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# The Marrying Chestnut Tree

By Bobbie Smith Bryant, Jefferson County

**W**ell over a hundred years ago in the Jackson Purchase, there was a special place where young brides and grooms went to get married. While some eloped, other fanciful lovebirds planned their "I do's" for this popular place of sacred matrimony.

This site became known as the Marrying Chestnut Tree. Kerby Jennings wrote about the tree in his *Story of Calloway County, 1822-1976*, saying it was located just east of Hazel and over the state line, fully 6 miles west of Hell-Fer-Sartin Creek and a short distance from the Hazel Hotel. (The tree actually was located in Henry County, Tennessee.)

In a column titled, "Musings from the Philosopher," an unnamed eyewitness from those early days wrote the following in a June 12, 1969, article in the *Fulton County News*:

*In my youth and long after, the laws of Tennessee permitted marriages on a slightly lower aged scale than did Kentucky. If the wedding was to be a real elopement, the prospective bridegroom and one of his friends secretly made their way to Paris, Tennessee, and got the license. Then, attended by a couple or two in their buggies, the couple to get married took a drive, usually starting out as if to go in any direction except south. On the way, they were joined by their attendants, and on they went to meet the marrying parson or justice of the peace at the Chestnut Tree.*

While there were numerous notices in local and regional newspapers announcing the knot-tying at this tree of wedlock, the following stories captured my attention.

**June 7, 1906, Paducah News-Democrat**

**Mr. Tom Williams and Miss Fannie Linn** eloped to Tennessee and were married last night. Miss Linn is a daughter of **Judge L.C. Linn** and is a very pretty and highly accomplished young lady. Mr. Williams is one of the most popular young men in Murray.

The wedding was tinged with romance and not without its humorous side. When the couple left Murray for the old chestnut tree on the Kentucky-Tennessee line, the **Gretna Green** of hundreds of West Kentucky lads and lassies, they arranged that **Elder W.J. Beale** should follow them and officiate at the wedding. In some way, the minister became lost in the Clark's River bottom near Murray and failed to appear at the chestnut tree at the agreed-upon time. After waiting for some time, the groom, not to be thwarted, drove to Hazel, a town nearby, and the services of a minister was secured to tie the knot.

The happy couple then returned homeward. At a late hour, long after the young people had reached home and received parental blessings and forgiveness, Rev. Beale, who had finally found his way out of the dense wood, arrived in Murray to find his young friends were no longer in need of his ministerial services, and he could only join their friends in wishing them success and happiness.

**Nov. 1, 1921, Murray Ledger**

There's many a slip 'twixt the trysting place and the marriage altar. A certain young man of the county can testify to the accuracy of the statement. Preparations had gone forward for the marriage of the young man, whose name is withheld, and **Miss Rubye Whitlow**, a popular young lady of the county. The prospective groom's sister had helped to arrange the fiancée's trousseau, and the wedding date had been fixed.

Saturday, Miss Whitlow attended the Calloway County singing

convention at Pottertown. There, she met **Curt Hobbs**, a former suitor. He exercised the woman's prerogative and changed her mind, and in the company of Hobbs, went to the old chestnut tree **Gretna Green** for Calloway County swains, and there, she was married to Hobbs.

**Feb. 2, 1923, Paducah News-Democrat**

The **Rev. J. Mack Pool**, who was 82 years old on February 22, performed his 1,554th marriage ceremony under the "old Chestnut Tree," on the Murray-Hazel Road yesterday. **Miss Nola Ann Lawrence and Eron Hall "John" Cain** were the couple married by Rev. Pool yesterday. The bride is the daughter of **Henry Lawrence**, who left today for Detroit to make his home.

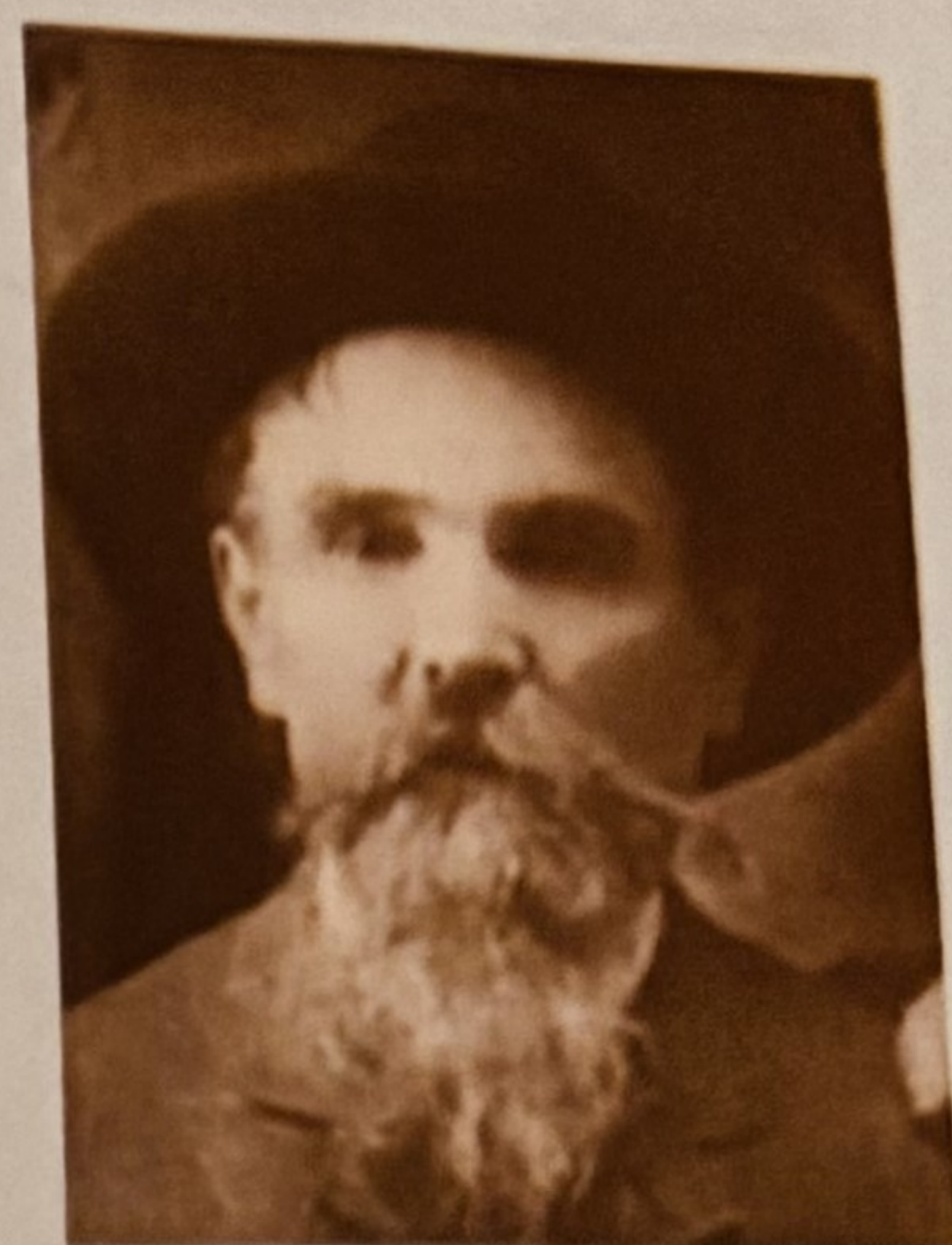
Recognized as the Grand Champion marrying parson of all of Western Kentucky, Methodist pastor Rev. Pool was highly regarded. His record number of nuptials was reported frequently in the local media as the numbers increased. The final count was more than 1,700 with the last vows being given a few weeks before he died, while he was propped up on his deathbed.

Pool was himself the son of a Methodist minister who reportedly passed away while standing at the pulpit preaching. The area of Calloway County originally known as **Pooltown** was named for this family.

Stories in the newspapers about the Marrying Chestnut Tree faded away around 1925. Sadly, the chestnut tree no longer stand. An eyewitness description recorded in the 1969 *Fulton County News* provides this closing note.

When I was a small boy, I just assumed that this famous tree was something special, that it stood in some romantic spot that showed how important it was. Away down in my teenage days (early 1900s), I drove by the place and got one of the big disillusionments of my entire life. The tree was a half-dead old chestnut tree in a very muddy place, so muddy that ruts ran on both sides of it, for even the buggies and wagons had a hard time getting over that stretch of road. I must confess that I have seen several hundred chestnut trees that were more to my idea of a runaway marriage site.

The chestnut tree, like all the trees of its kind, long ago died of blight. I doubt whether anybody now could pinpoint its location, a few yards over the state line in Tennessee.



Rev. John McKinney "Mack" Pool. Photo from the Murray Woman's Club Calloway County Family History.



Pictured are the great-grandparents of the author, **Samuel Tilford Brewer** and his bride, **Lois Etoile Robinson**, on Oct. 25, 1914, their wedding day, in Calloway County. Their carriage was the typical mode of transportation for young couples in the early 20th century.