

Crawford, Emma: A Good Life ^[1]

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Emma Crawford: A Good Life

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 7/11/1999. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

Emma Crawford was born 106 years ago on a small farm in Alamance County. We talked at her home in the historic Oakwood neighborhood of Raleigh, where she has lived since 1922.

Listening to her, I felt almost dazed at how much has changed in one woman's lifetime. I couldn't get used to the fact that she was born the year that Thomas Edison patented his motion-picture camera, that she was 11 when the Wright brothers made their first flight, that she was a grown woman when the Titanic sank.

When Crawford was born, North Carolina was a land of small farms and mill villages. Only 1 out of 10 citizens lived in towns or cities. No women and few blacks had the right to vote. Typhoid and scarlet fever remained every mother's nightmare. Organized in the Populist Party, many farmers still believed that they could challenge the power of railroads and big business.

Mrs. Crawford weathered the 20th century with a steadfast faith and charitable spirit that also seem to belong to another age. She still keeps busy, too. She reads the newspaper every morning, crochets and enjoys helping out with the housework. She also stays in touch with many of her Sunday school students at Edenton Street United Methodist Church, where she taught the 2-year-old class for 65 years.

"You can't believe how good they've all been," she told me.

A historical note: When Mrs. Crawford mentions a flu epidemic, she is referring to the Spanish influenza epidemic of 1918. That virulent flu strain killed 500,000 people in the United States, 21 million worldwide.

In Emma Crawford's words:



Emma Crawford. Photo by Chris Seward, 1999. To request permission for further use or to purchase a print, please contact the *News & Observer*.

I was born in 1892. We lived in the country about a mile from the little mill village of Swepsonville. We had a dairy farm. We girls did all the milking. We milked, then we strained the milk into 5-gallon jars. Then we put it down in this basement. It's hard work in the country. Think what we had to do to have bread. You planted the wheat, and when it came harvest time my father cut it with a blade and something they called a cradle. Then he would put the wheat in bundles. The thresh My brother Bob would take that to the mill, and it was ground into flour. We had a barrel in the kitchen where we'd put our flour. And we had a big mixing bowl that fitted exactly over the barrel, and that had a lid on top of it. That was where we were just plain country people. People didn't have much money. There wasn't a lot you needed to spend money for. Of course, we had to have clothing, and then coffee and sugar was about the only thing that mother ever bought at the store. We didn't go many places. We had no cars. We just sort of lived with the people around us. Mother always visited people. A day spent with your neighbor, that was a nice day. On Sundays, lots of times we'd take a friend home with us after church. I had three older sisters, and of course they had sweethearts. They would have parties at our home. One was a candy pulling. They'd make candy. Then, in the summer, they'd have ice cream parties. If you had a date at night, you entertaine I was working at a general store in Swepsonville when I met my husband, George, for the first time, though we lived in the country about three miles apart. We never had many dates. My brother-in-law had a pretty little horse and buggy, and When George went off to the First World War, my sister couldn't understand why I didn't kiss him goodbye. I don't reckon I had ever kissed a boy in my whole life. It just wasn't the custom to do it. But I wrote to him every day. I'm sure I was crazy. He'd been back about two years before we got married. But we'd always been friends. There was sort of an understanding between us, although not much conversation, just a feeling that we had for one another. He was a very, very special person. I remember, during the war, people were just dying with the flu. It was a great epidemic of influenza. They had no antibiotics or anything whatever. My sister Maggie would make a big pot of vegetable soup and put it in quart cans. We wouldn't eat it. At that time, people made shrouds when somebody died. That was one of my tasks at this general store. These people - they'd call them drummers - would come with their goods, and it was my privilege to select the china silk and the laces. I remember so well, I had a roommate that had the flu before I did. We used to have pretty little lacelike caps that we wore sometimes.

Before I'd leave to go to work, I would see that she had that little cap on and was all powdered up, and she looked so comfortable. Later on then, when I had the flu, I said, "Annie, why didn't you tell me you was hurting and let me rub your back?" There have been a world of changes, but I decided long time ago that I was never going to live in the past. The old days were good. I think God planned it that way, that even though we didn't have a lot of things, we had a good life. But I don't

Additional Resources:

[Audio Recording](#) ^[3]: Interview with Emma Crawford by David S. Cecelski, 20 May 1999, K-0261, in the Southern Oral History Program Collection #4007, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. <http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/sohp/id/14354> ^[3]

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