

Kelley, Halie: Remembering Sugar Hill ^[1]

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Halie Kelley: Remembering Sugar Hill

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 9/9/2001. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

As a boy in Kinston, Halie Kelley delivered telegrams to what was one of the most notorious red light districts in America, Sugar Hill. Folks used to say it was the wildest place between New Orleans and New York. Most every gentleman of a certain age in Eastern North Carolina remembers Sugar Hill -- only by reputation, of course. It was as much a part of tobacco farming life as market week or the annual visit from Rusty Williams' Tent Show with its theater and games of chance.

Supposedly founded by Civil War refugees, Sugar Hill lured farmers from all over Eastern North Carolina, city people on the way to the fishing beaches, and servicemen from Camp Lejeune and Fort Bragg. Military leaders finally shut it down during World War II.

I had problems finding anybody willing to talk on the record about this storied icon of Eastern North Carolina's past. But when I visited Kelley at his home near Pink Hill, the retired tobacco farmer told me right off, "I'm 88 years old and I don't care what anybody thinks about me." He wasn't kidding.

I relished the way Kelley spoke his mind. Best of all, I liked how he hadn't forgotten the women who worked in Sugar Hill or the hardships that made even Sugar Hill seem like a refuge for some of them.

In Halie Kelley's words:



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When I was 14 my pa got TB and I had to quit school and they made me a job at the cotton mill. I couldn't do a thing in the cotton mill. Didn't know nothing. They gave me a job sweeping the floor. I worked there till Pa got better where he could. I had heard of Sugar Hill all my life, but I didn't know nothing about it till I got working at Western Union. We telegram boys, you run errands, too, and you liked to go down on Sugar Hill because you get a big tip down there. Now, a dime or 15 cents. When you were a Western Union boy, you didn't go in. You just went there. If you were 15, and you say something about going in there, the madam would say, "Wait till you get a little older." That's what they'd tell you: "Wait till you get a little older." I never did go down there to see them women until later, a time or two during the war in the '40s. They'd treat you just as good as you need to be.

It was two blocks of it, somewhere between 10 and 20 houses. Every house, there was a madam who owned it, or rented it and run it, and she had two or three girls or better. Some of them were shotgun houses way back there, but some of them were luxurious. You know, back when I grewed up, this here upholstered sofa was a luxury. At home we didn't have nothing but straight chairs, cane bottom chairs. A lot of people didn't even have chairs. Now these are old as a hill you can see 'em. Everybody knew about Sugar Hill I reckon. I don't know nobody that didn't know about it. 'Course, I don't know everybody. But anybody that you get to talking to, mostly, knows about Sugar Hill. And anybody that had \$5 would go down there. If a customer went to Annie Belle's, somebody would come, and if it's a maid and if they don't know you, they'll go back and get Annie Belle. And if she knows you, or you look to suit her, she'd invite you in, find out what you want, whiskey or rum. A lot of times they'd have parties in the houses. You could dance in there. I heard tell of all night poker games down there, too, but I never did get into them. If you behave yourself, it was a pretty safe place. If you didn't behave yourself, it wasn't. I don't know if it's so or not, but the law back then was supposed to look out for them. If they behaved themselves, the law didn't bother them. There were supposed to be two or three of the law that had women down there, but I don't know what they did. I knew about 10 or 15 of them women down there at that time, but I can't think of none of them but Annie Belle and Flonnie. They were madams, them two. Annie Belle looked to be about 35, and at that time looked to me like an old lady. She never did see nary a one of them cuss nobody out or nothing, unless they needed it. You carry them telegrams up there, they treat you just as nice as you ever seen. They treat you better than most people, yes sir.

Some of them were poor, and some of them weren't. But at your age, you ought to know that there are a lot of families that are supposed to be high class families, they aren't as high class as you think they are. A lot of them girls, they weren't. There were also a lot of girls, well, you read the book about the Dust Bowl, where that family moves out to California? Remember, he got his granddaughter a young'un? A lot of them went there on them accounts. That sort of thing happened

[Listening to History](#): David Cecelski explores North Carolina's history, one person at a time.

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