

## HUGH HAMMOND BENNETT & THE 1900 ECLIPSE

In 1900, a 19 year old Hugh Hammond Bennett, on hiatus from college due to a lack of funds, was an apprentice at a drug store in Wadesboro, North Carolina. Bennett recalls the excitement in the small Anson County town, deemed the best spot for viewing the eclipse that year. He made the drug store what would be over \$2,700 today by refashioning discarded glass into eclipse viewers. The day was made more memorable to Bennett when he attempted to wake a newspaper man who slept through the eclipse. While the newsman kept his job, his mishap became the eclipse story in one tabloid!

### **Recount the tale below from Wellington Brinks, *Big Hugh: The Father of Soil Conservation*:**

Hugh Hammond Bennett vividly recalls the famous 1900 eclipse of the sun, traditionally the most important event in the long history of Wadesboro. It brought to the town many of the world's leading physicists and astronomers. They set up huge batteries of cameras, delicate instruments for recording changes in temperature, and a wide assortment of other scientific equipment.

Newspaper reporters came from London, New York, Chicago. Hugh Bennett got a glimpse of the power of the press, a power which years later he as to engage so skillfully to rouse the nation to a sense of its responsibility to the land.

Scientists and newsmen began arriving weeks ahead. No small town ever basked in a pleasanter spotlights. The town itself caught the spirit, entered enthusiastically into a study of the heavens. Lectures were well patronized by local citizens. Hugh remembers being impressed by a scientists description of a quartz thread used for measuring temperature changes. It was so fine, said the lecturer, that a spider couldn't climb it, and so delicate as to register the heat of a candle flame at great distance.

The day of the eclipse was warm and the soda foundation, only one in town, did a land office business. The store had quite a window-glass trade, dispensing panes which were cut with diamond cutters to desired the dimensions. There was innumerable trimmings, and occasionally a sheet of glass was broken and discarded. All these rejected pieces were chunked into barrels which were carted away and dumped once or twice a year. Hugh had heard about smoked glass and its usefulness for viewing the sun and other heavenly bodies. And in a pharmaceutical journal he had read that the best way to smoke glass was with camphor gum. So he obtained a few pieces of camphor gum, cut up the scrapped glass-a whole barrelful at a time-into small convenient squares, smoked it and put out a sign: "Smoked glass to view the sun."

It was all his own idea, and a good one as it happened. Hugh sold the barrel, and then other barrels of glass script, making over \$100 net profit for the store - more, in fact, for he saved the time and effort of hauling the stuff away for disposal.

The sun performed according to the astronomers' calculations. Wonderful pictures were made. Everyone had a good time.

One amiable newspaper man, taking kindly to southern hospitality, got himself well steamed-up in preparation for the occasion. Unperturbed by the excitement roundabout, he curled up in his customary chair in the drug store and went to sleep. As the time for the eclipse approached, Hugh tried to wake him up. "Wake up man, you are going to miss the eclipse," he yelled. The reporter shook him off and answered, "It's quite all right, Buddy, let her ride."

Afterward, Hugh recalls, people about town lamented the tough, luck of the well-liked correspondent. "He'll surely be fired," they said.

Be he wasn't fired. And of the multitude of clippings that poured back to Wadesboro, the best of all, the most stirring, was the inspired dispatch by -lined the social chap who had slept through the whole affair.