

Victoria Wade, a resourceful businesswoman

By Carroll McMahan

Independent, strong-willed Victoria Atchley Wade was a woman ahead of her time! She was a divorcee, single mother and a competitive businesswoman in an era when most women were housewives. She was also a staunch Democrat in one of the most solid Republican counties in the nation.

Mary Victoria Atchley, the daughter of Pleasant Lafayette Atchley and Anna Rule Atchley was born on November 7, 1878 on a farm near Sevierville which was later flooded by the waters of Douglas Lake. Her family soon moved to Catlettsburg where she was raised.

After attending Harrison-Chilhowee Baptist Academy she taught school in Sevier County before she married Robert Ira Wade in 1904. She and Wade moved to a house on New Street (now Parkway) in Sevierville. They were parents of two children; a daughter Anna and a son Dwight.

She and Wade divorced in 1916. Afterwards she married Dr. Jim Atchley of Newport and she and the two children moved there. Her second marriage was short-lived and she and her two young children lived with her mother in Catlettsburg for a short while after which they moved back to Sevierville, buying a home on Marshall Heights.

Victoria began working in a department store for Sevierville businessman Ed Shepherd. In the 1920s, she built a boarding house, a two-story frame home on Joy Street. With both of her children in college, she rented every room possible to help defray her expenses. One night her son came home from college to be told that his room had been rented.

In 1929, her son Dwight Wade Sr. opened Wade's Department Store on Court Avenue. Two years later she joined him and worked there six days a week for 40 years. Her daughter and her brother Sanders Atchley joined in the venture as well.

Her unique sense of humor appeared in custom-made signs throughout the store. Written by hand by Jimmy Turner, who worked for the Wades for many years, were slogans such as "Cannon Towels for the whole damp family;" displayed over the towels, over the counter where the "falsies" were displayed was a sign "we fix flats" and on the wall of the upstairs restroom, "haste makes waste."

For several years she wrote articles for the *Montgomery Vindicator* (the forerunner of the *Mountain Press*.) One such article published in 1928 and titled "*The Children of Joy Street*" read as follows:

"For some time I have thought of broadcasting the good morals of the children on our street. Why not the good things be published as well as the dark picture drawn, so the people may know that everything has not gone wrong and the world gone to the bow-wows.

There are eight bright healthy youngsters who live and play on Joy Street. No one could watch the innocent play of these children without deeply admiring them and knowing that they have fathers and mothers who study child training. These children know right from wrong, they obey their parents.

On their wheel carriages they parade the sidewalks, their move is small. It is seldom you can see them cross the street, unless the mothers call and they quickly look up and down the street to see that no car is coming and dart across to home.

If a neighbor asks an errand of one of these tots, they do it politely and make you feel they love to serve you. They do no damage to anyone's property. They have no political quarrels and no church prejudice, and on Sunday morning you see each of these children on their way to Sunday school.

Where will they be ten years from now? Watch and you will see. These children are going to be heard from; Mary Louise and David Paine Waters, Blaine, Billy and Harold Atchley, Pearl Drinnen, and Irene and Charles Inman. How we do admire

them. God bless all these children of our town and a double portion for these dear youngsters who make our street a street of Joy indeed.”

Sometimes she used her column to express her opinions on subjects such as Women’s suffrage, which was extremely controversial at the time.

On the living room wall, she hung a verse with a little Scotty dog in the picture:

A friend is not a feller
That is taken by sham.
A friend is one who knows our faults,
And doesn’t give a damn!

Her only day off from the store was devoted to family and church. A devout Baptist, she grew up attending Alder Branch Baptist Church near Catlettsburg for which her family had donated the land. When she moved to Sevierville she joined the First Baptist Church where she was a faithful member and Sunday school teacher.

However, one time the pastor came to pay her a call and it was no friendly visit! Telling Victoria that he was on a mission representing the church deacons, the preacher informed her that she had embarrassed the good God-fearing people of the church.

Once she informed him that she had no idea what he was talking about, he told her that it was her children. “Are you talking about my adult children,” she asked. “Yes, we have heard that they have been allowed to play cards....and dance! Do you deny it?”

The pastor told her that they could not have a Sunday school teacher who practiced, condoned or permitted such behavior.

“If you feel I should not be in a teaching position, you have my resignation,” she firmly told the minister. “But, Preacher, I was a member of First Baptist long before you came and I will be back after you are gone!” she added. Shortly thereafter the preacher was gone and she returned to her beloved church.

For more than 60 years, Victoria Wade greeted customers in downtown Sevierville and remained active as a saleslady until just prior to her death in 1969 at the age of 91.

After her passing, her oldest grandson, Dr. Dwight Wade, Jr. commented, “She was always an outspoken supporter of the family, her church and her community. Because of her dominant personality and sometimes controversial views, there were those who thought she was aggressive and forward. Without those qualities, she would have been hard pressed to make a good life for herself and her children.”