

Family Mystery: Why Did Louisa Cooper Barnhill Disown Her Daughter?

By Lily Altman Mullinax

One afternoon in July, 2004, my daughters and I stood in the cemetery of Sandy Plain Methodist Church near Gallivant's Ferry, Horry County, South Carolina. It was the first time in my life that I had seen the graves of my father's maternal grandparents, Stanly David Barnhill and Louisa Cooper Barnhill. When I was young I had heard about Louisa from my father, and her motives for some of her actions still intrigued me.

Stanly Barnhill, who was born in Pitt County, North Carolina on June 13, 1825, and died in Horry Co on July 19, 1886, moved to Horry as a young man and entered the turpentine business. On May 8, 1855, he married Louisa Beaty Cooper, who was born in Horry Co, November 30, 1832, and died there on April 16, 1910 (dates according to Barnhill family Bible). Louisa's ancestors included John Beaty, III (served as Horry Co sheriff 1812-??), Methodist minister Ezekiel Cooper, and Huguenot/Church of England minister John LaPierre. Her parents were Timothy Cooper and Mary Harriet Beaty Cooper, prominent citizens of Conway.

Stanly and Louisa lived in Conway during the early years of their marriage. Later they moved to Cool Spring, where Louisa ran their farm while Stanly served with the Confederate Army in Virginia. Louisa's sister, Ellen Cooper Johnson, left in her memoirs an exciting account of living with Louisa while Stanly was away, telling how they hid their provisions and held off marauders at gunpoint. After the war, the Barnhill family moved to Gallivant's Ferry, near the Marion County line. The couple had eleven children, nine of whom lived to maturity. This account concerns their daughter Fannie, my paternal grandmother, who, according to the Barnhill family Bible, was born March 26, 1868, and died July 5, 1896.

Stanly Barnhill died in July of 1886. On November 20, 1887 Fannie married William Waitus Altman (December 28, 1858 - July 20, 1897), a Marion Co farmer. Fannie was nineteen at the time of her marriage, and Waitus would soon be twenty-nine. Oral tradition within the family says that Waitus was standing outside Mt. Nebo Baptist Church in Marion Co when he saw a young lady drive up in a buggy. He told a friend, "That is the girl I am going to marry". The friend laughed and told him he would not have a chance, because she was a Barnhill.

After the marriage, Louisa disowned Fannie. For years, our branch of the Altman family has wondered why. At one time I thought it was because he was "just a poor dirt farmer", but after researching I have come to believe that, although he was not well-to-do, neither was he a poor man by the standards of the day. The Marion Star (August 18, 1897) gave an account of his property as it was listed in an administrator's sale after his death.

I will offer for sale at the residence of W.W. Altman, in Wahee township, on Friday, August 20, the following property: One new buggy, two horses, thirty or forty head of hogs, one lot of plows, one lot of timber, rope and dogs, a number of boats and other farm utensils, one Winchester rifle and two shotguns. Terms of sale cash or thirty days time upon approved security.

*R.J. Blackwell
Administrator*

I decided to search further for Louisa's motives in disowning Fannie. For years there had been a rumor among Fannie and Waitus' descendents that he was a Latter Day Saint. I decided to find out for certain if this were true. After searching in my local LDS library and finding records that indicated that he was, indeed, a Mormon, I asked the librarian to contact the archives in Salt Lake City. They sent back a microfiche roll containing the handwritten record of Waitus and Fannie's 1892 baptisms. They joined the church in Horry Co (LDS Records, Batch 6940034, Film 001985). Included was the record, also handwritten, of the baptism of Waitus' mother, Elizabeth Jane McDaniel Altman, the following year. Also on that roll was the biggest surprise of all. There had been a riot in Gallivant's Ferry on July 8, 1892. Two LDS elders had been chased by twenty-three men at gunpoint six miles into Marion Co. They were told that if they or any other LDS elders ever returned, they would be killed.

Obviously there were strong feelings in Gallivant's Ferry against the Mormons. It seems reasonable that religious differences (Louisa was a staunch Methodist) played a part in the decision to disown Fannie. Waitus and Fannie were married in November, 1887, nearly five years before the riot and nearly five years before their baptisms. It could be that he had LDS sympathies before he married Fannie, and Louisa knew about them. Also it is entirely possible that she knew about something else in Waitus' life, such as another wife.

For years there have been rumors in my branch of the family that Waitus had another wife in or near Gallivant's Ferry. (To my knowledge, no one has proved or disproved this theory.) If another wife existed, surely Louisa knew about her, since she lived in Gallivant's Ferry. He could have married her before he married Fannie, or even afterward, or he could have become a Latter Day Saint in order to justify two wives. The LDS church did not outlaw plural marriage until 1890.

Fannie and Waitus had five sons. They were Rufus Utley, born December 10, 1888, Flavel Knox (my father), born March 8, 1890, Stanley Blondel, born December 2, 1891, Welley (later changed to William) Lee, born April 9, 1893, and Don Carlos, born July 21, 1895. Fannie died in July of 1896. She was 28 years old. According to my father, she died of scarlet fever complicated by a miscarriage. He also said that the only time he remembered seeing his maternal grandmother was when she visited her daughter on the day she died. She sat by Fannie's bed until the end and then walked out the door. The children never saw her again. That, to me, is one of the saddest parts of this story.

In July of 1897, one year after Fannie's death, Waitus, a surveyor, was shot and killed in a land dispute. Although the accused was found not guilty at his trial, he steadily declined mentally and died in the "asylum" in Columbia.

There is another mystery concerning my grandfather. Oral tradition within the Altman family tells several versions of what he did with Fannie's body during the year before he died. One version is that he "buried her under the apple tree". Another says that he "put her in a coffin with a window in it and put it under his bed". Still another says that he "put her in the meat house". I can remember being told as a child that he disinterred her body before he died. It seems that he was planning to emigrate west, possibly to Utah, and intended to take her body with him. I believe this to be the most likely story. In any case, the two of them are buried in a single grave in Soul's Chapel Cemetery in Marion Co

The five boys grew up in the newly-founded Connie Maxwell Children's Home in Greenwood. They received good educations and lived long and productive lives.