

# Uncle Wah Clark of Crossnore, NC



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Words like 'colorful,' 'unique,' 'rugged individualist,' etc. come to mind in trying to diplomatically describe my ancestor *Warsaw Columbus 'Wah' Clark* of Crossnore, NC but the honest truth of the matter would bring us closer to 'unsavory,' 'belligerent,' and 'downright ornery.' Researching his life, family and personal story has proven to be quite interesting!!

He was the firstborn son of *Drury Spain Clark* (1834-1906) and *Susann(ah) Lucinda Wise* (1836-1898)<sup>1</sup> a simple, God-fearing farming couple. He was born on New Year's day<sup>2</sup> but the year is unclear, most likely 1854 or 1855. There were some 12 other children to follow him in this family. He appears as a 5-year-old in the 1860 census<sup>3</sup>, a 16 year old in the 1870 census<sup>4</sup>, and a 22-year-old in the 1880 census<sup>5</sup>. With only 3 sisters, it is interesting to contemplate what it was like in a house full of enough boys to field a baseball team!

Wah's first (of at least four) marriage took place on 23 March 1880<sup>6</sup> to *Rebecca Burleson*, daughter of *Russell Burleson* (1825-aft 1900) and *Lucinda Oakes* (ca 1824-1898) at the home of Rebecca's uncle *W.D. Burleson*<sup>7</sup> in the same area which by now had changed counties-instead of Yancey county, it was now part of the newly formed Mitchell county. The couple was soon blessed with two daughters, *Dumcie* (born 6 March 1884) and *Pettie* (born 10 May 1886). However it was when Rebecca was expecting their third child, a boy, that serious problems resulted during her labor. According to family lore, Rebecca had been in labor for four days, with Wah refusing to call for help; in his drunken state he said, "when the apple's ripe, it'll drop"<sup>8</sup> an analogous reference to his suffering wife's condition. By the time he finally allowed someone to go for help (most likely a midwife) it was too late, and Rebecca died along with their son on 8 May 1889.<sup>9</sup>

It was likely shortly after Rebecca's death that Wah joined his brothers 'Yack' and 'Shug' to respond to the call of the Colorado Gold Rush<sup>10</sup>, though it had petered out a generation or so earlier, the attraction and persevering reports and rumors of gold to be found, was enough criteria for this recently widowed young man to follow. It is thought that he left his daughters with his parents during this time. This 'get rich quick' hope doesn't appear to have lasted very long as Wah is once again in

NC by 1894.<sup>11</sup>

Prior to this however there was another (illegitimate) child, conceived by a woman named *Dersa Clark Buchanan*<sup>12</sup>. It is not presently known if she was married, and/or in some way related to Wah. This son, *Raymond Buchanan*, did not live past his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, possibly having been killed in a train accident. But he did live long enough to occasion an attempt by Wah to wrest a piece of land through him. Note the following introduction to a court case filed in 1911:

“This cause coming on to be heard before His Honor, C.C. Lyon, Judge Presiding, and being heard and the parties having waived a jury trial and agreed that the court should find the facts, and declare it’s opinion thereon without the intervention of a jury, the court finds the following facts:

1. That Raymon Buchanan was an illigitimate son of the plaintiff
2. That the defendant W.C. Clark was the father of said Raymond Buchanan.
3. That the said Raymon Buchanan died intestate on the 15th of May 1911 leaving the plaintiff his sole heir at law.<sup>13</sup>

Raymond was born ca. 1892, and it doesn't seem to have hindered Wah's ability to marry. His second marriage took place on 7 May 1894 in Mitchell county to his second cousin, *Margaret Sophronia 'Fronie' Cuthbertson*.<sup>14</sup> You'd have thought that someone who knew well Wah's reputation as a ladies' man, would have been a little more discriminatory in her relationship with him, but apparently it made little difference. This marriage lasted until Fronie's death in 1905<sup>15</sup>, but produced no children.

Wah's girls wasted no time in finding mates either, both of them having married before the end of 1905. There doesn't appear to have been much of a relationship between father and daughters--the grandchildren produced by both of them, not remembering much if anything, concerning their grandfather Wah.<sup>16</sup>

His third marriage took place to *Julie Franklin Phillips* on 27 March 1906<sup>17</sup>. She had quite a reputation herself, Wah being her third husband, and he likely had met a bit of a match in Julie. They were married until her death sometime between 1920 and 1930.

The 1930 census finds Wah at age 76 living with a 22 year old 'servant: *Delphia Church*.<sup>18</sup> Just exactly what their relationship was for a couple of years can only be speculated upon, but it was finally formalized on 9 September 1932 in Elizabethton, TN with Delphia becoming Wah's fourth wife.<sup>19</sup> During this marriage there were two children born to Delphia: *Harvey Sandy*, (born 4 January 1933) and *Linda* (born in 1942). You can imagine the gossip that this fall/spring marriage provoked, with a difference of over 50 years between this couple. It was to the point that many speculated that these two children were not in fact Wah's at all, but rather fathered by someone else. However the author finds no documentation to suggest otherwise and it is not biologically impossible. It would not be the first or the last time that an elderly man has fathered children.

His orneriness was legendary and probably resulted in his expulsion from the Masonic Lodge<sup>20</sup>. But in spite of his mean character, Wah Clark lived to be some 94 years old; others have exaggerated his age, saying that he lived beyond 100. Dr. Mary Sloop was well acquainted with Wah Clark and relates some of her knowledge about him which had made quite an impression on her:

"But speaking about what the mountain people used to eat back in those early days reminds

me of Uncle War Clark. His name was Warsaw--his mother named him from the book *Thaddeus of Warsaw*--but everybody called him Uncle War. Uncle War was a brother of Uncle Newt and a son of Uncle Drew. Uncle Drew Clark was one of nine sons, seven of whom had names starting with the letter 'd': Drury (Uncle Drew), Dothan, Douthard (called Douth), Detroy, Dallas, Deaston, Dolphus. I was talking one day with Uncle War, and I told him that I supposed that if his mother had had another son she'd have been bound to name Damn.

Uncle War once said to me, 'Mis Sloops, that thing you l'arn them young 'uns up at the schoolhouse ain't music. If you want to hear real music, you listen to the music of them hounds abayin' as they hunt on the hillsides. That's music!' And I agreed.

But I started off to tell more about the diet of the mountain people when we came into this country. Uncle War was telling me about customs at his father's house.

'My father had fourteen sons, and he adopted fourteen more boys,' he told me. 'He al'ays wanted a lot of boys around.'

'Did he have any daughters, Uncle War?' I asked.

'Yes,' he said, 'there was Nora and Cora and Cordelia. Their names all ended with the same letter, you see, the letter 'a'.

'Well,' I said, 'the girls must have had a hard life.'

'Well,' he said, 'I don't see why. How do you figure that?'

'Cooking for all those men and boys,' I said. 'How'd they ever do it?'

'Oh,' he said, that never bothered them much. All they hard to do was to keep enough bread cooked and on the shelf. We never set down to eat like folks do now, but when we felt the urge to eat we just went by the shelf and got us a hunk of bread and went on out to the smokehouse and cut us a piece omit and whittled and et as we walked.'

'You mean the meat wasn't cooked?' I asked.

'It was smoked when we put it up in the smokehouse,' he replied, with a trace of impatience. 'When fall come every year, Pa, he'd say, 'Boys, git yo' guns and start out and fill her full!' He was talkin' about afillin' the smokehouse with meat. And that's what we done.

'What kind of meat, Uncle War?'

'Bears, and deers, and wild hawgs, and possums and coons and rabbits, all kinds of game meat,' he said. 'We'd leave one of the boys at the smokehouse to keep the fire agoin' and we'd fill that smokehouse plumb to the rafters. And then we'd have meat to eat all winter and the next summer and tin we started ahuntin' again.'

'But didn't you eat any vegetables, Uncle War?' I asked.

'Well, the wimmenfolks sometimes raised a little garden sass, but they never could git us to eat none. We'd eat a onion now and then and turnips if'n they was raw. But we never et none cooked. We was al'ays satisfied to eat fried meat with that bread from the shelf.'

I could vouch for the way they ate onions and turnips. Uncle War might have added that they didn't even bother to wash them. I've seen many a man pull up a turnip, whisk it under his arm a time or two to clean off the dirt, and then start eating, sometimes without bothering to peel it."

By modern standards their diets and eating habits were terrible. The thing I can't understand--if good has anything to do with long life--is how they grew to be so old. Uncle War, for instance. He had four wives, I have been told. The first wife presented him with two daughters, Pet and Dumps; the second had no children, the third a widow, had six or eight when he married her, and the fourth, whom he married at the age of ninety-one, made him the very proud father of two. I remember that when Uncle War was ninety-eight, we had some sort of a church meeting one night, and he, as the oldest man there, was presented with a Bible. I can't recommend the diet under which Uncle War grew up, but if one looks at results, it's hard to say much against that bread-and-smoked-meat routine."<sup>21</sup>

Wah was part of a suit (it seems he wasn't afraid of the courts) involving the division of his Uncle Dothan's farm. Just why he would be a party to this inheritance question escapes the author, but it did work to his advantage, resulting in obtaining some 12 more acres for his own.<sup>22</sup>

His bullying tactics, particularly towards women, continued even after death! Note the condition he set down in his will:

"I bequeath to my wife Delphia Clark one third of all my property of land, stock, cash or bonds to belong to her while she shall remain the wife of the said W.C. Clark when deceased. But if she shall marry then the said property shall cease to be hers and automatically becomes the property of my son Harvey Clark and Lynda Clark."<sup>23</sup>

Even in death he insisted on maintaining the upper hand and wanted to make sure that his woman would keep her place!

Wah Clark was definitely his own man and part of a different generation. He was rough, without manners, and for the most part uninterested in other's opinions. The harsh and ruggedly beautiful mountains of Avery county truly found their reflection in at least one of her sons.

## **FOOTNOTES:**

<sup>1</sup>1860 Yancey county, NC census, p. 38

<sup>2</sup>Personal letter from Frank F. Fields, long time resident of Avery county.

<sup>3</sup>1860 Yancey county, NC census, p. 38

<sup>4</sup>1870 Mitchell county, NC census, Microfilm roll # 1149, #355, P 3, household #18

<sup>5</sup>1880 Mitchell county, NC census, Microfilm #973, #65

<sup>6</sup>Mitchell co., NC Marriage Records 1861-1902, p. 15

<sup>7</sup>/bid

<sup>8</sup>Personal knowledge of Marie Johnson Cuthbertson; interview of July 2001.

- <sup>9</sup>Tombstone, Drury Clark cemetery, Newland, NC
- <sup>10</sup>Family knowledge
- <sup>11</sup>Witness his marriage date to Fronie Cuthbertson
- <sup>12</sup>Avery county, NC Minute Docket book # 1, P 197
- <sup>13</sup>*Ibid*
- <sup>14</sup>Mitchell co., NC Marriage Records 1861-1902, p. 79
- <sup>15</sup>Tombstone, Drury Clark cemetery, Newland, NC
- <sup>16</sup>Personal interviews with grandchildren
- <sup>17</sup>General Index to Mitchell co., NC Marriages, p. 157
- <sup>18</sup>1930 Avery co., NC census, MF T626 1673, household #236/240, Linville township
- <sup>19</sup>Elizabethton, Carter co., TN Marriage Bonds, p 311
- <sup>20</sup>Letter of 31 July 2001 from the Grand Lodge of Ancient, Free and Accepted Masons of NC, giving as the date of his suspension Oct 11, 1930
- <sup>21</sup>'*Miracle in the Hills*' pgs. 122-124 by Mary T. Martin Sloop, M.D. with Legette Blythe (1953) McGraw Hill.
- <sup>22</sup>Avery county, NC Docket books #1, p 201, & #2, p 513
- <sup>23</sup>Avery Co., NC Cross Index to Wills 1911-1968, vol. 2, MF NC Ref929.3 Ave, Mayland Community College, Spruce Pine, NC