosted by Kirby at his farm was a tradition that was widely attended. He masterfully brought together elites and locals:

1915, August 14: "Mr. Kirby Sutton, the well-known traveling salesman-farmer of Moseley Hall, gave his annual dinner to his tenants and friends on Friday at his plantation near La Grange. Gathered to honor the tenants and friends and the host were a number of the most prominent men of the State and section. The dinner was a masterpiece. Presiding over it in one capacity was Mr.

Thomas Harvey....[who] carved barbecue and bread. County Superintendent of Schools [Joseph] Kinsey, who made a speech, states that there was "barbecue, cornbread, [and] lots of other things, cider, etc." The tables were reinforced affairs. Supreme Court Justice W. E. Allen and Tom Warren, State Democratic chairman, followed Professor Kinsey as speakers....There were hundreds of people from Kinston, La Grange, Goldsboro, New Bern, Greenville, Farmville and other towns, and from all over the surrounding countryside. County officials, township constables probably, plowboys and others rubbed elbows, and it was a 'real happy, hearty, democratic assemblage.'" (*The Daily Free Press*)

Few in Bucklesberry and Lenoir County were as well-to-do as Kirby. Yet he unselfishly shared available resources when he could, in one instance, at Christmastime when World War I was unfolding:

1914, December 29: "K. E. Sutton of La Grange, agent at that place for the Pamlico Chemical Company, distributed to the patrons of the Company there 150 gallons of oysters as Christmas gifts. The oysters were sent by the fertilizer company from Pamlico Sound. Their distribution was in keeping with the annual custom of the company. A number of Kinston people were similarly remembered." (*The Kinston Free Press*)