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New book recounts history in Dallas, Clark counties

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New book recounts history in Dallas, Clark counties

By Wendy Richter
For the Siftings

The Dallas County Museum in Fordyce and Turtlehull Publishing have recently made available a new book that contains information about Clark County, Ouachita College and south Arkansas region. "My Own Precious One: A Year of Courtship in Letters from 1889-1890 between Princeton, Arkansas, and Pittsboro, Mississippi," edited by Sandra Parham Turner, Melrose Smith Bagwell and Doris Smith Beeson Faulkner, is a real treasure. The editors are descendants of George Sallie Smith and Mary "Mollie" Rose Byars, the couple who exchanged the letters during their courtship. The correspondence is very special, in that both of the writers saved the letters they received, giving today's readers a glimpse of life in the rural South in the late nineteenth century. Fifty-five letters (28 from Mollie and 27 from George) tell the story of how the couple came together, and also offer insight about events and people in this region.

George S. Smith was born Feb. 4, 1863, in Dallas County, the son of George Field Smith and Susan Dudley Mallett Smith. George Sallie Smith became a Baptist minister in 1886 and lived with his

family near the town of Princeton. He preached at various churches in the area, and other than a semester he spent in Arkadelphia while attending Ouachita College (now Ouachita Baptist University), he lived his entire life in that general area. On May 19, 1889, George S. Smith delivered a sermon at New Hope. Among those attending were two young ladies from Mississippi who were visiting their uncle here in Arkansas. Little did George know that the day would impact the rest of his life.

One of the women was Mary Rose "Mollie" Byars, the daughter of John Marion Byars and Sarah Roseannah McDonald Byars. Mollie was born March 22, 1868, in Mississippi, and came with her sister to spend some time in Calhoun County, Arkansas, during 1889. After a 10-month, long-distance courtship and one short visit during the Christmas holidays, George and Mollie married, and moved to Dallas County.

The couple's letters contain many mentions of area events and institutions, including the then-new Ouachita Baptist College (established 1886). George planned to attend Ouachita College in the fall of 1889, and described the school in this way: "Ouachita Baptist College house at Arkadelphia, Ark. cost

twenty-six thousand dollars; and is an excellent college of twelve progressive teachers, and all departments of college work. Location beautiful. Moral and cultured community. 214 pupils last year. Prohibition for radius of 10 miles. I am going to enter the school in Sep. '89 and expect to graduate before I quit." Smith's one semester at the school must have made a long-lasting impression on him, for he named one of his sons, "Conger," for the college's first president, John W. Conger. A long-standing connection between the family and the university has existed, with more than thirty of George and Mollie's descendants eventually attending classes there.

George traveled around the area quite frequently. For example, in an Oct. 16, 1889, letter written while a student at Ouachita College, George tells Mollie that he "went to church at Malvern last Sat., enjoyed myself well," but on the 25th states that "I have no regular appointment at Malvern. Will serve the church at Dalark this year. Shall go there tomorrow." A November letter specified that he preached at Dalark on the fourth Sunday of each month as well as the "Saturday before." In January, after he returned from his visit to Mississippi, Smith wrote to Mollie from "Mr. W.C. Harley's

Store" in Princeton and told her to send future letters to him at Princeton. George planned to "serve but one church" for a while, and told Mollie of his plans: "After I complete my crop, I am going to take mission work under the Associational board, provided they have money sufficient to employ me. If however I don't do this, I shall teach at \$40.00 more mo., though had rather do the former work, than the latter."

George and Mollie were married on May 11, 1890, in Pittsboro, Mississippi, but lived in Dallas County, near George's parents. George served as a Baptist minister, but like many preachers of his time, supplemented his income with other work as well. For example, he operated a sorghum mill and sold syrup under the label of "Valley View Farm." Mollie served as a postmaster at the "Jacinto" post office, near Princeton. The couple had many children, and their descendants have scattered in all directions from their point of origin in Princeton Township, Dallas County. In 1918, the Smiths purchased a large white home on a hill overlooking the road between Princeton and Holly Springs. They lived there for the rest of their lives.

George died in 1935, and Mollie in 1943. George was buried in the Princeton

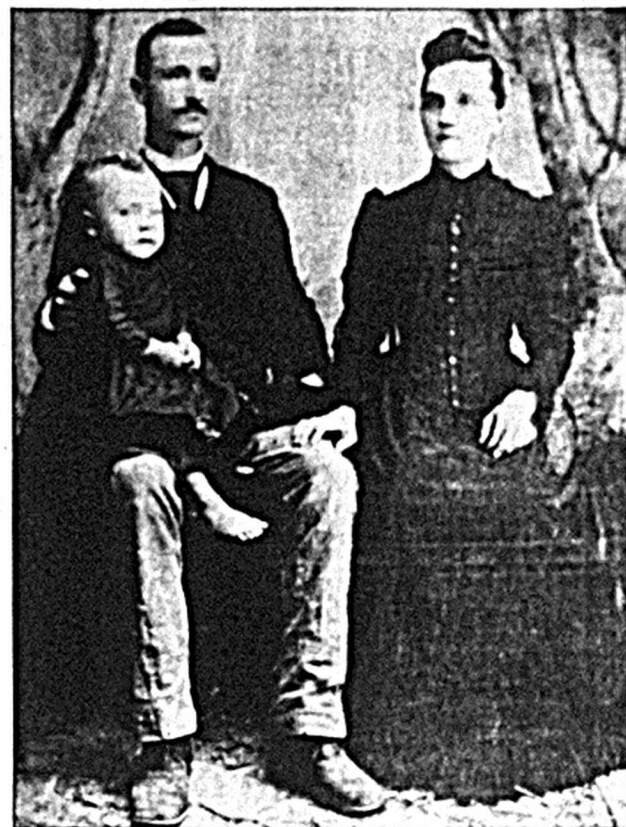


IMAGE COURTESY OF SANDRA PARHAM TURNER

George and Mollie Byars Smith pose with their first child, George Marion Smith, in 1892. Mollie wore her wedding dress to pose for the photo.

Cemetery with a marker that reads, "By the Grace of God, I Am What I Am," the title of the sermon George preached when the couple first met during Mollie's initial visit to Arkansas.

The book may be read at the OBU Library Archives and Special Collections reading room. The volume of letters is available for purchase at www.turtlehullpublishing.com or at the Dallas County Museum in Fordyce (P.O. Box 703,

Fordyce, AR 71742). All proceeds support the museum's activities and programs.

For additional information about Clark County area history, visit or contact the Clark County Historical Museum (www.clark-county-history.org or 250-1360) or the Clark County Historical Association's Archives at the Ouachita Baptist University Library (www.obu.edu/archives or 245-5332).