CHARLES A. DAVID: GREENVILLE CARTOONIST AND WRITER

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Linking enjoyment of nature with an invaluable record of life in old Greenville sounds more like rationalization for a picnic or a fishing trip than it does like a paper for students of local history. Yet, "taking time to smell the flowers and to savor their fragrance" led Charles A. David into a career in writing. With a talent for drawing that best manifested itself in cartoon creation, and a rare capacity for observing and recording anecdotes from nature and human nature, he attained a national readership for the products of his second career. A long life and a good memory provided opportuity to produce a marvelous account of life in old Greenville.

Born in Cheraw, South Carolina, Charles Alexander David moved to Greenville with his parents, Joseph Alexander and Rebecca Gilbert David, in time to feel the pain of the Civil War in the same place where he would suffer the agony of the Great Depression before his 1934 death.

Joseph David acquired the old Elias Earle property and the family lived in the Earle townhouse, where noted historian and author Mrs. A. D. Oliphant now resides at 107 James Street. This would be Charles' home until about 1921. When the Davids purchased the property, the entrarne was at the approximate point where Buncombe Street, Rutherford Road and Lloyd Street intersect. Charles David reputedly said in characteristic style that he did not like to work and every time the pantry got empty he sold a lot. By the time Charles died, he had sold most, if not all, of the property, but he had done a good bit of work, too.

David had one older brother, James, and two sisters, Edna and Elizabeth. The death of his brother in a Civil War battle had a great impact on young Charles who then began seeking solace in nature. In the 1930's he wrote, "When I was born the clouds of Secession and of War hung darkly over South Carolina . . . My oldest brother was killed in that needless

conflict, and to this day I cannot pass the site of the original depot in Greenville without seeing in memory a long row of pine boxes on the platform. These were the dead, home from the war. Sometimes they remained there in the shade for several days, awaiting friends or relatives. Everywhere there was trouble and sadness. Only the birds, the flowers and the gaudy butterflies seemed at all happy. Therefore my barefoot spirit turned to them, and I have loved them from that day to this." In adverse times, David was to seek and find comfort and renewal from nature for the rest of his 81 years.

After attending a private school, Charles graduated from Wofford College where he said the only brilliant thing about his career was the bright sash he wore when he was a marshall for commencement. Whatever he gained or did not gain from college, David somehow "acquired a thirst for knowledge and a curiosity that was boundless," according to James C. Derieaux, one-time editor of *American Magazine*.

Charles first found employment in his father's warehouse and then became a store clerk. "Finally," David stated, "I went to work for a big merchant, Mr. Obediah Pickle, but I soured on him and went into business for myself." David maintained that going into business for himself was the greatest mistake he ever made. From the point of being a success at business, David did err by becoming a merchant, but it was during this time that "more dull than busy days" furnished both the time and need for again seeking solace and diversion in the great outdoors.

David wrote, "Bad times came down on me and in my desperation I turned them into the making of my life. I took to the woods for relief, and there I found great beauty and much fun." Fishing with a young friend from the Greenville News staff was one of David's favorite outings.

Good fishing to Mr. David meant a bite not more frequently than every hour or two. This seems to imply that David was excessively lazy, but he really just did not like to have his pleasure in nature and meditation interrupted. Memories from these days would supply future contentment and a storehouse of experiences about which he would write. Other aspects of these

escapes, on poor business days, would advance the career to which he turned after 40 years in general merchandizing, where he claimed to have sold "everything from Val lace to trace chains and from calico dresses to hogshead cheese."

So that his friend could get away from his newspaper job, "Mr. David would write short paragraphs, editorials, and nature paragraphs" that could be used to fill editorial page gaps until the fisherman returned. David was gaining experience in writing while he was befriending James C. Derieaux, who would become editor of *American Magazine* for which David would supply cartoons and articles. In addition David began creating cartoons that were appearing in a New York publication by 1887.

In 1876 David married Eva Lester by whom he had two sons, Louis and Charles, and a daughter who became Mrs. C. B. Andrews. From this union six grandchildren also resulted. One is Dorothy David Browning of Greenville and another is television actor Edward Andrews. A failing business and a growing family certainly must have made the local and national sale of cartoons and comic strips welcomed.

At one point, Mr. David tried doing serious illustrations, but he was so accustomed to drawing cartoon characters that his serious figures were always distorted and often provoked more laughter than thought. His work as a religious publication artist and as a lightning blackboard illustrator terminated rather quickly. While this failure was a disappointment for David, it may have been a blessing for posterity who have benefitted from his writing. Although it is conjecture, I strongly suspect that had he found success in many types of drawing, his pen might not have done much writing. I feel that his philosophical statements and his accounts of life make far greater contribution to us than do his drawings.

A genial man, David seemed to have had a happiness that was at least temporarily contagious to all who came into contact with the man or the products of his pen. Writing in *The Greenville Story,* Frank S. Barnes, a long-time neighbor observed, "David's humorous nature permeated his every

expression in conversation, writing, and drawing, leaving with us the memory of a sweet and enduring picture, always to be remembered."

In his columns, magazine articles, and in his book, *How to Be Happy on Nothing a Year,* David mixed philosophy and humor with examples from history, nature, and human nature to make his reader smile as well as think. As I read his work, my mental picture of him was one of a jovial looking person with a gleeful laugh. Like most mental pictures, this one contrasts sharply with reality. David was reputedly distressed that he could not laugh rippingly and that his sad countenance belied his inner contentment.

Describing the cartoonist and author as a man who made others happy when he approached, Derieaux reported that David was funny even to himself and was one of those characters of which every town has a few. His warmth, generosity, and humor earned him many friends and many times to serve as a pallbearer. David claimed that his woeful expression rather than popularity accounted for the frequent requests for his participation at funerals.

Regardless of what he said about it himself, David was well-liked and well-known for his generosity and hospitality. His yard and home "which always wore their everyday clothes, even on Sunday" made guests feel as welcomed as did their owner, according to Derieaux's accounts. So anxious was Mr. David that a guest never leave without a token of friendship, that one day he hastily picked up the item a neighbor had just brought to him and gave it to her as she left, completely unaware that he was returning her present.

Throughout his writing, David employed a crisp, columnist style that is forthright, delightful, and appropriate. Anything lacking in literary merit and erudition is more than compensated by beautiful but simply expressed ideas. Homespun though his philosophy was, it has depth and speaks to us as much today as it did to David's contemporaries.

I commend the columns on old Greenville to you for pleasant reading as well as for enlightenment about Greenville of an

earlier day. David often contrasted the conditions at the time of his writing with those of 30 to 50 years before. Since he had known people who had lived in Greenville much earlier than he, today's reader can get an excellent idea of the change that Greenville has undergone in the last century or so.

David tells of a "Main Street (probably in the 1870's) that was about as quiet a spot as one could find; that was particularly so in bad weather when teams were liable to stall and stick in the mud at any point between the grave-yard style (Springwood Cemetery) and Cox and Markley's Shops at the ford (Reedy River)."

Two low places in the street—one where McBee Avenue intersects and one between North and Coffee streets—were often a little too deep to ford in rainy weather and, in fact, stayed wet most of the time. Deep mud made nearly every person wear rubber overshoes or boots. David explained, 'Even overshoes could not always be depended on, as at a certain stage Greenville mud could pull off an overshoe, swallow it instantly, and leave the unfortunate standing on one foot and holding the other in the air—a position that was extremely embarrassing to the ladies of the day who were not supposed to have such things as feet and ankles." David added that careful shoppers usually carried a plank to put down over muddy spots. (At the time of writing in the 1920's, the columnist observed that some ladies now "aetually admit owning a pair of knees.")

From columns entitled "Greenville of Old" and "Old Greenville," we learn tidbits such as the importance of livery stables played in politics. Much drinking and politiking took place in the stables, and lucky was the candidate who had the support of the livery boys. In the 1920's Greenville was served by 90 passenger trains and in the 1890's by 18 saloons which occupied the best locations on the best streets. In David's words, "Intoxicating drinks of all kinds were sold as openly as sugar and coffee and nobody thought anything about it. Any man, woman or boy could walk in, plank down a dime and buy enough trouble to last a month."

In one column, David described the "Sunday which Greenville of old kept holy" and which he contended "would not even speak to present day (1928) Sabbath Observances." The writer claimed that "the only thing about Sunday that had not changed from the Sabbath of the 1870's was that it was still in the same place on the calendar, right between Saturday and Monday." David said that in the earlier day, everybody, if they pretended to be anybody, went to church on Sunday, and it was really a day of rest when all work automatically ceased. Food was prepared the day before and some people would not mail a letter toward the end of the week for fear it would have to travel on Sunday.

David has left us a fine legacy in the wonderful picture he provided of old Greenville. Since he relied on his memory, it is wise to be wary of the accuracy of the detail of the picture, while yet appreciating the feeling that his work engenders. His ability to portray the tone of the times as well as to describe behavior and physical conditions created a worthy record.

The publication of *How to Be Happy on Nothing a Year* in the depressed year of 1933 brought commendation, and as far as I can tell, marked the end of David's writing career. In an article in a local paper, Mrs. Richard Watson, David's former neighbor was quoted, "In the midst of all our gloom, if we begin reading this little book, we will find cheer descending upon us. Soon we will begin to chuckle with the kind of mirth that loosens the tight places and lets the sunshine in."

Rabbi Moses J. S. Abels of Brooklyn wrote the publisher, "Through it *(How To Be Happy on Nothing A Year)* like a golden thread runs a lofty sermon. Its tone and appeal are arresting."

Saying that by nothing a year, he meant no money, the author tells of beautiful people who have attained happiness by bringing it to others. One person whom he cited was Mr. Arthur Gower, who each Sunday took flowers to the hospital to people who otherwise would not have had any flowers. Since he grew the flowers himself, the thoughtfulness required little money although it, of course, demanded much effort.

As mentioned earlier, Mr. David had an extremely keen sensitivity for enjoying and learning from nature. In his book he shares numerous anecdotes that inspire and entertain. The example of a hen who was so determined to set that she went into a human-like decline when her many attempts were thwarted, motivated perserverance in David that saw him through his lowest moments.

He was impressed with watching catbirds go to the other side of a tree and start all over again with a new nest when theirs was destroyed. Years later he recalled the incident when his wife's death destroyed his home, and he adapted to living with his son and his family. As one would expect David took to the woods to ponder, in utter desperation, his next action after his wife died. He ended his book by describing his feelings as he returned home about dark.

"I knew, as I went silently up the front steps, that peace of a sort again could and would be mine. And I wondered then as I have wondered a thousand times since if tranquility, happiness itself is not within reach of all of us, if we but open our eyes, our ears and our hearts to the senses and sounds and the implications of divinity that are anywhere and everywhere to be found. If we but accept life, go along with it, rejoice in the privilege of being alive. If we but count what we have, instead of grieving for what we have lost or worrying over what we can not achieve."