

History of Water in Our Community

The streams and rivers of Mecklenburg County have been vitally important as a major source of raw drinking water since the 1800's. Charlotte's first municipal drinking water intake was located on Briar Creek in 1881. In 1904, the water intake was moved to Irwin Creek primarily due to declining water quality conditions in Sugar Creek brought about by sewage discharges from inadequate and often nonexistent collection and disposal systems. In 1911, the Irwin Creek intake failed to provide Charlotte with the water it desperately needed during a water shortage brought on by an extreme drought and water had to be brought into town by train from the Catawba River. This near catastrophe awakened Charlotte to the growing needs of the community for abundant, clean drinking water and in 1912 the City began withdrawing its water from the Catawba River close to the current intake along Mountain Island Lake at the end of Pump Station Road in western Mecklenburg County.

By 1900, the population of Mecklenburg County had grown to 55,268. The Catawba River and the many streams continued to be vitally important to area residents. At that time, Mecklenburg County was very rural in nature and the quality and usability of these waters had continued to be very good with only small, isolated pockets of pollution centered primarily in downtown Charlotte. Little Sugar and Sugar Creeks were the most polluted waters in the County due primarily to inadequate sewage disposal facilities. In the early 1900s, some areas of Charlotte were served by septic tanks but most of the town completely lacked any type of sewage treatment system and thousands of gallons of raw sewage were dumped straight to creeks until the City constructed its first modern sewage treatment plant along the banks of Sugar Creek in 1923. In the rural areas of the County, creeks remained free of pollutants and were widely used for recreation. Most residents had a favorite fishing or swimming hole near their home and in a time with limited recreational activities, these waters provided much needed relief for area residents. In 1910, a public recreational area called Camp Latta was developed along the banks of Long Creek in western Mecklenburg County and included a swimming hole formed by damming the creek.

Beginning in 1948 during the post World War II boom, suburbs began to spring up in a ring around Charlotte. A brief lull in growth was experienced in the early fifties followed by increasingly steady growth into the 1960's. The quality and usability of Mecklenburg County's streams suffered as a result of this growth primarily due to dumping by businesses and inadequate collection and disposal systems for the community's increasing volume of sewage. In the 1960's, citizens became increasingly upset regarding the sewage stench from Sugar and Little Sugar Creeks in Charlotte. In response to numerous citizen complaints, the Mecklenburg County Health Department hung 55 gallon drums of orange blossom deodorant from bridges and allowed the fragrant liquid to drip into

creeks to mask the odors. This effort proved unsuccessful. Water quality problems came to head in the late 1960's.

A series of articles in the Charlotte News in September 1969 brought these problems to the attention of Mecklenburg County residents which lead to a call to action resulting in the established of one of the country's first local water quality programs in 1970. Subtitles in this series of articles included "*A Tip: Don't Go Near The Water*" and "*Catch Any Fish In Sugar? You Can Forget About It*" as well as "*The Creek Is Simply A Sewer.*" The articles featured a six-week long investigation by a News reporter documenting severe pollution problems in Little Sugar Creek. The News enlisted the help of Dr. Edward F. Menhinick, an assistant professor of biology at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, to document the impacts of this severe pollution on aquatic life in the stream. Dr. Menhinick selected three intercity locations in Little Sugar Creek for his research including Cordelia Park, Piedmont Courts and Freedom Park. After hours of seining the creek for life, Dr. Menhinick found one dead frog, one live earthworm, two beer cans and several hundred cigarette butts, but not one fish. Bacteria counts measured in the stream were 260 times the State standard. The creek was void of life and the extremely high bacteria counts made them completely unsuitable for human contact. Public outcry in response to these appalling conditions lead to the funding of the County's Water Quality Program effective January 1, 1970.

Present and Future:

A lot has changed with regards to water quality conditions in Mecklenburg County over the past thirty years, for both the better and worse. As the area has grown so have the water quality problems and likewise the Water Quality Program has grown to address these problems with highly scientific water quality monitoring efforts to identify and eliminate pollution problems and the enforcement of a number of land development and pollution control regulations. As a result of these efforts, improvements in water quality have been documented in the inner city streams draining areas of "Old Charlotte" such as Little Sugar Creek in the area that Dr. Menhinick surveyed 30 years ago. The illegal dumping by businesses and the discharges from inadequate sewer collection and treatment systems have been significantly reduced. This is largely due to improved regulations such as the enactment of the Federal Clean Water Act in 1977 as well as enhancements to the municipal sewer system by Charlotte-Mecklenburg Utilities, established in 1972.

On June 16, 1998, the Water Quality Program completed a fish survey in the same section of Little Sugar Creek studied by Dr. Menhinick 30 years earlier. This time fish were detected in healthy numbers, a total of 796 to be exact. Unfortunately bacteria counts measured in these streams continued to be high and the waters remained unsuitable for prolonged human body contact. Today, the average bacteria count in the County's urban streams is one-third what it was

30 years ago but continues to exceed the State standard. Compared to 1969, the score has improved in favor of cleaner waters but County residents are still the losers, as the streams remain unsuitable for wading or swimming.

The story for the outlying areas of the County is somewhat different. As this community has urbanized, the waters of the streams in these once rural outlying areas have become increasingly polluted. Streams that were once suitable for swimming only a few years ago are experiencing significant water quality degradation to the point where they are no longer safe for human contact. McDowell Creek in northern Mecklenburg County is a good example. This once rural area of the County has increased in population by over 300% since 1980 putting it among the fastest growing areas in North Carolina. During the 10-year period from 1988 through 1998, there were 138 incidents of measures that exceeded the State's water quality standards in McDowell Creek, which has been degraded to the point that it is no longer suitable for prolonged human contact. This problem must be checked before negative water quality impacts are experienced at Mecklenburg's water intake.