

## EMMA BELLE RAGSDALE HENDERSON

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Emma Belle Ragsdale Henderson grew up in Hamilton County, Tennessee. The following is from a handwritten speech Mrs. Henderson made to a woman's group, probably the P.E.O., in Tecumseh, Oklahoma, in the 1950s.

Committee members of Chapter W, you asked for it and here it is! If anyone has to leave the room, please do so now as you might disturb the narrator as she is old and nervous.

I was born in Chattanooga, Tennessee, September 12, 1868. My early childhood was a carefree, happy one. I started to school at the age of six and as my teacher, a Miss Wood of Natchez, Mississippi. My happiest recollection is standing with other school children to see President Hayes drive by on his visit to Chattanooga.

Then in 1877 my last Christmas in my home with my father and mother, the ground was covered with a deep snow, and I remember so well my grandfather coming to bring his gifts to us. Mine was a silver thimble which I still have.

In September 1878, that dreadful epidemic of yellow fever was raging in the South, and Chattanooga was quarantined against the Southern cities. My father, B. F. Ragsdale was agent of the East Tennessee Va and Georgia Railroad, now the Southern, and it was his duty to meet all trains twenty miles outside the city limits, see all doors were locked, so the trains would pass

through without stopping as the refugees were trying to get in the City and to Lookout Mountain. It was in this way he contracted the fever and brought it home to my mother. She was very ill, and Miss Wood (my teacher) volunteered to nurse her as she had had the fever in Natchez. She passed away late in the evening of September 26 and was buried at twelve o'clock that night as it was against the law to keep a fever patient after death.

My father was sick in the next room, and they tried so hard to keep her death from him but he saw the torch lights as they were taking the remains away. He became unconscious and passed away the 28th of September. That left my sister, brother, and myself and our grandmother, our father's mother alone. The officials of the Road felt responsible for us, and they came in President Col. (?) Magus private car and took us to Knoxville.

Miss Wood taught in city schools for over fifty years. She died at the age of 95, and my niece, Mary Mitchell, was made administrator of her estate. My sister had always looked after Miss Clara after she was retired and saw she was well taken care of.

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We were met at the train by Dr. Parker, pastor of the Presbyterian Church, and Dr. Boyd, a physician. We were driven out to a farm five miles in the country. It was late in the evening, and as we drove along, we could see lights twinkling in the farm houses, and we would say, "I wonder if that's the place." At a turn in the road way back from the road we saw a place with lights. My grandmother said, "Children, if that's the place, I'll never come away alive."

It proved to be the place. We were met by a Miss Long who was to look after us, and a white man who was to see over all the place and a Negro man to cook and keep all our wants supplied. We couldn't have had better care, but my grandmother was taken sick and died on October 8, and was buried in a small enclosure on the farm. (After I was grown and married, I worried so much about her being there that Mode had her body brought to Chattanooga and laid to rest beside my father and mother. It could only be moved if it was extremely cold and the ground covered with snow.)

After my grandmother's death, the quarantine was raised, and we were taken to Dalton, Georgia, to an aunt's until we could go back to Chattanooga. My grandfather, our mother's father, was still very low with the fever, and it was late in November before he knew our parents and grandmother had passed away. After the fever was over and the quarantine raised, we went to our grandfather's home to live. His oldest daughter, Aunt Belle, kept house for him and her

five sisters and with my sister, brother, and myself, it made 10! She was nineteen and engaged to be married but waited four years until she felt we would be better able to take care of ourselves.

Two of my aunts the age of my sister and myself occupied a large room 20' x 20'. My sister and Anna had one side of the room furnished with bed, bureau, and washstand. Mary and I had the other furnished the same. In the center was a dropleaf table that we used to study around. At one end of the room was a large fireplace. Were we a happy foursome? Yes, we were!

Once we four had the chicken pox and were quarantined in this room. Did we have a good time enjoying the many lovely big trays brought to us! We stayed shut up longer by telling Aunt Belle we didn't feel like being with the others, afraid they might get the chicken pox. We were so enjoying all the attention we were getting!

When Aunt Belle married, I will never forget! It was to be a quiet home wedding at noon. As the minister was reading the ceremony, my brother Ben ran across the room and put his arms around Aunt Belle and said, "We can't give you up! You can't go!"

Really in place of being a quiet wedding, it was more like an Irish wake. Her husband said afterward he felt more like a criminal than a happy bridegroom.

I graduated from school in 1885. There were thirteen in our class, two boys and eleven girls. For a long time I kept up with the class, and it finally got to only two of us left. I

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received word of the other's death, and now I am the only one.

I had a lovely young ladyhood. My grandfather was so understanding of our young pleasures, but he was also very particular that we observed his rules. One was that our beaux must leave at ten o'clock. I'll never forget one night when Mary and I had company. Mode and a friend were calling on us, and at ten, Mode said, "Let's go."

Mary's beau said, "I'll be along in a minute." Mode left, and I went upstairs. I heard Grandfather get up and go across the hall and open the parlor door and say, "Young man, do you know what time it is?"

My aunt and sister were in our room, and sister Minnie was kneeling, saying her prayers. I heard Anna say, "Pray, Minnie, pray!" Needless to say, the young man left. Mary walked upstairs, and I can truly say I never saw a madder girl, but the young man never overstayed ten o'clock again.

Mode had gone with an older girl, so I never dreamed I would be the one he would ask to marry. I was, and after he asked me, he went home to see his mother who lived about twenty miles from Chattanooga. He told her he was engaged to be married. I want you to hear the letter she wrote me and which I have kept all these years and cherish very much because she tried so hard to be the mother I had lost and made me so happy.

Willoak  
June 25, 1886

Dear Emma,

*It affords me much pleasure to hear that you have accepted the proposal of my son, Moses, to become his life companion.*

*Though not personally acquainted with you, I take this opportunity of expressing my gratification at our anticipated relationship and of assuring you of a warm welcome into our family.*

*I truly and sincerely wish you and Mode a happy and prosperous voyage over the tempestuous bed of life and safe entrance into the haven of rest.*

Yours truly,  
Mary A. Henderson

We were married on March 9, 1887, in the Centenary Methodist Church by Dr. G. C. Rankin. Mode and I went to Buffalo, Niagara Falls, Boston, New York, and Washington on a three-week trip. In Boston we were taken for members of the President's party who were stopping at the Revere House, where we were stopping. We were ushered into a private dining room and seated at the table with J. D. Carslie(?), Speaker of the House, and his wife, and Congressman McAdoo and his wife. Mode called on Mr. Carslie(?) and had a most pleasant visit and told him of the mistake, and he enjoyed it and laughed heartily.

In New York we had a most delightful time visiting the stores, going to the theatres, and sightseeing. We went over to Brooklyn. We rode over, but I suggested we walk back as I would

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like to say I had walked across Brooklyn Bridge. We stood and looked down and out on the vast number of large steamers coming and going and to the Statue of Liberty. It was one grand sight!

Going up Broadway one day looking up at the tall buildings, I fell flat. A policeman rushed forward and helped me up. My fall caused Mode a great deal of amusement, and he enjoyed telling when we got home.

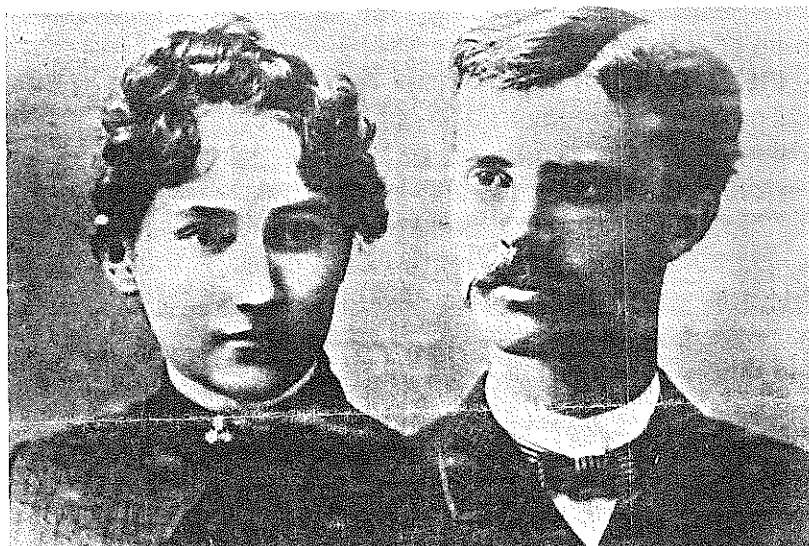
From New York to Washington, we visited many places of interest, including the Supreme Court where Chief Justice Fuller was presiding. It was quite a sight to see all the Supreme judges in their long black robes and a page standing behind each chair.

We got home in time for the visit of President Cleveland and wife. They were on a tour of the South. It was also their bridal trip as they were married M(?) 14, and as Mode

was to be one of his escorts in the parade, we just couldn't miss that and the reception given them.

In the fall we set up housekeeping in our home we had had so much pleasure in planning, building, and furnishing. We had the pleasure of entertaining in our home Dr. Parker and Dr. Boyd who were so kind to us as children in Knoxville. Had my sister and brother to dinner with them, and they were glad to see how well we had gotten along.

An international religious meeting was held in Chattanooga, and a sunrise prayer meet was held on the brow of Lookout Mountain. It was one of the most beautiful sights I ever saw. The brow of the mountain below our house was covered with people, and the city below and surrounding county was covered with clouds. In fact, we were way above the clouds, and you could see the sun just like a big ball of fire coming up out of the clouds. [Text ends here.] ❖



M. M. and Emma Ragsdale Henderson