

William Ernest Bird

William Ernest Bird (July 21, 1890-October 22, 1975), sixth child of Sally Terrell and Charles Asbury Bird was born at the family home at Qualla in Jackson County, NC. He shared farm chores with his brothers, hoeing, plowing, mowing, harvesting corn and wheat; tying the bundles of wheat by hand behind the older boys who swung the cradles; sawing and chopping wood; rising early to build fires in the eight fireplaces and cook stove. He attended local one or two-teacher schools at Shoal Creek and very early acquired his life-time love of learning, especially of language and literature. Though he never had formal training, he loved music and learned all the old songs he heard during his childhood, continuing to sing in a strong tenor voice throughout most of his life.

In 1909 he entered R.L. Madison's Cullowhee Normal and Industrial School where he studied English, history, algebra, science, civics, and literature, completing, in 1911 the "Normal" course - equivalent to high school. He attended Mars Hill Junior College for one session, returning in 1913 to Cullowhee, now a bona fide junior college under the new administration of A.C. Reynolds. In 1915 he entered the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill earning a Bachelor's degree in 1917. He continued his education at George Peabody College where he received a Master's degree in 1920 just before joining the teaching staff at Cullowhee as vice-president and teacher of English. He remained there for the rest of his life, taking time away only to do further graduate study at UNC and later at Duke University.

During his fifty-five years of association with Western Carolina University, he served as head of the English Department, Dean

of the college, Acting-President, and finally, President. He helped Cullowhee Normal School grow from a secondary school, with an enrollment of less than one hundred, into Western Carolina Teacher College, and finally into Western Carolina University with several thousand students. He was author of The History of Western Carolina College; The Progress of an Idea (University of NC Press, 1963), three volumes of poetry, and numerous articles dealing with literature or language. In 1960 Western Carolina University awarded him the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters for his many years of distinguished service to the University.

He was a faithful member of the Methodist Church all his life, filling many church offices, serving as lay delegate to the Methodist Annual Conferences for forty years, an avid student of the Bible and teacher of an adult Sunday School class for thirty years.

He was a Rotarian for forty-five years, served on the boards of the NC Historical Association, the NC Poetry Council, and the J.C. Harris Community Hospital. Among his many interests were a keen respect for mountain customs, artifacts, songs, and folkways; and a love of gardening, which, besides the superb vegetables he grew and shared with neighbors, included knowledge and nurture of native mountain plants. The hillside behind his home in Cullowhee was landscaped with laurel, rhododendron, mountain holly, flame azalea, Cullowhee lily, Indian pink, trillium, lady slipper and many other specimens of mountain wildflowers.

On August 16, 1916, he married Myrtle Wells (1891-1983), daughter of Anna Reynolds and Charlie L. Wells of Sandy Mush, Buncombe County, NC. They had three children:

(1) Sarah Anne Bird (July 24, 1923-), who married NASA

Engineer Lloyd Engman and reared one son and three daughters in Decatur, Alabama; they retired to Lake Norman, NC.

(2) Dr. Charles Wells Bird (June 16, 1925-), who practices dentistry in Sylva, NC, married Ellen Burnett of Enka, and makes his home in Cullowhee. This couple had three daughters, all of whom became teachers;

(3) Helen Gertrude Bird (August 3, 1926-), who married James M. Foreman, Jr., of Durham, Professional Engineer, ^{and an executive} for Duke Power Company of Charlotte. They reared two daughters, both of whom settled in Lincoln County, NC, near Lake Norman where their parents' home is.

William Ernest Bird died October 22, 1975, at the Lake Norman home of his daughter Helen Bird Foreman. Myrtle Wells Bird died several years later, on January 4, 1983, in Alabama, where she had lived with the other daughter, Anne Bird Engman. Both are buried in the Thomas Cemetery at Qualla, NC, in the family plot where his parents, several brothers and sisters, and other relatives are buried.