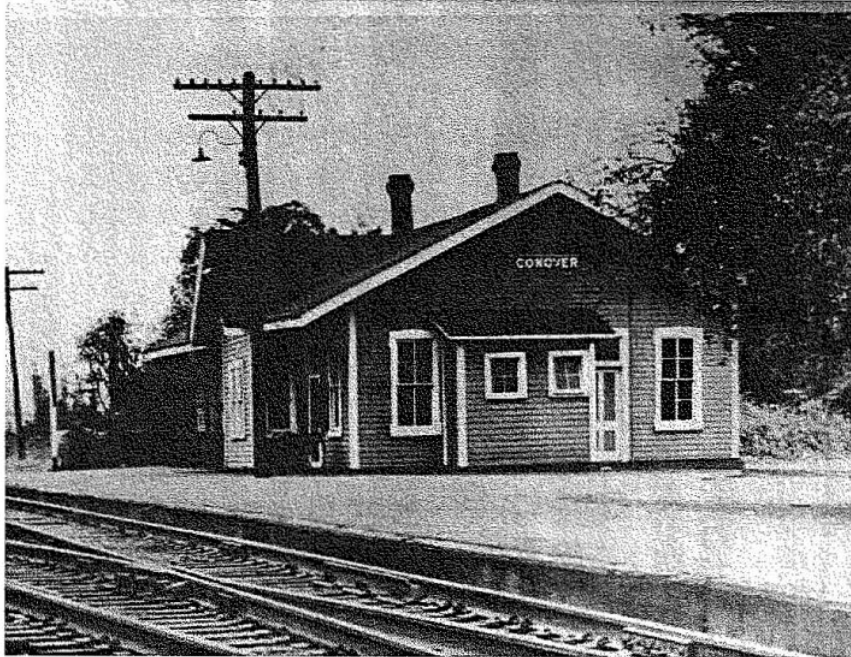




# CONOVER



*CONOVER N.C. train station.*

## NORTH CAROLINA A CLASSIC AMERICAN TOWN

**By Tom Prendergast**

Herbert T. Conover, a long-time officer of the family association and editor of *The Family Bulletin* (predecessor to *Tidings*) for more than forty years, reported in volume 2 of *The Bulletin* in 1939 that he had decided to visit all places with the name Conover, or at least as many as he could get to. He began his trek by going to Conover, North Carolina and Conover, Ohio. His next journey would be to Conover, Wisconsin, but as far as we can tell, Herb never reported back on that pilgrimage.

In Ohio, Herb found that the town was basically a "flag-stop" along the railway line, and that Conover, North Carolina, which he visited in 1937, had been founded as "...a school center by Reformed Church people from New York." He promised to report more fully on this visit at a later date, but a search of all the old *Bulletins* has not revealed that he kept to that pledge, at least in writing.

In any case, this editor – With the help of the Internet – has "re-discovered" Conover, N.C. through its website, and is happy to report that Conover, North Carolina is indeed a fine city going strong in Catawba County, in the western piedmont area of the state,



located about fifty miles northwest of Charlotte and 60 miles west-southwest of Winston-Salem.

Ironically, the city came to our attention through a photograph of its quite handsome railway station with the name CONOVER prominently displayed. Unfortunately, the station disappeared completely during one night several years ago and it has never really been officially learned what became of it. It turns out that this was also a flag-stop station in its day, but the present City of Conover boasts of much more than just a railway station that no longer exists.

According to Mr. Don Barker, a nearly life-long resident and the "unofficial" city historian there, it has been home in the past to the important furniture industry, including Conover Furniture Company (founded by his grandfather); the Canova Theater, named for an Italian sculptor, Antonio Canova, and at one time there was a merchant and watch repairman by the name of Kopenhaver, possibly a German gentleman, but his name could almost fit onto the long list of Kouwenhoven name variations (see Tidings, Vol. 10) that have arisen over the centuries.

The origin of the name of the City of Conover is uncertain. Mr. Barker states that the folks in the town are themselves trying to ascertain just how the name came to them. He does cite one John G. Conover, a preacher, whose wife's name was Sara, and they appeared in the 1870 Census of North Carolina, just a few years before the founding of Conover. The couple also appeared in the Illinois Census of 1860 and the Pennsylvania Census of 1880, in Indiana County, then as a Minister of the Gospel. They have found that he may have been born in Ontario County, New York. This theory may possibly have a connection to the evidence Herb Conover turned up in 1937 about the founding of Conover being connected with "Reformed Church people from New York."

The City of Conover was chartered in 1876 and incorporated in 1877. It covers about 9.5 square miles in area. At about the time of the city's founding, Concordia High School opened in Conover, and later became Concordia College, a Lutheran institution that produced ministers in that faith. It continued in operation until 1935 when the buildings were destroyed by fire. It was not rebuilt because other Lutheran learning institutions had opened in the region, making the Conover facility unnecessary.

Today, the City has several large industrial parks that make Conover one of the main employment bases in Catawba County and the Unifour region. The city's daytime population is in the mid-twenty thousands, about four times its normal residency. The county is home to three major fiber optic manufacturing companies producing more than forty percent of the world's fiber optic cable. The area's economy continues to grow due to the diversified manufacturing and commercial oriented base. It has excellent accessibility to major transportation routes and a favorable climate. Zoning permits for Conover during the last three years total just under \$100,000,000, an impressive 23% increase from the previous three fiscal years. A number of new residential developments have been completed or are in the planning stage, in addition to educational and recreational facilities including golf, tennis and swimming accommodations.



Mr. Barker has written a history of the Newton-Conover Twins (Newton being the neighboring town to Conover), a community baseball team that was formed from the old North Carolina State League. The Twins played from 1939 till 1962, and their story will be published in book form in the near future. It is called, *For the Love of the Game*. Mr. Barker has also written a nostalgic history of the Canova Theater in Conover. It contains the good memories of many of the folks who worked in this and other local theaters during and after their high school years, and of course, the fond recollections of those who frequented the movie houses in their early dating years. In addition, Don Barker has produced post cards and a poster of the Conover railway station, items that are available for sale.

Don Barker was adopted by Bill and Lula Barker from a children's home downstate from Conover, when he was four. It is then that he was introduced to the City of Conover, and he considers himself lucky to have been reared there, an emotion that moved him to attempt to preserve its history. Bill and Lula, the only parents he ever knew, are gone now, Don reports, as well as are his aunts, uncles and many childhood friends, classmates and a disturbing number of the good folks he met through his travels. He still lives in his parent's home, with his cat, but he says he is not alone - he has a treasure trove of memories. Bill Barker, Don's dad, was born in New Orleans, and he was a photographer in his home state as well as in North Carolina. Don is also a veteran photographer, having worked for Associated Press in that capacity as well as being a correspondent for the organization.

The subject of one of Don's histories, the Canova Theater, is also a thing of the past. Gone are its Saturday matinees, the cowboy heroes and Sunday night classic films. These dates may have been followed by a Cherry Coke or peanuts in Cheerwine at the soda fountain; or perhaps a greasy hamburger at a downtown café. Another scene missing from Conover today is the etiquette of dressing up for a double date to the movie, or to go dancing to the jukebox at Shady Grove or at the recreation center. Missing too are the Bobby Socks worn by the girls and the pegged pants and Penny Loafer attire of the boys.

The Conover Furniture Company, built up by Don's grandfather, Robert C. Brady, is gone, as well as the once mighty Broyhill Furniture Industries. Don says that his grandfather was the second male child born in "our little burg," and that he had built the furniture company "with his bare hands."

Don Barker also misses the "hometown grocery stores," the Bolick Buggy shop, the glove mills and textile plants and the sounds of the mighty steam trains passing by the town with their precious cargoes.

#### TIME TABLE W. N. C. RAILROAD.

##### NUMBER 23.

In effect on and after April 10, 1876.

Arrive.	GOING WEST.	Leave.
	Salisbury	8:30 A. M.
9:20 A. M.	Third Creek	9:30 "
10:15 "	Statesville	10:25 "
10:50 "	Plott	10:53 "
11:13 "	Catawba Station	11:18 "
12:30 P. M.	Newton	12:15 P. M.
12:30 "	Canova	12:35 "
1:00 "	Hickory	1:20 "
2:00 "	Leard	2:05 "
2:45 "	Morganton	2:55 "
3:40 "	Bridgewater	3:45 "
4:25 "	Marion	4:30 "
5:15 "	Old Fort	5:20 "
5:30 "	Henry's	
Arrive.	GOING EAST.	Leave.
	Henry's	7:10 A. M.
7:20 A. M.	Old Fort	7:25 "
8:10 "	Marion	8:15 "
8:55 "	Bridgewater	9:00 "
9:45 "	Morganton	9:55 "
10:40 "	Leard	10:45 "
11:35 "	Hickory	11:55 "
12:25 P. M.	Conover	12:30 P. M.
12:50 "	Newton	12:55 "
1:40 "	Catawba Stat'n	1:45 "
2:07 "	Plott	2:10 "
2:35 "	Statesville	2:50 "
3:30 "	Third Creek	3:35 "
4:15 "	Salisbury	

Going West, breakfast at Salisbury, 8 a. m. Going East, dinner at Hickory, 11:35 a. m.

S. McD. TATE,

General Superintendent.

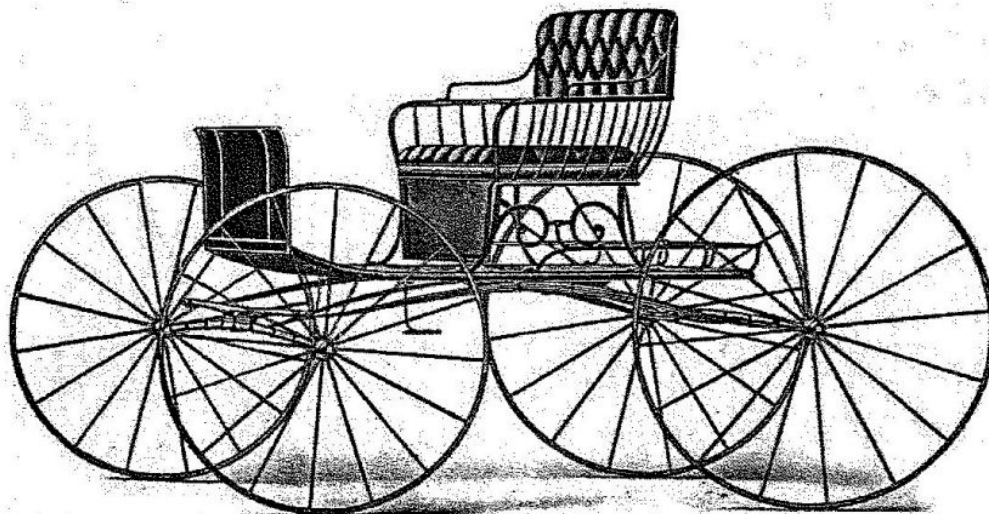
W. S. PEARSON,

Master Transportation.

Timetable of the western North Carolina railroad c.1876



No longer heard are the mournful whistles in the middle of the night, seeming to beckon



Stick Seat Slat Wagon No. 58

*A handsome buggy manufactured in Conover, also known for its furniture industry.*

the awakened sleeper, or perhaps telling them that they too would soon be saying goodbye.

It is interesting to note that on the westbound route of the Western North Carolina Railroad in 1876, the town was listed by the name of "Canova." Something would apparently occur to the alphabet, however, when the train turned back eastward, for in that direction the station was called "Conover." This is entertaining when you consider that the name of the town and the station was "Conover."

In any case, with respect to the vanishing train station, it appears that one night a Southern Railroad work train started in Black Mountain and toiled its way down the line and dismantled all of the inactive stations along the way, including Conover. They must have worked very quietly because their deed was not discovered until people were up and about the following morning, and wondering what in the world became of their beautiful station!? Apparently the only citizen who knew anything about it was the city manager, a Mr. Robinette, who had been informed about the intention of the company, but was unable to do anything about it because the city did not have the cash to purchase the station. This information was not shared with the citizenry for some time. The bottom line or, perhaps more succinctly, the "end of the line," was that a business decision had been made, and Conover's vintage beauty of a station was simply hauled away on a freight car.

If any reader of this article has information about Conover, North Carolina, its history and highlights, etc., or knows of an ancestor or collateral ancestor who settled in North Carolina in the second half of the 19th Century, please share your information with us.

Immense thanks go to Mr. Don Barker of Conover, N.C. for his generosity in sharing his knowledge and his materials with the association, not to mention his clever insights and



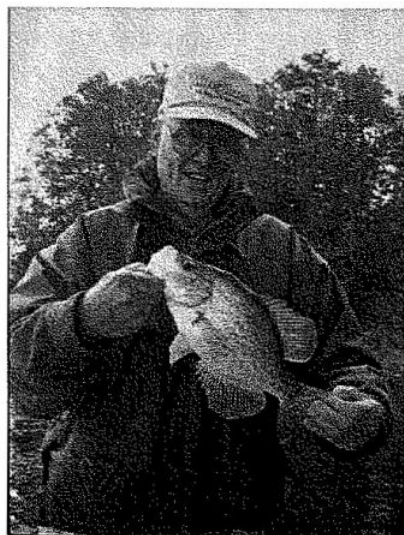


talents. Don leaves us with the thought that, contrary to the old adage, "You can't go home again..." – he feels that you can and should do so, if just for the memories.

As a footnote to the mention above that Don Barker has written a history of the Canova Theater, it was published in expanded form taking in all of the local movie theaters with the title, "Catawba County's Silver Screens: A History." It covers about forty local emporiums, past and present, including indoor and drive-in theaters. The book has been written about quite favorably in the newspaper, The Charlotte Observer, by columnist Mary Canrobert.



*Believed to be an Essex, This was the first car in Conover, circa 1915.*



*Don Barker, an avid fisherman, photographer, historian, pilot, cat lover and author, is seen here enjoying a catch. Don has also worked as a correspondent and field photographer for the Associated Press. He has had a nearly life-long love affair with the City of Conover, North Carolina, which makes it easy for him to promote it with such great enthusiasm. He was adopted at age four by Bill and Lula Barker of Conover, and has lived in that fair city ever since.*