

Francis Mack was a Soldier and Educator in Fort Mill

Francis Murray Mack (1887-1979) a Fort Mill native, descended from a large number of Presbyterian ministers and educators.

Mack was sickly as a boy and didn't start school until he was 8 years old. When he was 14, he was sent to a preparatory school in Georgia. His older sister was at nearby Agnes Scott, planning to become a teacher. With his sister's help he mastered French, Latin and math to the extent that he was the highest-ranking student in those subjects at both Davidson College and Cornell University. To the end of his life, Mack maintained he was not as bright as his classmates, he just worked harder.

After college, he came home to work at the Fort Mill Manufacturing Co. (the first Springs Industries plant).

Around 1910 Mack joined the Fort Mill National Guard. In 1914 the guard was sent to the Mexican border. More than 60 years later he recalled a week's hike from the Rio Grande to Las Cruces, N.M. He said the major thing his company learned was how to care for their feet and clothes.

Fred Nims was the company's song leader and no matter how tired he was, he kept them singing. Later, when the Fort Mill National Guard under Col. Thomas Spratt entered World War I as part of the famed Old Hickory Division, they became known as "the singing company." And other companies took it up and it was soon "the singing battalion," and before long, marching to a song became characteristic of the whole regiment.

When Mack was in basic training at Camp Jackson in Columbia he competed for the rank of lieutenant. Most of the other candidates were graduates of military schools, but Mack had committed the manual to memory and had practiced all the drill orders using small sticks to represent the various officer levels. He came in fourth. However, there was one thing he knew nothing about: use of the saber.

Mack recalled, "Tom Spratt told me I done well except that I handled the saber as if it were a pitchfork." Mack was made 2nd lieutenant.

Mack had been on Cornell's wrestling squad and had had lessons in boxing. He was in charge of 80 to 90. He was expected to drill the men but figured that was for open fields and not helpful in the trenches.

Instead, Mack taught his men the athletic skills he knew. He feared he would be court-martialed for disobeying orders.

And then, unexpectedly, he was appointed first lieutenant and ordered to train the men for close combat. He said he fell back on things that he learned as a Boy Scout troop leader and they worked.

Mack and his men had a number of narrow escapes. He was gassed. This made him so nauseated that he had to get out of a convoy truck and vomit. He got back in with a splitting headache. Another soldier was in his seat. He told Mack to sit at his feet and he would rub Mack's head to relieve the headache. A shell struck and Mack was covered with blood. The soldier sitting in Mack's old seat had been killed instantly.

From 1921 to 1938, Colonel Mack was Fort Mill Superintendent of Schools. He was in World War II and in 1946-47 was military governor of Taegu, Korea.

Mack came back to Fort Mill in 1948 and took up farming with great enthusiasm (he had studied agriculture at Cornell). This occupied him until 1976 when he retired because

of health problems.

Louise Pettus is a local historian. This monthly article about the history of Fort Mill is presented by the Fort Mill Downtown Association. For more information, check out www.fortmilledowntown.com.