

Bucklesberry, Back in the Day

Match Made in Heaven (Part 2)

The talk of the town during Christmas week of 1890 may have been the December 23rd marriage of Laurah Wood (1856-1934) and Rev. William Ellis Smith (1856-1923) in La Grange. Laurah's parents were Dempsey Wood Sr. (1816-1882) and Elizabeth Sutton Wood (1827-1894) of Bucklesberry. Rev. Swain was the former bachelor pastor of Hickory Grove Church in Bucklesberry from 1885 through 1887.

Laurah and William were 34 years of age when they married. Not so unusual by today's standards. Nonetheless, they were older than typical couples who married in that time period. Marriage data from the 1890 Census indicated the average age of men who entered their first marriage was 26 years; for women, it was 22 years.

Their careers were in full swing before they married. Records documenting Laurah's grade school education and professional preparation are unavailable. Her parents were affluent, though, so she may have attended private schools in the area. Laurah eventually became a teacher. At the age of 28, her attendance at a teachers' conference was reported:

1884, June 22: "The Teachers' Chautauqua [Conference], Waynesville, N.C., June 19....The prominent schools of the State are represented....We have had the pleasure of seeing and listening to the following teachers....Miss Laura[h] Wood....who contribute[d] mightily to the joy and profit of the occasion." (*The News and Observer*, Raleigh)

A seasoned educator, Laurah probably logged ten or more years of teaching prior to her marriage. She taught at a leading school in La Grange the year before she wed:

1889, August 22: "Miss Laura[h] Wood, a lady of superior accomplishments, and well known in our county, will teach in the [La Grange Collegiate] Institute the following year." (*New Berne Weekly Journal*, New Bern)

Called to preach, William attended Yadkin College in Davidson County from 1880 to 1883. He had no prior schooling in rural Washington County where he was reared. In an autobiographical essay titled, "From Good to Better," published in the book *College Men Without Money* by Carl B. Riddle (1914), William acknowledged he was self-taught:

"There were no schools of any consequences near, and had there been, they were barred to me, for my father was not able to pay tuition, and there were no public schools in that section. When

I was nearly fifteen years old, a gentleman living near by employed me to grub new ground...With the money so earned, a bottle of ink, six pen points, half quire of paper, a pen staff and a 'Blue Back Speller' were purchased. The Speller was necessary that the script letters might be learned....Even after I had learned to make the script letters I did not know how to spell. As a substitute for this lack, more than half the Speller was copied. By the time this was done some of the simpler words had been learned and so I began to write. About the same time I undertook to work 'sums' in Greenleaf's Arithmetic. This was painfully slow..." (pp. 142-145)

More on the marriage and lives of Laura Wood and Rev. William Ellis Swain will be shared in a future Bucklesberry article.