

IMUNITY

Oct-11-97

## Hustler set up marriage mill on state line

From 1785 until July 1, 1911, South Carolina did not require a marriage license. On the other hand, North Carolina had strict requirements, which included putting up a bond to guarantee that neither party had been previously married.

In 1897, Willard O. Bailes, who lived north of Fort Mill close to where Carowinds is now, saw an opportunity. Bailes, then 27, advertised himself as the "greatest marrying man" in the world.

Bailes had a card printed that listed the marriage fees — "to those who can't pay more, \$1.00; common fee, \$2.00; secret service, \$5.00; advertising price, \$3.00; rich man's price, \$10.00." He also offered marriage certificates in different styles and sizes for free.

Within three years Bailes boasted that he had married 395 couples. In 1900 a news article in the Atlanta Constitution noted that Bailes was marrying couples who lived as far as 700 miles away. The Constitution said that Bailes guaranteed that "his services will be short, intelligent, very binding and hard to break." (Indeed the marriage would be hard to break; prior to 1950, South Carolina forbade divorce.)

By the summer of 1903, Bailes'

Flint Hill neighbors were petitioning the governor to take away Bailes' notary public commission. When they didn't hear from the governor, they hired a lawyer who maintained that a notary public license did not give authority to perform marriages — that Bailes had committed a fraud.

Meantime, as word spread, Bailes married more and more couples. On weekends couples waited in line. His advertising expanded to attract more couples. He didn't charge for the marriages of ministers or couples over 50 years of age. And he promised that if the couple had no money he would marry them anyway. Even at that, people began to say that he was becoming wealthy.

Gov. Heyward finally responded to Fort Mill's objections to Bailes. He said that although he highly disapproved of Bailes' advertising, it was not enough to take away his commission in the absence of proof of wrongdoing.

His neighbors then got busy gathering proof that Bailes had a racket going. They submitted his price lists, which by 1904 ranged from \$1 to \$100 (the last for "regular millionaires"). Bailes promised "No hard questions. No license."

Fort Mill citizens overwhelmingly voted against Heyward in the 1904 election. This time the governor paid heed and canceled Squire Bailes' notary public commission,

but that action made absolutely no difference. Bailes continued in his marriage business.

In April 1905, Bailes and a cousin, Ed Bailes, got into an argument. W.O. Bailes shot Ed Bailes and was arrested on a charge of assault and battery with intent to kill. It was termed "a family row" in the newspapers. The circuit court found Bailes guilty of assault and battery and imposed a fine of \$20 or 20 days. Bailes paid the fine.

Two years later Bailes was charged with bigamy and adultery. Before police could catch up with him, he was out-of-state. One report was that he was in New York and suffering from malaria. Another said that he had gone to Oklahoma.

By November 1910, Bailes had managed to persuade the solicitor to drop charges and was back at his old stand on the N.C. line. He was as popular as ever as couples lined up to be married by him.

But it wasn't long before the S.C. legislature passed a law requiring that marriage licenses be issued by the county probate judge. Willard Bailes' salad days were over. Out-of-state customers went to the courthouse for the license and stayed there to be married by the probate judge.

*Louise Pettus is a history professor retired from Winthrop University. Her column appears Saturdays.*

Louise  
Pettus



NEARBY  
HISTORY