

Bucklesberry, Back in the Day

Christmastime 1880 (Part 2)

Little is known about Christmas celebrations in nineteenth century Bucklesberry and greater La Grange. Reprinted here is an unusual news item about a Christmas festivity held at La Grange Male and Female Academy (Kinsey's School) in 1880. Featured in the report was the moving speech of a ten-year old student:

1880, December 30: "The fall session of Kinsey's School closed Wednesday [December 22] evening. At an early hour the house was crowded, and when the curtain rolled up the audience beheld a beautiful Christmas tree laden with presents and surrounded with the pupils of the School. Master Jimmie Koonce was the orator of the occasion and spoke as follows: 'Friends, Parents, and Children: It is said that the observance of Christmas is becoming less general and hearty every year and that Christmas merry-makings will eventually be given up altogether. I hope the prediction may prove untrue, and that the pleasures, in which we have met to participate tonight, will always continue to mark the return of the great Christian festival in this country. Positively, we cannot spare King Christmas. All other potentates may go down—the sooner the better, but the holly crowned King of Revels must not be deposed. To say nothing of children of a larger growth—what would we boys and girls do without him? We must not banish him. To do that would create an insurrection in our schools that would shake the very foundations of our domestic peace. To give up Christmas would be to give up plum pudding. Who would agree to that? We talk about the canons of the church. Are not plum puddings its cannon ball? Truly they are, for the church gave them her sanctions years ago and the cook, who substituted this glorious species of edible ammunition for plum porridge, the earlier Christmas fare, came very near canonized and actually was ennobled. Abandon Christmas festivities? Why, the ghost of Washington Irving would rise to rebuke us for such vandalism. Do not we all, old and young, feel Christmas in our bones tonight? How could we do otherwise, standing around this beautiful tree full of rewards. Though two days distant, let us grab Santa Claus by the fore lock and snatch him here tonight, singing merry, merry Christmas.' He closed amidst great applause, and the pupils sang, 'Merry Christmas' with good effect. Then followed the distribution of gifts by J. B. Dawson, L[uther] C. Koonce, Jeff Outlaw and D. W. Wood. All seemed well pleased, especially the principal who received a nice chair as a gift from the School and the music teacher one from her music pupils. Promenading and conversation in accents soft and low were indulged to a late hour." (*Kinston Journal*)

The response from the audience suggests this young boy had been coached well, due in no small part to his principal, Joseph Kinsey (1845-1929) and the able faculty at the school. A gifted and accomplished educator, Mr. Kinsey amassed a sterling record of success over his career. By the

age of 15, he was a school teacher in Jones County, and he remained in the profession as a teacher-administrator for the next seven decades.

In 1880, he turned over the reigns of his school to two former students, Noah J. Rouse (1861-1935) and James Y. Joyner (1862-1954), who later served as State Superintendent of Instruction from 1902-1919. Mr. Kinsey was principal of numerous schools over the next two decades, including Kinston Free School, Kinston Collegiate Institute (elementary graded school), Kinsey School for Girls and Young Ladies (also called Kinsey Seminary, a boarding school in La Grange), and Kinsey Institute (also called Kinsey Seminary, a female boarding school in Wilson, N.C.).

The Wilson school closed in 1901 due to low attendance. Coupled with his poor health, Mr. Kinsey was forced to resign. The school was purchased the same year by the Disciples of Christ Church Conference and became the springboard for Atlantic Christian College, now Barton College.

Prof. Joseph Kinsey and his family returned to La Grange, where he served as Superintendent of Lenoir County Public Schools for many years until his retirement in 1920. That year, the N.C. General Assembly conferred upon him the unique title of *Superintendent Emeritus*, purportedly the first honorary position of its kind in the nation at the time.