

## WILLIAM OSCAR WRIGHT OF ROCK HILL

By Paul Gettys

The following short notice appeared in the *Rock Hill Herald* on March 14, 1900:

*William O. Wright, son of Mr. and Mrs. J. S. Wright, lost the first joint of his first finger of his right hand on Tuesday of last week. While at work on a warping machine at the Arcade Mill, it was so seriously smashed as to require amputation.*

William O. Wright was 17 years old at the time of the accident. The textile industry in its early years was a dangerous place to work. The *Herald* and the *Rock Hill Record* carried many notices of accidents related to textile machinery and to the handling of materials, and sadly many involved child laborers as young as 9 or 10. I thought it might be interesting to follow the life of one such textile worker. The information in this paper is derived from Census reports, Rock Hill City Directories, and other public records. It is possible that some of Dr. Wright's family still lives in the Rock Hill area, and we would be appreciative of any corrections and additions they can make to this story.

William Oscar Wright was born on December 14, 1882, the son of John and Lucy Gandy Wright. His father John Simeon Wright (1851-1903) was born in North Carolina and was a mill wright who worked in the textile industry. His mother, Louisa (Lula) Carolina Gandy Wright (1864-1938) was born in Lancaster County, S. C. in the Cedar Creek community.

Session records at First Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church show that William's parents, J. S. and L. C. Wright were received as members in November 1899 by transfer from White Memorial Presbyterian Church. William joined the church in July 1900 by transfer from Laurel Street Methodist Church.

The 1900 Census reports that William Wright, age 17 is in the household of John and Louisa Wright in Rock Hill. His father, John, is listed as a mill wright. William, the oldest child, is listed as a cotton mill warper while his brother Allie (age 16), is a cotton mill oiler. Also in the household are Walter (age 12), Pearl (age 11), and James (age 8). It was not unusual for children as young as sub-teens to work in the textile mill alongside their fathers. Pearl and James are listed as going to school. Unfortunately, the census for this year did not list the address, but it is

likely the family lived in the Arcade textile mill village. In 1903, about the time that William was leaving the household, his father John died at the age of 52. In the 1910 Census, Louisa Wright is listed as the head of household of a house in the Arcade mill village as a widow. In the household are her daughter, Pearl, 21, who is a spinner, son James, 18, who is an oiler. Presumably, they both worked in the Arcade mill. Also in the household are three relatives, Marie Pace (age 24 and listed as a niece), Udia Pace (age 18 and listed as an adopted son), and Thomas Pace (age 12 and also listed as adopted). Each of the Paces also worked in the mill. Thomas, at age 12, was a doffer.

By 1910, William O. Wright had married and had two sons. He married Mamie Miller (in some records her name is listed as Marion and in others as Mary). In 1910, the family was living in Gills Creek, a community east of Lancaster. William is listed as a barber, and they are renting a house in the Gills Creek area. They had two sons, George S. Wright, age 7 and Arthur Wright, age 5. William and Mamie are both listed as age 27, so they must have married at the age of 19 or 20. Mamie was born in Fort Lawn, S. C. on May 11, 1882, the daughter of George Washington Miller and Martha Ann Tinkler Miller.

In 1913, the family was back in Rock Hill, where William was working as a barber. The Rock Hill City Directory shows them living at 137 South Wilson Street, near the Arcade and Victoria Textile Mills. In 1918, William registered for the draft for World War I. In the registration, he is described as medium height and medium build, with brown eyes and brown hair. Although he registered for the draft, he did not serve in the war. The application lists his wife as Mamie Miller Wright and his address at this time as 421 East Black Street. This home is now (2019) the location of White Land Surveying. He was employed as a barber in the shop of E. S. Kirk at 100 East Main Street. This shop was in the National Union Bank building, located at the corner of Main and Trade Streets (now Dave Lyle Boulevard).

By 1920, William is listed as the manager of the Quality Tonsorial Parlor at 100 East Main Street in the city directory. The family was then living at 121 Jones Avenue. In the census for this year, the family is listed as owning their house. The family had grown, with the following children listed: George (16), Arthur (14), David (9), Cora (6), Lyle (4), and James (2).

The 1930 Census shows that the family was still living at 121 Jones Avenue and that William was still manager of the barber shop. The home was owned and was listed as worth \$3,000. The three youngest children are still living with the family. The oldest daughter is listed as Cora in the 1920 Census and as Mae in the 1930 Census. In a later Social Security application for William, he lists his daughter as Mae Cora.

By 1933, the family had moved to 518 Hope Street, and they stayed at this address until William's death in 1955. William is listed as a barber in the city directory in 1933, but by 1934,

he had changed careers and was listed as a chiropodist with an office at 138 North Trade Street. A chiropodist was a clinician who treated the feet and their ailments. In recent years, this profession is known as podiatrist. At the time, there were evidently no educational requirements for the profession, as the 1940 Census lists William's educational attainment as the sixth grade. In 1940, the family was living at 518 Hope Street, where they rented their home. The family had shrunk, with only the eldest son James living with his parents at this time. The house at 518 Hope Street was later demolished in the creation of Dave Lyle Boulevard.

William continued in his profession as a chiropodist for the rest of his life. At some point, his office moved to the IZARD Building on East Main Street. The IZARD Building was constructed about 1915 and was on the corner of East Main Street and Hampton Street. There were a number of offices on the second floor, where William's business was likely located. The first floor for many years was occupied by Good Pharmacy. The building has been demolished. On November 22, 1955, William died in his office of a sudden heart attack at the age of 72. He was buried in Laurelwood Cemetery. The obituary for William identifies him as Dr. William Oscar Wright and states that he was a chiropodist for the past 25 years and was a member of First Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church of Rock Hill and of the Woodmen of the World. The funeral service was held at Bass Funeral Home at 331 East Main Street, conducted by Dr. A. S. Rogers and Rev. B. P. Hawkins. Dr. Rogers was William's long-time pastor. Survivors are listed as his daughter Mrs. P. F. Wood of West Palm Beach, Florida, sons A. F. Wright of Long Island, New York, Lyle Wright of Rock Hill, and James Wright of Rock Hill. There were nine grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren. He was also survived by his sister Mrs. Pearl Gordon of Rock Hill and brothers James U. Wright and I. W. Wright of Rock Hill. The obituary was in the *Rock Hill Herald* on November 23, 1955.

Mamie continued to live at 518 Hope Street until her death in November 1961 at age 79.

From a childhood of working in the textile mill, William O. Wright found work in two professions and raised a large family, moving into the middle class economically.