

Rassie Wicker Knew Moore County As Few Others

BY VETA E. GORMAN
 Moore County has had a number of great citizens who should be placed in any future Hall of Fame for Outstanding Citizens. Perhaps those who come in at the very beginning of the County's history, or those who speak the loudest, whatever their time on stage, may be the first to be acclaimed.

A person's greatness, however, does not depend on his birthdate or outstanding attention bestowed, but upon what he does with his allotted time.

Rassie Wicker was a great man.

There are many people who knew him, but it is difficult to find any who had words other than praise for him. He wasn't born to this acclaim; he earned it.

Born March 6, 1892 to James A. and Lucretia Millis Wicker, he was one of four children. The Wicker family was English, coming to North Carolina and Moore County from Virginia, but his grandmother on his father's side was a Currie, so he also had Scottish forebears.

James Wicker was a carpenter, builder and foreman for the trestle force of the Seaboard Air Line Railroad. From this industrious parent young Rassie first learned the value of work and the love of good wood and workmanship.

North Carolina's school system at this time was of shorter terms and more indistinct grade-level divisions. When it was reported that Rassie Wicker attended the small village school near Cameron where he was born, for a total of thirty-two months, it does not indicate an education of little beyond the primary grades. That would be far from the truth.

He was about twelve years old when the family moved to Pinehurst, but he returned to Cameron for high school.

Also, he worked. In Pinehurst with the Tufts' soda fountain history, he became a soda-jerk at the drug store. Other jobs he held in his early years were that of electrician's helper, carpenter, and office boy with the Pinehurst Printing Press.

And he read! This was a life-time love for a man with an inquisitive mind.

The College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts in "West Raleigh" (now N.C. State) accepted him

into the Freshman class upon recommendation of Supt. Cameron and the passing of a comprehensive exam. In this, his knowledge enabled him to take advanced studies in math and drawing on the Sophomore level during his Freshman year. With money difficult to obtain for college, he worked for expenses in between times. He would be awarded his degree in Civil Engineering in 1919.

A happy occasion on June 13, 1917 was his marriage to Mary Loving of Cameron. Later, James and Eloise would make the family complete.

World War I was an interruption. He was inducted August 8, 1918 and was in France a month later, serving with the Third Army Headquarters Post Office. His military career ended in July 1919.

In Pinehurst, his work in surveying alone made him spoken of as knowing more about Moore County than anyone else. He surveyed most of it and people knew it would be accurate. More than that, perhaps, he knew its people.

In his "Miscellaneous Ancient Records of Moore County, N.C.," he has statements about the 1850 census (which did not list locations) such as the following, which, incidentally, he read from microfilm by a gadget he concocted. It was a square screen through which ran the film, and had a microscope for magnification. He would read a section of text, turn aside to type it by "hunt and peck" until he was ready to read the next portion.

From McLendon's Creek: "Poor Elisha Rose...having made his last basket, he got a rope and hanged himself from the limb of a mulberry tree. The writer recalls this 'Hang Tree.' It stood near the home of the late Angus Ferguson about two miles from Cameron and was avoided by the suspicious ones, especially at night. A song-ballad was composed about this unfortunate man, but the only part recalled by the writer was:

... 'Lisha Rose
 He had a mouth from ear to ear
 And a long and crooked nose."

From Nick's Creek: "This day the enumerator was first on one of the heads of Nick's Creek, where he enrolled Philip Cameron, blacksmith and, when

the spirit so moved him, a gunsmith."

"Today the enumerator was still listing potters. It is significant that this census lists no potters as 'potters.' To the writer, this indicates that art was practiced only as a side line to farming, and produced only jugs, crocks, churns, etc., all purely utilitarian objects. The idea that they had any artistic quality would have been stoutly denied by their makers."

Rassie Wicker went on in his book to give short histories of several families in the 1790 census, the story of Flora MacDonald, the Loyalist Uprising, the early roads of Moore County, discussions on grist mills, debunker of myths through his research, old customs, curious names, historical events, and problems of the early settlers. Through it all, his tone was for accuracy from personal contact and research tempered with a keen interest in his fellow man, with a quiet sense of humor.

He was called upon for much service in his capacity as surveyor, historian, architect and artist.

A letter from Richard Tufts January 11, 1928 asks him to help with the "artistic and inexpensive rain shelters which we will have to build at Pine Needles" (now Saint Joseph Hospital) and goes on to say, "You know, you are getting quite a reputation with us as an architect, landscape designer, and sort of handy man when we want to get something that looks extra nice."

Wildlife held a fascination for him. A nest of young quail was found in his backyard, their mother apparently killed. The Wickers, Rassie and Mary (Miss Dolly) raised one who later became a mother to two broods, despite an injured leg which her owner splinted with toothpicks. She died of old age near the spot where she liked to carry on conversations with Miss Dolly. These quail were the only known domesticated ones and were trained so well that one served as an impartial selector in a lucky drawing for the annual trials of the Pointer Club. Rassie Wicker thought quail should be selected for national honors due to its intelligence, beauty, personality and distinctive calls and chirps. World War II, at age 50, found



Rassie Wicker

him working two years as a designing and estimating engineer with the Sanford firm of General Foundry and Machine Company. This followed 38 years with Pinehurst, Inc. where he first began as office boy to Leonard Tufts in 1904. He wanted a part in the war effort. His son was in the Army.

Many souvenirs of the neat, exact notes—some even on the backs of envelopes—are treasured by friends. Many are in the Archives Room of Given Memorial Library.

One of the most touching memorabilia is a note which Mrs. Eloise Wicker Knight shared. Her father wrote it on the occasion of her graduation from the University of North Carolina, his pride showing in her degree in botany. It is a real love letter, and mentions prominent professors. It reads, in part:

"...I (and you, too) know the pleasure—the deep and soul-satisfying pleasure of having knowledge as one of your possessions. Not a knowledge confined to one subject, but a broad intellectualism which gives you a deep appreciation, not only of the distant and unapproachable things, but also of the little, homey everyday creatures and incidents of which everyone's life is made up. You will never be bored with existence, for within a square yard of God's good earth, you can find a myriad of things over which to wonder and speculate, and from which you can learn still more. A bug or a worm or a plant, each going about its appointed task; not haphazardly, but in conformity with some great plan, the whole

of which no man will ever see, much less grasp. Only man himself, who sets himself above all these lowly (?) things, is guilty of transgression of these natural laws, which is a thing at which to marvel, but nothing of which to boast."

Rassie Wicker goes on to praise his daughter's accomplishments, and reminds her to "...maintain and cultivate a high sense of curiosity...an inquiring mind about everything with which you come in contact. As time goes on and you accumulate what may at times seem to be trivial facts, you will learn that all these seemingly unrelated things fit together and weave themselves into a most wondrous pattern, revealing life itself."

His daughter was a natural for all wildlife, science in general, math and music. Later these traits would be passed on to others, her own children and those she taught. As he told her, "You find it in music—perhaps the most vivid illustration of all—and what sounds to many as a chord or symphony, can be shown to be a wonderful example of the universality of mathematics. To some, the reduction of an aesthetic art to a formula is no less than heresy, but to one who both appreciates music, and understands mathematics it is just another proof of the interrelation of all natural phenomena, and rather than an offense to one's sensibilities, it affords a deep satisfaction to one's intellect."

He closes with a bit of advice for the new graduate referring to her birthday letter to him. "P.S. Don't say 'Aren't I...tain't proper—stretch it out. 'Are I not...You know that's not right. If you can't say 'Am I not,' say 'Ain't I.'"

Rassie Wicker never retired; just as he was elected to fill the office of county surveyor and then disqualified because he was not old enough, he loved to be at work all his life. Called upon constantly for surveying and consultations, he took time for the issues of the day.

In a Moore County (now Moore Memorial) Hospital issue, he felt that the dispute was due to a jealousy that could be resolved without an investigation as one side would have it. The hospital, he said, was built for the people and "the people who had received

aid had felt that it had rendered service to the utmost satisfaction of those concerned."

Concerning labor unions, he observed that if mandatory service for the military applied in time of war for both draftees and industry, then when the draft applied in peacetime to young men, that industry should also be producing. "Is it too much," he asked, "to hope that these labor unions will also fall into line and not become traitors?"

Concerning the new buildings of the county, both schools and the new government buildings in Carthage, it seemed too much all at once. Money was a big item to this self-made man. To Robert Ewing he wrote of tax rates being lowered but still resulting in a rise in the amount paid. "Let me again commend you and some of the others of your board for your attitude in conducting the county's business."

The new programs at Pinecrest were not wholly accepted, because, as he saw it, "the lack of progress under the 'Innovative' method of 'Teaching' was a psychological laboratory, trying out every new theory." It was a time of change from small neighborhood high schools to three large ones in the county with a large number of students, plunged into a more self-directed plan of study.

Even The Pilot did not escape a mild reproof.

"Full many an ode, sans meaning, rhythm or rhyme, is blazoned in The Pilot, on page three;

Full many an idle rhymer wastes his time, when he writes such stuff for dolts like me.—Mr. Gray"

R.E. Wicker, ca 1975
 Of course, most of his time was devoted to the "hunt and peck" system of typing his book, an invaluable document for generations to come. "Miscellaneous Ancient Records of Moore County" will be a Bible to all workers in county history. Years of work went into it; it had to be accurate, and he wanted the statistics to "live" by his personal comments.

Even this was not all of his talents. Furniture making, inlaid wood, a fountain design, a mercury gauge to measure the natural suction of water by plants to the leaves, an Italian dulcimer,

a copy of a nutcracker on his metal lathe, unfinished hand-carved picture frame, a toy for his grandchildren with arms that could interchange positions and motions, clocks, including one with only one hand that moved gears that pushed out pegs to mark the time, a coverlet woven on a loom which he also made, and many more.

Add to this list these accomplishments: He was a self-taught musician, the cornet being his favorite; a self-taught typist; designer of the traffic circle at Junctions of Highway 211-15-501 and Number 2, Midland Road; a discoverer of the most westerly location of the Venus Fly Trap in North Carolina in the 1930's; designer and builder of his own home on Dundee Road in Pinehurst; Commander of Sandhill Post of the American Legion, manager of the Pinehurst Theater in 1917 and some years after, planner of the brick work and parking area in front of the Department Store in Pinehurst, a supervisor of building many of today's structures, among them Given Memorial Library of which he was a member of the Board.

The list is bound to be incomplete, as the Sandhills Kiwanis Club presenting him with the Builders Cup December 1971 noted. This is an award kept secret until the actual presentation, and was made amidst a standing ovation of 156 persons who came out in the worst

possible weather of the year.

He was a member of the Democratic party and a Presbyterian.

Rassie Wicker died on October 16, 1972 leaving his wife; one daughter, Mrs. Richard A. Knight of Pinehurst; one son, Col. James R. Wicker, U.S. Army, Retired, then of Raleigh and now of Pinehurst; five grandchildren and one great-grandchild.

Somehow it seems fitting to end with the Christmas Card he designed for his family to send in 1938. Of course, he not only designed it, he made the message and the plate for its printing:

"What Profiteth it a man and his household if they layeth up the yere through in order to buy of John Hemmer rare and artistic Yuletide Greetings—what profiteth it them forsooth, if as ye time draweth nigh they findeth themselves up against it and must performe have ye same lettered in such a crude and uncouth manner as this? + + + + Yea, of a truth, it profiteth them little but it maketh them VERY HAPPY just ye same."

Rassie Everton Wicker, your county salutes you.

CENSUS ATTEMPTS
 Twice the Moore County justices tried to enumerate the county's citizens, in 1785 and again in 1787. Neither of these lists, if actually completed, can be found today. But in 1790 the first United States Census was taken, showing the county with 3,770 residents in 639 households.



BUTLER GRAVE — The grave of Bion H. Butler, writer and one time editor of The Pilot, is in Old Bethesda Cemetery.

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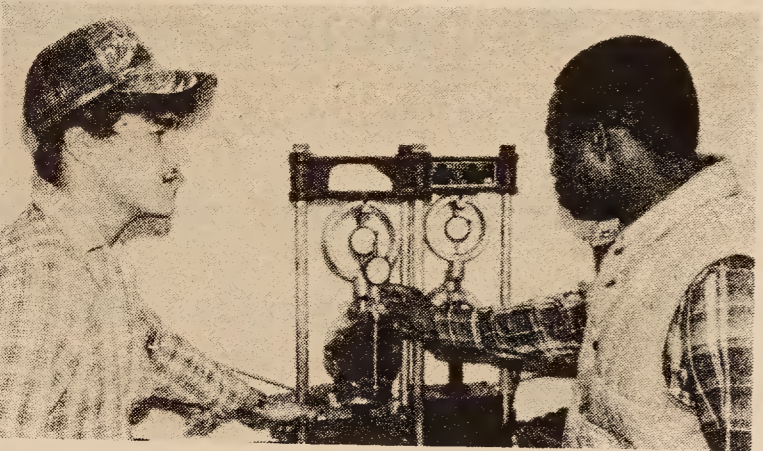
College Transfer



Vocational



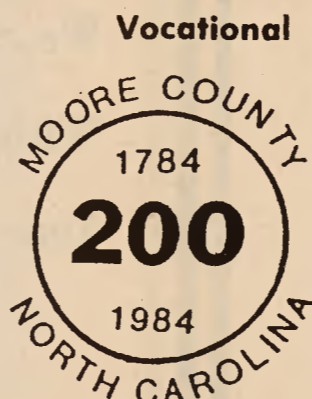
Allied Health



Technical



Continuing Education



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