

# Kershaw's Enterprising Roxie

East Marion Street in Kershaw today is a mere ghost of its former grandeur. From the founding of the town until the 1960's, it was bustling with activity and was home to several thriving businesses. One of the most legendary still stands, though it has long been vacant and derelict. This is the famous Whitfield Hotel, whose owner and hostess, Mrs. Roxie Belk, was Kershaw's own version of Madam C.J. Walker, her contemporary who became the 20th century's most successful, self-made female entrepreneur.

Like Madam Walker, **Roxanna E. Starnes** was born a poor black child in the Reconstruction South, specifically in Red Springs, North Carolina—today a quiet town of beautiful Victorian houses near Fayetteville. **Her father was Tom Starnes—a surname common in Union county, NC**—and the next time we know anything about Roxie she was living there, in Monroe, where perhaps her family had originated. She married a man named Whitfield, and together they moved to the Haile Gold Mine, then a flourishing enterprise. When Whitfield died, Roxie came to Kershaw “and conducted a small mercantile business,” according to her obituary. “By close attention to it and her frugal habits she accumulated good property. She built the two-storey brick hotel, and retiring from the mercantile business, operated the hotel.” Actually she bought her land in three parcels, in 1903, 1907, and 1909. Roxie seems to have been a lady with a plan. She married again, this time to William Belk of Lancaster, a man with two daughters and

two sons. The census that year listed Roxie as a mulatto woman, 40 years old, and the manager of a boarding house. She was described further as able to both read and write, and it was noted that she owned her own home, free of any mortgage. At the time of the census she had seven boarders, among them two house painters, two oil mill workers, and one cook in a restaurant. Roxie's own table at the Whitfield was becoming famous. In the Jim Crow South, segregation was the rule, but Roxie found ways to turn a good profit anyway. She had a separate dining room for whites in the front of the hotel, and she soon had a good business from both locals and railway patrons. Kershaw was well-known as a meal-time stop in those days because of the Whitfield and the Benton Hotel on Cleveland Street, but the railway passengers were a bit fearful of the locals' reputation for violence. Maybe they were comforted a bit by knowing that the Whitfield was just across the street from the town jail, so any shenanigans were less likely.

Roxie Belk never had children of her own, but she did help rear her step-daughter, Beatrice Belk, who became a teacher in the Kershaw colored school and her niece, Almetta Davis. In the late 1920's Roxie's health began to fail, and she deeded her property to Beatrice in 1929. She died on 29 April, 1930. Her funeral was preached at the A.M.E. church by the Rev. H.J. Cousart and Presiding Elder of the District, the Rev. J.C. Lewis of Chester.

Like Madam C.J. Walker, Roxie Belk knew what it takes to get ahead. I imagine she might have echoed Madam Walker's words: “There is no royal, flower-strewn path to success. And if there is I have not found it, for if I have accomplished anything in life it is because

I have been willing to work hard.”

The old hotel, even with its beautiful galleries fallen

away and private alley-way veranda dilapidated, and even with its garden overgrown, still looks as if it would be more at home in Charleston, Savannah or New Orleans than in Kershaw. It is one of several remaining buildings from Kershaw's remote past that we still have an opportunity to salvage and restore.



Roxie and her second husband, Billy Belk.

