

# Hollerin' from Hamlet

18 October 2009

Hamlet, North Carolina

## Back for a North Carolina visit

*1<sup>st</sup> trip to  
home town,  
home state in  
4 years*

My sister, Julie Meacham Jones, was supposed to meet me at Raleigh-Durham Airport, but the person who called my name was not so blond, female or – how should I write this? – old.

“Hey, Uncle Jody,” said my nephew and Marshall University’s most recent graduate, John Meacham.

He and his father, my brother Lee, had come down from Richmond, Va., to meet my plane Saturday morning along with Julie so that the three of us could be together during my week-long North Carolina trip.

It was a great surprise and a great way to begin my trip, which includes my 40<sup>th</sup> high school reunion later that day in Hamlet, N.C., my hometown, as well as stops all over the state to visit family and friends.



**The governor of North Carolina does not live in Los Angeles and commute to work in her private jet. She lives in this governor’s mansion in Raleigh. “She cut my benefits,” my school teacher sister (green sweater) said, “and we’re gonna vote her ass out.” L-R: Brother Lee, niece Virginia Jones, Julie and nephew John.**

We picked up Julie’s daughter, Virginia, who is a student at N.C. State University in Raleigh and went for lunch before a

**– Continued overleaf**

# Back for a North Carolina visit

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quick tour of Raleigh's downtown sights. Then it was south to the golf resort town of Pinehurst, where Julie and her husband Mac live, and where I'm spending the first weekend. It's just a half-hour north of Hamlet, the railroad town where I was born and lived until I graduated from UNC in 1973.

I tried to nap away my fatigue from Friday night's red-eye flight from the West Coast, but when it was time to head to the Hamlet High School Class of 1969 reunion, my eyes were still burning. Never mind. A reunion is every reason you need to look your most youthful. I chose my contact lenses over my glasses.

There were about 50 of us from a class of 200-plus, a historic class as the first graduating class after the end of racially segregated schools. And it was a historic reunion. After 35 years of segregated reunions, it was the second attended by black and white graduates in our class.

Our football team, of which I was quarterback, went 0-10 for the 1968



## **Why didn't I think to wear red and black?**

season including the 22<sup>nd</sup> consecutive loss to our arch-rival Rockingham in the final game, a season marked by racial tension as well as incompetence on the field. We finished with only 13 players of the original 40 or so in uniform. Five years after we graduated, Hamlet High and the other three high schools in Richmond County closed and were replaced by a single county high school that is still the high school today.

About 25 of our class are known to be dead, some of those I talked to are retired and many are talking about retirement in the next few years.

The newsletters I send out during my travels this week will cover what I'm doing, but each will also cover something about the place my family still calls home, though none of us lives there. Under the fictional name of Shortridge – Hamlet's founder was John Shortridge of Carlisle, England – it is the scene of my novel *Through the Heart of the South*.



# Why Hamlet exists

Hamlet was founded by John Shortridge, who had moved from England to Rhode Island in 1836. Eleven years later, he moved to Rockingham, N.C., to work in a textile mill, but soon decided to start his own business by building a mill six miles east on Marks Creek.

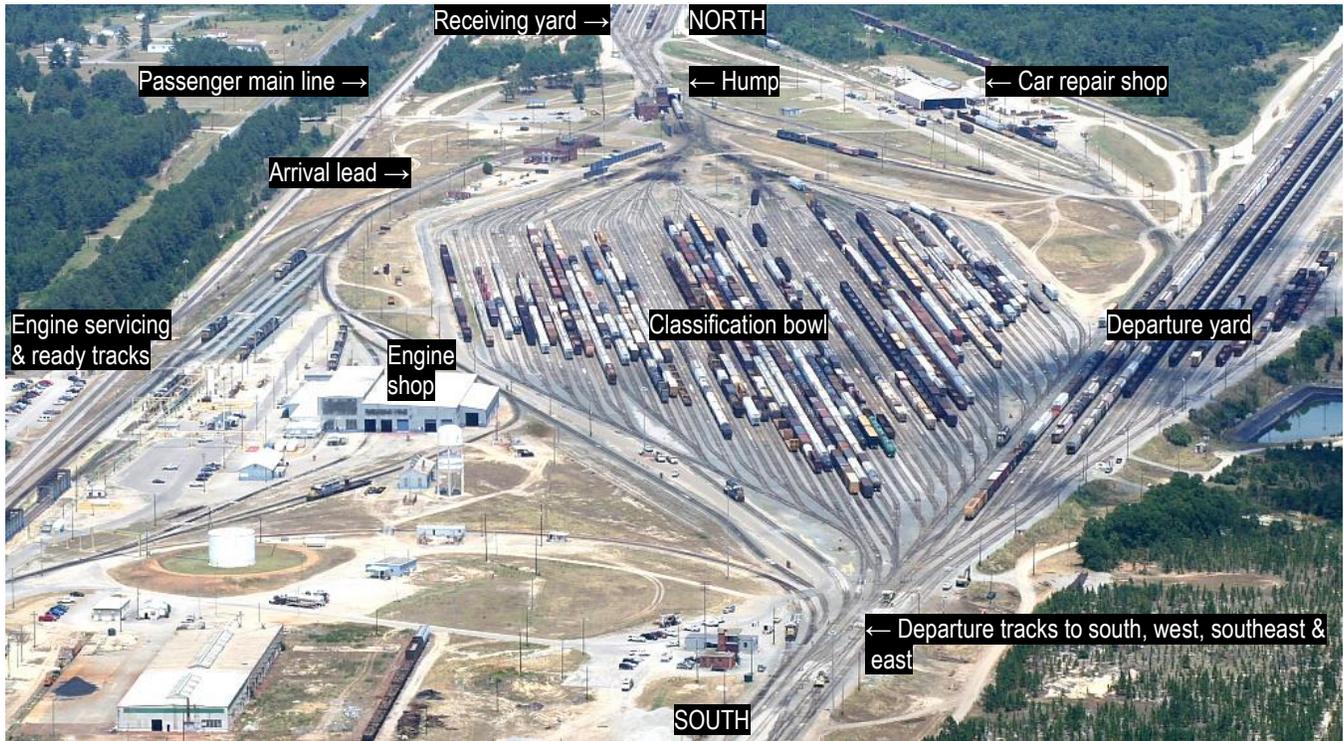
In 1873, he named the town that grew up around his mill Hamlet, which means a small cluster of houses. Shortridge's other notable contribution to the town was to persuade the Raleigh & Augusta Railroad Co. to build its north-south mainline through Hamlet rather than Rockingham. The Raleigh & Augusta and other railroads that built connecting lines to Hamlet were among those consolidated into the Seaboard Air Line Railroad ("air line" being the railroad term for a straight line) in 1900.

The Hamlet Depot built that year still stands – after a \$12 million move and restoration in 2003-04 – at the convergence of five lines and is an Amtrak station and railroad museum. The Seaboard and its competitor between Richmond, Va., and Florida, the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad, merged in 1967 to become the Seaboard Coast Line.



**My father, who worked for the Post Office, was the only male in his or my mother's families not to work for the Seaboard.**

Through a series of subsequent mergers involving the Baltimore & Ohio, Chesapeake & Ohio, Louisville & Nashville, Clinchfield and parts of the Pennsylvania and New York Central railroads, Hamlet's railroad is now CSX (the "S" coming from the original Seaboard name) which serves most states east of the Mississippi and parts of eastern Canada.



Aerial photo from RailPictures.net

**Opened in 1954 by the Seaboard Air Line Railroad, Hamlet's hump yard has thrived through the railroad's evolution into CSX.**

# Railroading in Hamlet today

About 40 freight trains move through Hamlet each day, most of them through the yard north of town.

CSX trains from the west, south, southeast and east converge downtown at the passenger depot and head north to the yard, which is a complex of tracks stretching three miles from north to south. Trains arriving from the north come directly to the yard.

Either way, arriving trains park on one of the 10 tracks in the receiving yard at the top of the photo. Their engines are uncoupled and taken to the servicing tracks to be prepared for their next trip while a pair of yard switch engines is coupled to the north end of the train.

The switch engines shove the train over a 15-foot tall hump. The freight cars are uncoupled one at a time at the top of the hump and roll freely into one of the 64 tracks in the classification bowl. A

yardmaster, sitting in what looks like an air traffic control tower, controls the switches that guide the car to the proper classification track based on its destination. As the cars descend the hump, they roll through retarders that slow them down so they will couple gently to the cars already in the bowl.

Several switch engines work pulling the cars out of the south end of the classification bowl and then shoving them into one of the 10 departure yard tracks (right) where outbound trains are put together. Once the train is built, a road crew brings its engines from the ready tracks on the left edge of the photo, couples to its train and is dispatched on its way.

Hamlet Yard can process about 5,000 freight cars a day.

I worked for the Seaboard Coast Line as a brakeman both in the yard and on the road during summers while in college.

# My North Carolina itinerary

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
October 11	12	13	14	15	<b>16</b> Red-eye to NC	<b>17</b> Hamlet High 40 <sup>th</sup> class reunion
<b>18</b> With sister in Pinehurst	<b>19</b> Wilmington & the coast	<b>20</b> Travel to mountains	<b>21</b> Great Smoky Mtns Natl Park	<b>22</b> Winston-Salem & Cary	<b>23</b> Travel to Richmond, Va.	<b>24</b> With brother in Richmond
<b>25</b> Fly home to California	26	27	28	29	30	31

## Today's picture pages



**My parents built this two-bedroom house when I was 5 years old and lived in it the remainder of their lives. The driveway was paved by its new owners. The kitchen window is to the right of the pickup truck, directly above home plate, which was a stupid place to put a kitchen window.**



**Billy Quick, right, and his brother Leroy were two of my 12 teammates who finished the 1968 football season on the newly integrated Hamlet Red Rams. They were among the classmates and friends I interviewed while researching my novel. Billy and his wife, who is from Wilmington, N.C., and whose name I can't remember, are both ministers in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. His youngest brother, Mike, played for N.C. State and the Philadelphia Eagles of the NFL. Leroy retired from Eastman Kodak in Rochester, N.Y., last year, and another brother Dennis is an assistant principal at Richmond County Senior High, the high school Hamlet students now attend.**



**Although North Carolina's state capitol building still stands as a museum, the General Assembly moved into the State Legislative Building in 1964. I covered the legislature as a reporter for the Daily Tar Heel as a UNC journalism student my last two years in college. The 120-seat House of Representatives chamber is at the top; the 50-seat Senate chamber at the bottom.**

Hamlet's restored 109-year old railroad depot is a daily stop for Amtrak's north- and southbound *Silver Star*, which runs from New York to Miami.



The southbound *Silver Star* stops in Hamlet on Saturday night to pick up passengers and a new operating crew (engineer, assistant engineer and conductors). They will work the train to Jacksonville, Fla. Passenger service crew (sleeping car and coach attendants, dining car cooks and waiters, lounge car attendant) work all the way from New York to Miami. Except for the sleeping car attendants, who have berths in the cars they manage, the passenger service crew has rooms in a crew dormitory car.