

Bucklesberry, Back in the Day

Match Made in Heaven (Part 3)

Laurah Wood (1856-1934) and Rev. William Ellis Swain (1856-1923) married during Christmas week of 1890. Although particulars about their engagement and wedding are unknown, available records give clues about how and when they probably met as well as the extent of their courtship.

Laurah was born and reared in Buckblesberry. A local teacher, she was widely known in the surrounding area. William grew up some one hundred miles away in Washington County. There is no evidence to suggest a pre-existing relationship between the two—childhood, familial, collegial or otherwise—prior to William's move to the La Grange area as pastor in the mid-1880s.

After he completed his education in 1883 at Yadkin College in Davidson County, William entered the ministry of the Methodist Protestant (M. P.) Church with which he had been affiliated as a young boy. His first pastoral appointment was to the La Grange Mission of the M. P. Church in 1885, which included four churches. He served there for three years.

Two of the churches were located a considerable distance outside the La Grange area: Oak Grove Church in Little Washington, Beaufort County; and Speight's Chapel in Whitakers, Edgecombe and Nash Counties. The other two churches were the fledgling M. P. Church congregation in the town of La Grange and Hickory Grove Church in Bucklesberry.

The assignment to the La Grange Mission was William's first introduction to the community. He preached his inaugural sermon at Hickory Grove Church on Sunday, March 1, 1885. Laurah Wood and her family, lifelong Bucklesberry residents, probably attended the service. If so, the handshake between Laurah and the bachelor pastor in the vestibule after the service may have been the impetus that sparked their mutual attraction.

Whether William lived in La Grange his entire three-year term as pastor is uncertain. He may have resided in or near the locations of the two out-of-town churches for awhile. In 1886 he reportedly suffered illness requiring medical intervention that placed him as a resident of Bucklesberry where he convalesced:

1886, March 18: "We are sorry to hear that Rev. W. E. Swain is still quite sick in Bucklesberry. Mr. Swain has many warm friends in that community who are cheerfully giving him every possible attention and who will continue to do so. We truly hope to see him up and out again soon." (*New Berne Weekly Journal*)

William and Lurah had opportunities to grow their relationship while he was living in Bucklesberry. For example, in addition to worship services, Hickory Grove Church held events, including picnics, that allowed congregants to socialize. One, in particular, was reported:

1887, August 11: "The picnic at Hickory Grove last week was a complete. success. Everybody present enjoyed themselves to the fill. There was [sic., were] rations in abundance and to spare....The people are highly pleased with all things connected with the picnic, and we hope they will be stimulated to renewed efforts for the future..." (*New Berne Weekly Journal*)

More on the courtship between Lurah Wood and Rev. William Ellis Swain will be shared in an upcoming Bucklesberry article.