

Joel Reuben Hitt (1874-1967)

Lucile Wilmoth Hitt

1972

Joel Reuben Hitt, the oldest son of Reuben Martin Hitt and his wife Mary Emma Hughes Hitt, was born on October 24, 1874 at Bellefontaine, Webster County, MS. By the time he was 12 years old he was helping his father teach school by hearing the classes of the younger pupils and keeping order while his father had to be out of the classroom. Later he attended school in Eupora, MS.

As I have mentioned before, in 1897, Grandpa (Reuben Martin Hitt) decided to move his family to Texas. Earlier, his half-brother James' daughter, Priscilla Alice Hitt Malone (1838-1888), had moved to Texas on account of her health, and I'm sure this influenced Grandpa in his decision. From the memoirs of Priscilla's daughter, Martha Florence Malone Waller (1857-1936) (sent to me by Mrs. J.H. Soper, Priscilla's great granddaughter), who went to Texas with her parents:

“... my husband and I, with our baby daughter, moved with my parents to Fort Worth, Texas, on account of my mother's health. It was at that time a cosmopolitan community of five thousand people, with fine schools and many churches. There was an Episcopal Church with a splendid rectory, a brilliant preacher, a fine choir; for twenty years I sang in the choir of Saint Andrew's Church, and for thirty years was the president of the Altar Build. Society then was far superior to what it is today (1934). We had splendid concerts, opera, lectures, theater.”

“My father bought a home on the corner of Fourth and Burnett Streets, and my husband built next door.”

In Texas, Joel Reuben Hitt attended Coronal Institute, completing the course of study there at San Marcos in two years. Nearly fifty years later my youngest brother Joel, Jr., wrote his father from Wharton, Texas

where he had gone to obtain information regarding a subject of one of his cases (F.B.I.): "I talked for some time with Mrs. Sid Border, who was Eola Hudgins before she married. She asked me where my home is located and I advised her with pride that it is in Mississippi. She said that she had gone to school with a boy named Joel Hitt and that she thought I might be related to him. She further stated that it was between the fall term of 1894 and the closing term of 1898 at Coronal Institute. I said, "Lady, that was my Dad." She went on to say that Joel Hitt was a handsome, slim, neat, clean, industrious lad and I said that was my Dad! She didn't recall whether or not she had any classes with you but was of the opinion that she had not had much association with you. But, she remembered you and that is something!

When Joel Reuben finished his study at Coronal Institute, he decided he would teach. I find in his papers a letter of recommendation written May 29, 1900, by G. H. Harvill, Publisher of the East Texas Reformer, Athens, Texas:

To whom it may concern,

Gentlemen-

I have known and been personally associated with Prof. J. R. Hitt for some time and know him to be a gentleman of high moral character and a scholar of excellent attainments. As a mathematician he possesses rare ability, and those who secure his services as a teacher will be fortunate.

We can cheerfully recommend him as a first class teacher in every respect.

Signed: G. H. Harvill

In the Fall of 1900 Joel went to Athens, TX to teach Math. While there he was associated with Dr. William Herschel Bruce, who later organized John Tarlton College and later became president of North Texas Teachers College at Denton, and Dr. S. Walter Stanfield of Southwest Texas Teachers College at San Marcos. These men were older and became life-long friends. He later wrote that they were a great inspiration to him. He named his first son for Dr. Stanfield, and his second son for Dr. Bruce. I never met Dr. Stanfield, but once in 1932 when Dr. Bruce was visiting my father he left for Birmingham and asked my Mother and me if we wouldn't like to drive as far as Newton with him to visit my sister Flora. He was a lovable old man looking somewhat like an eighth dwarf named

Jokey. I thought he was a very old man and was nervous about his driving. Along the way he remarked that he had double vision and as we approached a bridge he saw two bridges and had to figure out which one to cross. I was terrified and prepared for a crash every time we met a car. He must have seen that I was nervous about his driving and been teasing me but I was never certain.

Daddy talked the rest of his life about his few years in Texas. His children grew up hearing hair-raising tales of his adventures there. I have letters that he wrote my two boys in 1942 when we were stationed in the southwest, telling about his fight with a wild boar, an experience with coyotes (which he called wolves), catching jack rabbits in an unusual 10-inch snow and others - all complete with sketches. The trip from Webster County by rail via New Orleans furnished enough story material to entertain for hours.

In February 1901 of Daddy's first year of teaching at San Marcos his mother, who had come back to Mississippi with the family, died with a ruptured appendix. This was a terrible blow to Daddy. He had been very close to his mother and thought her so beautiful and wonderful. Perhaps if he had been with her it would have been easier to bear. He kept the letter his sister wrote him the day mother died and read it occasionally the rest of his life. When he was 90 years old he asked me to take it away (he had been giving me his papers for years, keeping only the ones he valued most) because it made him so sad to remember his grief. At the end of his school year he came to join the rest of his family in Marion County.

He came to stay one year and return to Texas, but in the Fall he taught school, and at the end of the year the trustees offered him such inducement to continue with them that he decided to stay. This decision was made easier by the fact that he had fallen in love with one of his pupils and needed time to woo and win her. On December 25, 1904 at Columbia, Marion County, Mississippi he married Elizabeth Margania Robertson, born February 12, 1885, daughter of James Robertson (1858-1908) and Sarah Bourn Robertson (1860-1914) and granddaughter of James David Robertson (1816-1891) and his wife Sarah Cox Robertson (1836-1891).

Joel stayed in Marion County until the Fall of 1914, teaching and preaching. He had been ordained by the Antioch Church. He taught all week and preached every Sunday. My Mother helped him every way she could. She played the organ, sang solos and duets with him while the latest baby lay on a pallet nearby. During this period Daddy consolidated

two schools. All of his life I heard him say he didn't know whether he was a teaching preacher or a preaching teacher. He came to Mississippi College, a small Baptist college in Clinton, MS founded in 1826, to study for the ministry, but even as he entered he helped with the teaching of Math. I don't know if Math teachers were so scarce or if he was so good - probably both. He taught fulltime during the Summers. I think the teaching won out over the preaching, although he did reorganize the Salem Baptist Church in a community near Clinton and pastor it for 22 years, rushing out every Sunday after Sunday School to preach. Most of his Ministry was as a layman in the First Baptist Church, the college-related church here in Clinton.

In the Fall of 1914 Joel came to Clinton alone and entered Mississippi College. My Grandmother Robertson lay dying with cancer and didn't want my Mother to leave her. Grandmother had been carried to New Orleans where the doctors operated too late to help her, and she was brought back home to die. Daddy agreed that mother could stay with her. It was a terrible time. Daddy was very ill with the new Spanish Influenza, Grandmother died, and James, Mother's fifth baby, was born there at Mother's old home. I don't know if Daddy got much learning done that year or not what with his running back and forth from Clinton to Columbia. Daddy had many virtues; promptness was not one of them. Among the few things I remember about that Winter is Daddy's running to catch the train for Jackson. He never arrived at the station until the train was pulling out and always had to run up the track, straining to get a hand on the last projectile on the last car as the train picked up speed. I don't think he was ever left behind, but I'm sure everyone's nerves suffered. I remember my Mother's grief - it frightened me - and Daddy's trying to comfort her and I remember my new baby brother.

Although my Mother was the fourth child in a family of ten children and had a sister seven years older, she was the one who mothered the sisters and brothers left orphaned when Grandmother died since Grandpa Robertson had died six years earlier. Her baby brother was only ten years old, and two sisters were twelve and fourteen. When we came to Clinton in the Fall of 1915 these two sisters came with us and stayed until they finished their education at Hillman College, a school for girls here in Clinton at that time. The two younger brothers stayed with us some but were mostly in and out.

Daddy graduated in the Spring of 1917 and went to Clark College at Newton, MS to teach Math, but was called back to Mississippi College to be head of the Math department until he had to retire a quarter of a

century later. After his health improved he went back to teach numerous times whenever he felt that he was able or whenever there was a special need.

Once when he went to the cemetery at night to check on a freshly dug grave to see that it had been put in the right place, my two little boys went with him. As he was peering about in the dark trying to see the markers the flashlight suddenly went out. He had stepped too close to the edge and fallen into the grave breaking the flashlight. He was unhurt and the little boys pulled him out.

Once when he was over 80 he went with two men to survey some land for a friend . The men had gone on ahead carrying the pole and chain. As Daddy was climbing over a high fence a barb caught him in the seat of the britches and he couldn't jerk loose. He told me when he got home that he would have hung there and fluttered 'til he died if the men hadn't looked back to see him and come back to get him down.

For a quarter of a century Joel taught steadily at Mississippi College, day and night, for no one who was not able to keep up and asked for help was turned down. Daddy either met them at night in the classroom (if there were several) or had them come to the house and worked with them privately until they were able to keep up with the others. He wrote his own textbooks for some of the subjects and devised a new method of bookkeeping and also a new method of trisecting an angle. He was always solving some knotty problem for some company and to the best of my knowledge was never stumped. I don't remember ever seeing him sit without paper and pencil in his hands, even if he had fallen asleep, and every scrap was covered with figures. What is amazing is that he never earned a degree except that Bachelor of Arts in 1917. He longed to study further, but the few times he was able to get off (in the summers) and went to La. State University to study, they persuaded him to teach instead. After he retired from teaching the college conferred on him the degree of Doctor of Letters.

Never robust, by 1943 his health had failed to such a degree that under pressure from the doctors and family he had to retire from teaching although he protested with tears in his eyes that he wouldn't live a year if he had to quit teaching. His civic and church work and surveying kept him occupied and he improved so that in a few years he was able to teach again and several times taught special classes or filled in for those who needed a leave of absence. Also at this time he took up golf and as with everything else he put his mind to became quite proficient. He didn't have the strength to hit the ball very far but was consistent and

accurate. He made the headlines on the sport page of the Jackson papers when he made his first hole-in-one in his 70s. Later when my boys took up golf he gave them pointers. I remember his teaching them after he was so weak he couldn't swing the club without staggering and one would hold him steady by slipping his hand under his belt in the back and holding him up. He rode on the motorcycle with them, was thrilled to ride in the A-model Ford and went to the Airport in Jackson and sat in the copilot's seat and was amazed at all the instruments. He would have loved to fly, but I was too afraid to agree for by this time his heart had failed several times. He may have been failing in other ways but his spirit and enthusiasm never failed in the least.

Soon after he came to Clinton he was elected to the board of Aldermen - in 1922 to be exact - and in 1924 became Mayor. While he was mayor the old plank sidewalks were replaced, streets were paved with "Bilbo Bricks," the first well was dug (I remember this so well because for many years the Company that dug the well sent Daddy every Christmas a huge box of chocolates which went like the proverbial snowball as soon as it arrived), a city hall was built, and a fire department started.

After six years as mayor, in 1930 he became city clerk. At this time no city employee received any pay. Daddy's financial burden had become very heavy that it was decided that he should become Clerk and receive 25 dollars a month. So from 1931 to 1952 he served simultaneously as Alderman and Clerk. In 1952 he gave up his service on the Board but continued as clerk until 1957 when he had to give that up too.

When Highway 80 (now known as Clinton Blvd. and College Street) was built through Clinton it came right through the Clinton Cemetery. The cemetery was on a hill and the highway had to be cut through. Daddy was so upset when he saw the graves being destroyed, and at about the same time he received a letter from a man asking about his grandfather's grave. Daddy took a few men and rescued the stones - some broken - and everything he could find. He organized the Clinton Cemetery Association, had it incorporated and secured the charter. He worked tirelessly getting all the lots surveyed and all the metes and bounds in order, and in setting up an endowment fund (and working to increase), insuring that the cemetery would never again be disturbed. He served as President of the Association the rest of his life. The cemetery is now a beautifully landscaped plot enclosed by a high fence with gates that are locked at night. There is a caretaker, a tool house and a small building that has an office for the President, a room for meetings and a place for records.

From the time he came to Clinton, Daddy taught the Men's Bible Class until he was too old to go to Sunday School. He was Sunday School superintendent, several times a Deacon. Many sought his wise council and advice and he was always willing and anxious to serve in any way possible. Never very strong in body, he always carried a heavy burden of responsibility. He was blessed with a natural sense of humor and a warm personality that won the love and admiration of old and young alike. He has friends and students all over the world who are grateful to him for the things he taught them, not only from books but in how to live. He took great pride in all his students, and especially those who went on to hold high positions. One of his favorites, Dr. Baley Price, served as president of the Mathematical Association of America (MAA) and was given the 1970 Award for Distinguished Service by the MAA. From an article in the American Mathematical Journal: "While a student and teacher at Mississippi College Baley Price and his patron teacher Dr. Hitt, often conferred on furthering the teaching and use of Mathematics. The foregoing recognition and citation are evidence that the goals of Dr. Hitt and his protégé have been achieved. The genius of one master teacher produced another master teacher."

In the Mississippi Baptist Record, November 1904, Pastor Estes Bass, reporting on a Revival at the Prine Springs Church in Marion County: "Prof. J. R. Hitt and Miss Lizzie Robertson added greatly to the interest of the meeting by their deeply spiritual songs."

By 1957 he had hardening of the arteries to such a degree that any exercise or excitement that caused his heart to beat faster had to be avoided. His heart was fine, but when it tried to pump blood that wouldn't flow it stalled, kicked back and stopped. The third time this happened, the doctors convinced him that he had to stop all outside activities. He still enjoyed life: dressed every morning, ate what and when he wanted at the table, bathed himself and enjoyed visitors. During this time his greatest pleasure was riding about town and seeing what progress was being made. He never tired of looking at Clinton, and I spent a great deal of time driving him about - sitting in the middle of the seat with my arm about his shoulders and his head on my shoulder. He never was a big man, as a young man not quite six feet and weighing at the most 160 pounds. By the time he was 60 years old he weighed 125 pounds and when he died he weighed less than 80 pounds, but he always stood straight and held his head up. He just dwindled away and died in his sleep July 22, 1967. He was buried in his beloved Clinton Cemetery. Elizabeth Robertson Hitt still lives in the old home here in Clinton at

102 East Main. *[As of this writing around 1972. She later died April 1, 1983 at age 92.]*

I remember Daddy's sitting in a straight chair grading papers or figuring on a problem on his knees while all the kids played a game of basketball all around him, knocking him about - he never seemed to notice the noise, and unless he got a hard lick or was almost turned over he paid no attention. He had the greatest power of concentration which earned for him as for others the accolade "absent-minded-professor." Once when he was teaching he was crossing the Campus and stopped to talk with a student for a few minutes. When they finished talking and started away Daddy stopped, called to the boy and asked him in which direction he was walking when the boy stopped him. Upon learning that he was walking toward the classroom, Daddy said, "Well I guess I have eaten lunch." The old U.S. Highway 80 came right through town and Daddy had to cross it on his way home. Cars have actually brushed his clothes because he paid no attention to them whatsoever if he had a problem on his mind. At the same time he always had time to listen to any problem however small if asked for help and gave it that same concentration.

From a **Life Sketch** written by Mariah Johnson Latimer in 1950:

"What a vast amount of work this kindly generous man has done. Not too strong in body but of a valiant spirit, he has given his all to God, his family and to his community. He loves the college and gave it the best years of his life. He has comforted the sick and bereaved, he has helped the poor, preached many a funeral sermon and steered countless college students into paths of rectitude and right. From his own rich experiences he has helped scores of ministerial students over difficult times. Faithful and just in all his relationships, Dr. Joel Reuben Hitt has been a blessing through the years. We who knew him best, give thanks God for his life and are inspired to nobler living by his wonderful example. ... Truly he has lived and served grandly."

From a newspaper article written by Dr. M.P.I. Berry in 1954; "One cannot even attempt to reach the true worth of a man who has so dedicated his life to the betterment of mankind, one who throughout his entire life has given of his physical strength and devotion to every good cause, to the upbuilding of Clinton, and to the inspiration of youth coming under his influence. Briefly stated, his is a life well-lived."