

Days of Catawba Rifles

By TED HOOKS

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ROCK HILL — B. M. Branham was a 21-year-old textile worker who had never been out of South Carolina when he and 130 others in Rock Hill formed Company H of the 1st Regiment of the South Carolina Infantry.

It was 1917 and there were rumors of a war with Mexico — a land that seemed far away from the tiny town of Rock Hill where horses pulled a street car.

Branham remembers back to that time over half a century ago when he and his buddies that made up "The Catawba Rifles" boarded a train to El Paso, Tex.

"I had just gotten all my shots (immunizations) and I was sick as a dog on that trip to Texas," said the 77-year-old retired textile worker.

The troop train rolled for five days and five nights before arriving at the hot border town.

The Carolinians joined with about 40,000 other American troops in El Paso. "We lived in tents with dust and sand up to our knees for six months," he said.

Branham said there were plenty of interstate rivalries among the troops and fist fights would break out at times. "The best bunch of guys we met were from Pennsylvania. We always took up for each other," he said.

"And those Texas women were real nice to us, too. Of course, it was easy being nice and polite to them when they came around to visit. Every one of them wore a six-shooter around the waist of her dress," he chuckled.

"About all we had to eat in the tents was baked beans, but sometimes the well-to-do Texas families would take us to Sunday dinner."

"We weren't in Mexico but about six months before the Mexicans started behaving. They had been fighting each other. The Mexicans had never heard of South Carolina. They thought the whole country was nothing but Texas."

After returning to South Carolina, the Catawba Rifles were sent to Columbia to guard Camp Jackson while it was being built.

The company later moved to Greenville where snow and ice covered the ground for more training.

Shortly after that, Branham was hospitalized with a broken ankle when the company received orders to pack up its gear and head for France to fight the German army.

Branham was assigned to guard various railroad trestles from saboteurs.

Branham said several of the men who went to France never returned home. They were men like Frank Roach who were killed in action.

On returning to the states, Herbert Black organized the Rock Hill American Legion Post No. 34 and the men named it after Roach.

Scanning the list of names, Branham said most of the men have passed on.

"I still see Jimmy Watkins around town. (Watkins was the company's first sergeant) He opened up a pool room on Trade Street when he got back and ran it for years, before

recalled

retiring," Branham said.

"And I chat with Forest Blankenship when I go over to the Legion hut. He's the sergeant at arms over there."

Branham said the company's commanding officer was Capt. L.C. McFadden. "He was a fine fellow, a colonel when he got back from the war. He later worked as postmaster for Rock Hill.

Branham said the company's second lieutenant, James C. Dozier, ran a mule and wagon express around Rock Hill before the war.

Branham said the group never did have any big reunions — just some get-togethers at the Legion.

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