

William Edward and Caroline Kochtitzky Merritt

William Edward Merritt (1867-1946) was born in Chatham County, North Carolina. When he was about 20, he left the farm near Pittsboro where his family was struggling to make a living. He came to Mount Airy, then a town of some 2,000, to work in a hardware store owned by a cousin. In a few years he had bought the store and named it the W. E. Merritt Company. He signed his name "W. E. Merritt," but was known as "Ed."

At that time, Otto Leander Kochtitzky (1855-1935), an engineer from Missouri, was employed by the Town of Mount Airy. Otto's father, Oscar von Kochtitzky died in 1891, and Otto invited his mother and his sister Caroline Octavia Kochtitzky (1868-1960) to spend the winter of 1892-93 in Mount Airy. A family story recounts that when Ed saw "Carrie" coming down the street, he exclaimed, "There's the girl I'm going to marry ... if she'll have me." Ed never denied that story, nor did he deny that he was already engaged to a local girl. In any event, before Carrie and her mother left in April, the wedding date was set for June 7 in Jefferson City, Missouri.

The two were very different in many respects. He was a large, rough, boisterous son of the Confederacy, and a Methodist; she a Presbyterian and a diminutive, shy, but quick-witted, cultured daughter of a foreigner who had served as an officer in the Union army.

After a wedding trip to the Columbian Exposition in Chicago, the young couple moved in with the Otto Kochtitzkys, at the end of Hines Avenue, where their first child was born. Later they moved to a small frame house on Main Street, across from the just-completed Trinity Episcopal Church.

Ed Merritt and John Alexander Yokley (1859-1915) organized Mount Airy Furniture Company in 1895. With an abundant supply of lumber and willing workers, and with the railroad to take their products to market, the company was destined to do well. Ed Merritt did

not work at the furniture factory himself, but his brother, Cullen Merritt, left the family farm in Chatham County, and his brother-in-law, Ed Kochtitzky, left his teaching job in Jefferson City, Missouri, to work there.

Money was very tight as they began production. They ordered one load of lumber, one barrel of glue, and one keg of nails at a time. Cullen Merritt and Ed Kochtitzky lived in the small office building at the factory. In bad weather they took turns wearing the overcoat they owned between them.

Ed Merritt and his family also struggled to make ends meet. According to his daughter, Elizabeth, "Papa was hard-pressed to find his share of the money to keep the new factory going until it could make a profit. His growing family had only the barest necessities. Mama used the material in her wedding dresses to make clothes for the children. Oscar's first pants were made from her traveling dress."

Elizabeth Merritt came home to help take care of her father before he died in 1946, and she was her mother's constant companion until she died in 1960. She remembered her mother this way:

"She never, in more than 91 years, lost her zeal and enthusiasm for living. ... She was an active member of the Presbyterian Church, sang in the choir and was always involved in the various projects of the Ladies Aid Society — the ice cream suppers, the oyster suppers, bazaars and bake sales. Although she was essentially a timid person and shunned the limelight, during the first World War she was active in establishing the Surry County Chapter of the American Red Cross and spent many hours in the workrooms training volunteers and making bandages. In her later years she loved to travel and was always ready to go. Just about the only preparation she felt was necessary to make for a trip was to collect the pictures of her grandchildren, being very

sure she had the latest picture of the newest baby. It was fun to travel with her, and we had many good trips together.”

Evidently Ed Merritt’s businesses soon began turning a profit, and in 1901 he built a brick house, now 618 North Main Street. The brick for this house, as well as his hardware store at the corner of Main and Oak Streets, were made at his brickyard on the banks of Lovill’s Creek.

As soon as he finished his house, Merritt began building another one next door (610 North Main Street) for his parents and sisters, who were still on the farm in Chatham County. His oldest sister, Anna Lee Merritt (1864-1946), served as a nurse during the first World War. Another sister, Sarah Elizabeth (“Bess”) Merritt (1874-1961), was a school teacher and supervisor. They both eventually moved into the home of sister Emma (1880-1970), who had married Marvin Sparger (1878-1958) and lived on Franklin Street.

During the first World War, Ed Merritt was chairman of the Surry County draft board. His sons entered military service as soon as they were old enough. In 1921 he organized Renfro Hosiery Mills Company (now Renfro Corporation.) with three other local businessmen. As with the Mount Airy Furniture Company, the early years were a struggle, and two of the businessmen withdrew, leaving Ed Merritt and W. G. Sydnor as the sole investors. Elizabeth Merritt remembers her father muttering, “The rats think they are leaving a sinking ship. But, dammit, this ship is not going to sink.”

Ed Merritt never held an office at Renfro, but two of his sons, William and Hugh, spent most of their working life there. In addition to the hardware store, Ed Merritt was actively involved with another enterprise, his farm on the Ararat River just east of town. He raised corn in the rich bottom land and fed cattle. Although he had Wilsher Short to manage the farm, Ed Merritt frequently walked to the farm. He seemed to enjoy the physical side of farming —

hoeing corn or rounding up the cattle. His chewing tobacco often gave his mustache a brown tint, he loved baseball and fishing, and he always had a good hunting dog.

He never learned to drive a car and was suspicious of any message that came by telephone. In his later years he was proud to say that although he never attended college himself, he was able to send all his brothers, sisters and children through college. When Hugh Merritt was asked what he remembered most about his father, he recalled his saying, "All I want is to leave the world a better place than I found it."

Ed and Carrie Merritt had six children: Oscar von Kochtitzky (1894-1979), Sarah Elizabeth (1896-1991), William Edward, Jr.(1898-1983), Abram Haywood (1900-1991), Mary Katherine (Auer) (1902-1985), and Hugh Leonidas (1908-1989).

Sources

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— Robert E. Merritt
832 Country Club Road
Mount Airy, NC 27030
919-786-8359