

JOHN WALKER O'NEAL

John Walker O'Neal was born February 12, 1867 below the Lesslie Community of York County. He was the fifth child and only son of Margaret Jane Wylie and John Faris O'Neal. The house in which he was born (one which was recently written up for The Evening Herald) was lent to his father upon his return from the War Between The States as a young soldier by the father of the late Mr. Sep. Massey.

A few years after his birth the family moved into town and later built a home on what is now the corner of Hampton and Marion Streets.

At the age of 9 he vividly recalls riding on the band wagon in a parade of Wade Hampton's Redshirts, who were trying desperately to overthrow the governing Carpet-Bag Rule in South Carolina. Many parades were held at night, and were brilliantly lighted by torches - one such terminated close to his home at the end of the road which was later given the name of Hampton Street, to honor this great man of the Reconstruction era. There were two schools in the early days - Pine Grove School was located ~~near~~ⁱⁿ White's pasture (which is now Pickens Street & Pickens Court) and Pineopolis School, located about where Ebenezer Avenue School is now. John O'Neal attended Pineopolis School and was taught by a Miss Stoney from Charleston, and Mrs. Lou Rhea, the grandmother of Jimmie Rhea. Later he attended a school under Capt. B. P. Alston, which was located about the corner of Saluda and Black Streets.

In his teens his first business venture was an interest in a retail grocery business with his brother-in-law, the late B. N. Craig, at a salary of \$8.00 per month.

In 1888 at the age of 21 he entered the retail grocery business alone, located on the corner of Trade and Main Streets where the Phillips Building now stands. This was wiped out by the great fire of 1898 as was most of the business district of Rock Hill.

In 1893 he was married to Helen Ruff in a beautiful church ceremony performed by Dr. Alexander Sprunt. A large reception followed at the Ruff home on East Main Street, at which a course dinner was served. There were five children born, Margaret Perdon, who died in infancy, Helen Elliott (Mrs. A. L. Humphries), Mary (Mrs. King C. Tolles), J.W. O'Neal, Jr., and Laura Ruff (Mrs. W.M. Mauldin, Jr.). He is proud to have ten grandchildren to whom he is fondly known as Father.

After the fire the Smith-Fewell Company, a retail mercantile company, was formed in conjunction with Mr. Ben M. Fewell and Capt. A. E. Smith. He sold his interest in this after a short while and with T.O. Flowers, James S. White and W.W. Watt, organized the Rock Hill Supply Company. Withdrawing from this he bought out the B. N. Craig business where he had held his first job and established the J. W. O'Neal Grocery Company, a wholesale firm which he operated successfully for about forty years. This business was located on the site from which Rock Hill gets its name. In 1932 he retired, having sold the merchandise to his nephew, B.N. Craig, Jr.

John O'Neal served on the City Council six years - being elected first in 1898 when W. C. Hutchison was Mayor, and another term 1903-1905 with J. J. Hull, Mayor, and again in 1906-1908 when John T. Roddey was Mayor.

It was about this time that the first installation of water pumps was made and Mr. O'Neal recalls that the council was assembled

to inspect the height of the water spout forced into the air as a test for its pressure. Another interesting recollection is the method of publishing the weather predictions which was made by hoisting a weather flag on the spot where the freight depot platform now stands.

About this time Mr. O'Neal ordered a porcelain bathtub. This was one of the first in town and to facilitate its use a simulated septic tank was built. He soon received word that the council was going to inspect this for sanitary reasons and hastened a crew of darkies down to make the whole back-yard presentable for the inspection.

In 1914 Mr. O'Neal suffered from a present day ailment known as occupational fatigue and as a result bought a farm in the Oak Ridge community. In conjunction with Mr. John A. Black, Horace Brown and Mr. Finley of York he was influential in establishing the present highway to McConnellsville, which opened up that part of the county to Rock Hill for the first time.

He became greatly interested in farming and acquired and traded several tracts, and maintains and oversees one to this day.

In 1918 he built the first sweet potato curing house in South Carolina and pioneered in the present method of curing sweet potatoes. Clemson College Extension Department made a study of this and incorporated the technique in its Bulletins.

During World War I he was Fuel Administrator for York County and for this service was awarded a certificate by Hoover, who was National Fuel Administrator.

In 1917 he was elected a charter member of the newly established Library Board, and in July 1929 was elected Chairman. It

was during this time that the present Library Building was bought from the Federal Government and established as a Library Building. He was instrumental in obtaining a tax levy for the Library so as to insure a sound financial footing and also to help establish library facilities for colored people.

Also in 1918 he became a charter member of the newly formed Rotary Club and served as President in 1923 and again in 1924.

John O'Neal was elected to the Board of Deacons of the First Presbyterian Church in March, 1913 and served continuously until December, 1948 when the rotation system of the Board was inaugurated.

In November, 1917 he was unanimously elected to the Board of the Mechanics Building and Loan Association, and continues in this office to present date. He has served as Chairman several times and as President from January, 1939 until his resignation in January, 1949.

This brief biography would not be complete without the recording of the building of the Cabin and the Rose Garden.

This was started about 1930 and was completed and maintained mostly with his own hands and ingenuity. The Cabin was made of rough logs and centered around a large hospitable rock fireplace.

The Rose Garden ultimately contained about 1800 plants of forty varieties. This was a source of much pleasure and occupation to both Mr. and Mrs. O'Neal. Many friends were entertained here in an enjoyable informal atmosphere and many brides were the recipients of roses by the bucketsful during spring and fall seasons. This hobby led to a membership in the American Rose Society.

On November 15, 1943, Mr. and Mrs. O'Neal celebrated their golden wedding anniversary with a small but beautiful reception.

All the children were present as were several grand-children.

This was a very happy event and marked fifty years of constant companionship through joys and sorrows. Mrs. O'Neal was an everpresent help and source of happiness to her many friends and acquaintances.

On November 2, 1950, Helen Ruff O'Neal was called to the great beyond at the age of seventy-eight, after fifty-seven years of married life. The memory of this bright and noble personality shall long remain with those who knew and loved her.

John O'Neal has always maintained a high and active interest in Rock Hill and its progress and today at the age of eighty-five is keenly interested in its many and varied activities.

At the conclusion of this paper the only comment from John O'Neal was the story of the funeral being preached over a miserly and crusty old man who had done little for his family. After much eulogizing by the preacher the widow turned to her daughter and said: "Sal, take another look and see if that's your Pa!".

J. W. O'Neal, Jr.

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