



Quarterly Bulletin of the Calaveras County Historical Society
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The Passing of a Christian Gentleman

By Berenice Lamson

Editor's Note: Richard Coke Wood, teacher and historian, co-founder and longtime member of this Society, and part-time resident of Murphys, died December 15, 1979, in Stockton. As a tribute to our former editor, friend, and fellow-member, we take pleasure in dedicating this issue of "Las Calaveras" to him. We will miss his winning smile, cheerful greeting, and his sincere interest in everyone. We are deeply saddened by his passing.

We are particularly fortunate in having Berenice Lamson, one of his more recent students, and a staff-member of the Holt-Atherton Pacific Center for Western Studies, write this tribute to our friend Coke. Mrs. Lamson feels that it was a rare privilege not only to have worked with him but also to have been a student in his classes. "Because of him, history is exciting." Portions of this article are excerpts and adaptations from her forthcoming book, *There's Only One Coke*. Mrs. Lamson received her B.S. degree from U.O.P. in 1971, M. Ed. in 1972, and is currently working on her M.A. in history, as well as continuing her work at the Center.

Coke was born on December 20, 1905, in rural cotton country near Cement, Oklahoma. He was the youngest of sixteen children. His parents, Nathan Alexander Wood and Lenora (Gilmore) Wood, each had seven children by former marriages when Clem and Coke came along. Clem was large and strong, while Coke was small and frail.

His father was a circuit Methodist minister and at times tended as many as three churches at once. The family income was spare because the parishioners were unable to pay him much, so he supplemented it by working in the



TRAVELER COKE

Coke leaves on a trip, probably about 1930, on the reliable transportation of the day.

cotton fields. This meant hard work, long hours and many times a short food supply. The family moved constantly from one parish to another. Clem and Coke attended a different school each year during their elementary years.

When Coke began his eighth year, his mother became ill.

"I can still hear her praying," Coke remembered. "She would pray that I be a fine Christian man, and I think it had something to do with my life.

"One Christmas she gave me a small New Testament Bible, and that is one of my most treasured books now. In it she wrote 'To Coke with love, Mother.'

"She could work her will with me, especially in the last few months when she was confined mostly to her bed. She would say, 'Now Coke, you get the cornmeal and you get a



“MR. CALIFORNIA”

Governor Ronald Regan presents California’s highest history award to R. Coke Wood, while Assemblyman Gene Chappie and Senator Steve Teale look on, at Sacramento, January, 1969.

couple of eggs. You put in the eggs and some milk and stir up a pan full of cornbread for Mr. Wood and Clem.’

“She would direct me like that and I would get the meals for my father and brother. Of course when she finally died, it broke me up terribly. She did have her influence, and if I have been successful in my life and a Christian gentleman—I hope that’s what people call me—I know it all began with her.

“A year later after Mother died, Clem, Father and I were still batching. My good sister Susie learned of our terrible condition—our batching, lack of proper food and all—and to demonstrate what a good person she was, she decided she must come back to Oklahoma from California to take care of us.

“She arrived on a Sunday. I was with Father at church, so Clem took the wagon to meet her at the Rock Island Depot in Cement. Clem brought her out to the old farm and I can still hear her describe our condition . . . ‘No curtains, no rugs, nothing but a plank floor, and no linoleum!’

“We didn’t have an outhouse or a privy. We were using an old chicken shack for that sort of thing.

“Susie didn’t waste any time checking out what we had to eat. She found that about the only thing in the pantry for us to eat was a gallon of molasses and a hunk of salt pork and some flour. She asked my brother what in the world we ate.

“Clem replied, ‘Well, we have some things down in the garden and we have a lot of chickens.’ So Susie asked him to catch a chicken.

“When Father and I got home from church services, Susie had taken over and had a *beautiful* fried chicken dinner with tomatoes and beans. Susie was the kindest person in the world—absolutely the kindest person—and the most patient, too. I just fell in love with her. I transferred all my former love for my mother to her.”

Because Coke adored Susie he was pleased and excited to learn they were moving West together in 1918. Coke was thirteen at the time. Coke and Susie rode the “Little Slim Princess,” a narrow-gauge railroad, into the station at Laws, which was five miles from Bishop, California.

Coke enjoyed growing up in the Owens Valley, and this was where he came to love California so much. At this time too, he began a fortunate association with his Uncle Tom Wood. Uncle Tom was kind and gentle to Coke. He realized that his nephew was a sensitive and fragile little boy. Coke grew up with strong love from Aunt Cinnie, Uncle Tom and sister Susie.

While he attended Bishop Academy and later, Bishop High School, he worked after school hauling gravel for his uncle. He also worked part-time at the creamery, and for the theatre. Upon graduation from Bishop High School in 1923, he went into the grocery business. It was five years before he enrolled at the College of the Pacific, in Stockton.

Most of his friends and professors thought he would become a minister like his father, but Coke earned his teaching credential instead. It was during his years at the College of the Pacific that he met Ethelyn Edson whom he ultimately married.

He graduated from College of the Pacific in 1932, and was fortunate to be offered a teaching position at his former alma mater, Bishop High. He began teaching Social Studies there from 1932–1934. He was soon forced to resign, however, due to ill health. He entered the Norumbega Sanitarium at Monrovia for two years and seven months.

On August 28, 1936, he was married to Ethelyn Edson and was able to return to Stockton where Ethelyn had purchased a home. In the spring of 1937, he taught two social science survey courses at Stockton College for President Duane Orton. He also assisted Dr. Harold Jacoby there.

In September, 1937, he took a position at Reedley Junior College in Reedley, California, about twenty miles southeast of Fresno. This time he taught history, speech and coached the debate team. Just before Easter vacation he had to resign and again return to a sanitarium—this time to Bret Harte Sanitarium in Murphys—because he began to hemorrhage. He remained at Murphys from

1938 until 1941, when he was released as an out-patient. On November 20, 1942, Coke and Ethelyn were blessed with a baby daughter, Colynn. Coke taught at Bret Harte High School from 1942 until 1951.

Ethelyn and Coke were active members of the Murphys Congregational Church which they had joined in 1941. Coke served on its Board of Trustees for several years and was a Sunday School Superintendent for five years until he resigned in 1963, after suffering a heart attack.

Between 1944 and 1949, Coke was a Scoutmaster of Murphys Troop 43. He had the pleasure of producing an Eagle Scout for each of those five years. Coke served on the Board of Trustees for the Union High School at San Andreas for nine years from 1944 to 1953.

In 1948 he helped to organize the Murphys Centennial Commission with Elvie Mitchler, R. E. McKimens, and others, for the purpose of celebrating the discovery of gold. In 1949, he helped organize the Murphys Community Club and served on its Board of Directors for several years.

In 1968, Coke was chosen by the Murphys Community Club as "Outstanding Man of the Year" and given an

honorary life membership and received each year thereafter a membership card bearing the number, "one."

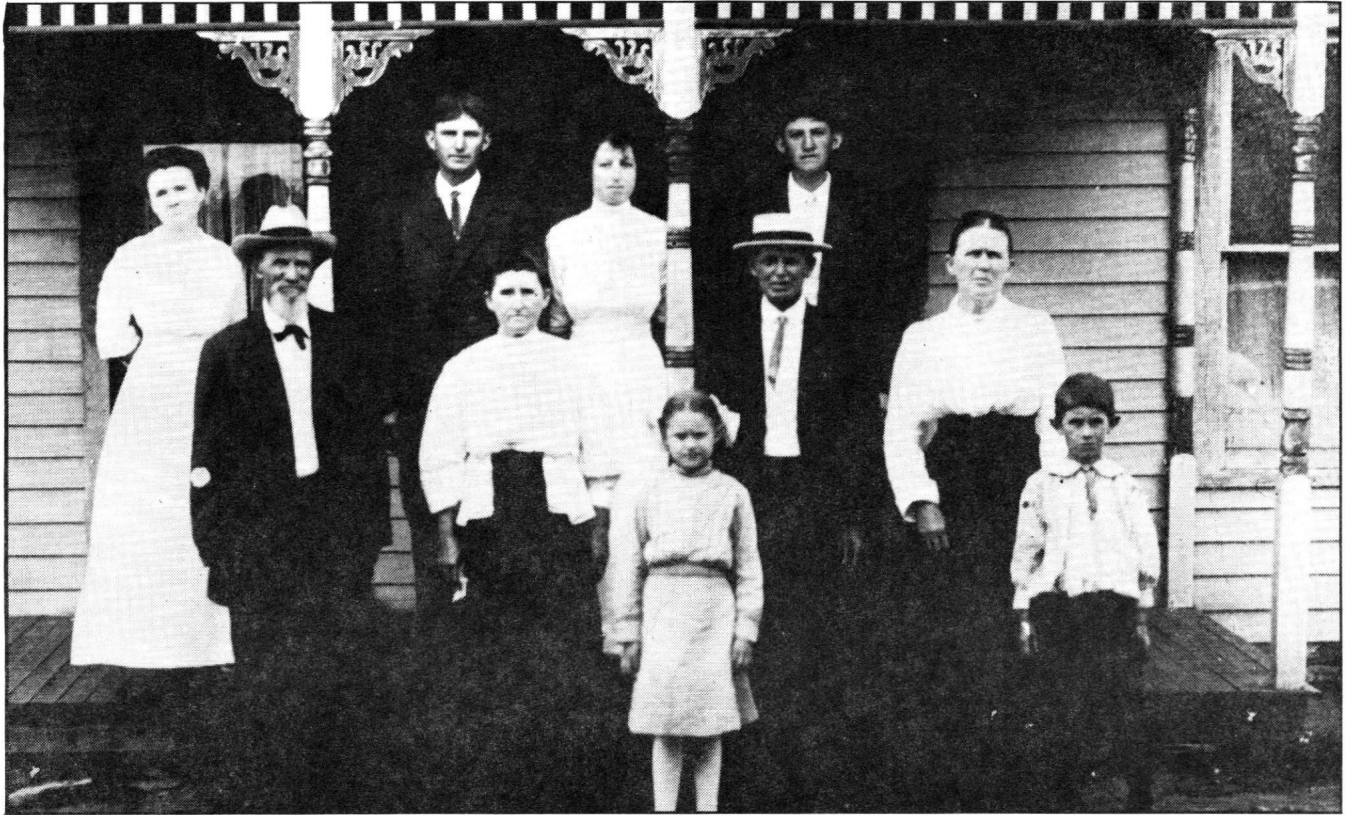
With his wife Ethelyn, Coke saved the old Peter L. Traver Building, the oldest stone building in Murphys (1856), and restored it in 1949. They started the collections and displays known as the Old Timers Museum and operated it since then in the Traver Building at their own expense, never charging admission. (The Traver building was dedicated as an Historic Landmark in 1953 by Ruby Parlor of Native Daughters of Murphys. On August 30, 1975, the Articles of Incorporation of the Old Timers Museum were adopted by the Board of Directors at a meeting in the museum.) Coke also served as chairman of the Old Timers Museum at the Homecoming for the past thirty-one years.

Coke helped organize the Calaveras County Historical Society in 1952. The Society came into being through the efforts of the Calaveras Grange who sponsored the formation of the organization as a part of its community service activities. A committee consisting of Sadie Hunt, Amon Tanner, George Poor and Coke Wood was formed to get the Society organized. The Society became very successful and boasted of the honor of having "Mr.

CALAVERAS CORNERSTONE

Myron Smith, Grand Master F & A M, grouts in the cornerstone for the new County Government Center at San Andreas, August, 1966. Supervisor Robert Boles holds the mortar board, while Vincent Tiscornia, George Poore, and Coke look on.

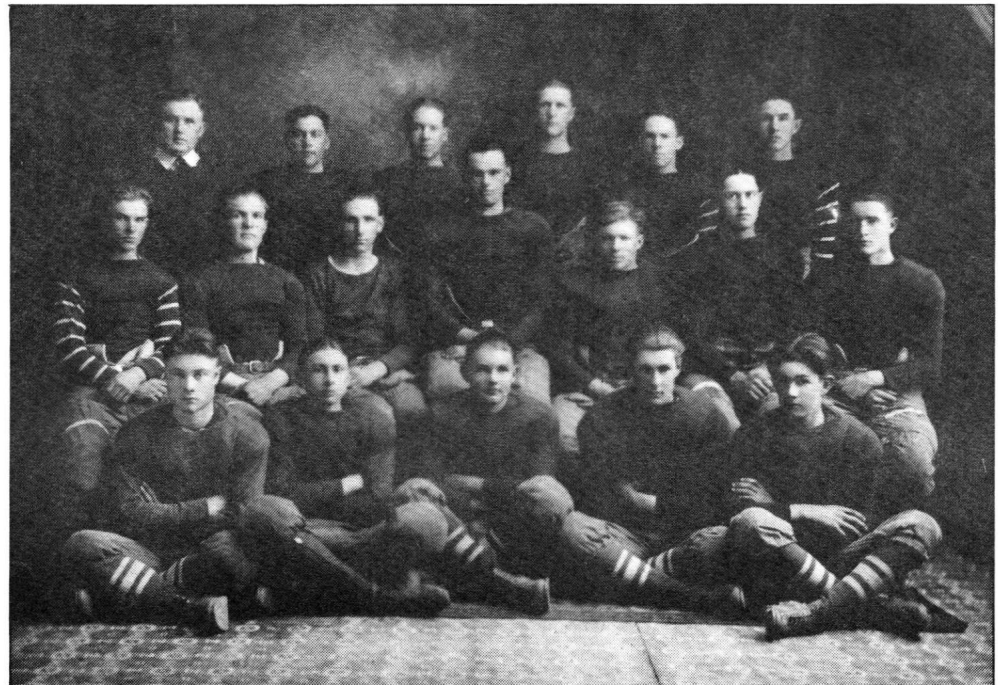




OKLAHOMA — 1911

The Wood family pose in front of their home in Oklahoma. Coke, of course, is the little boy at the right.

Courtesy of the Wood Family



**BISHOP HIGH
FOOTBALL TEAM
1921**

**Coke Wood
standing
far right**

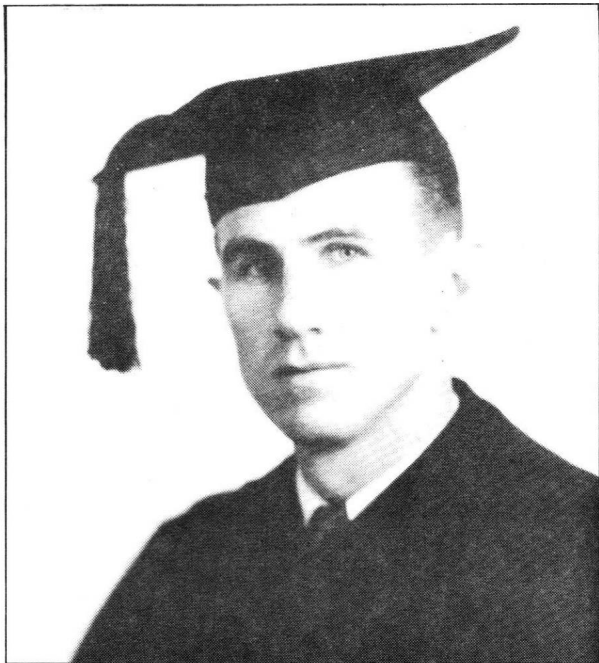
*Courtesy of the
Wood Family*



LENORA GILMORE WOOD

Coke's mother from a photograph taken in the 1880s.

Courtesy of the Wood Family



FINALLY MADE IT

R. Coke Wood graduates in May, 1932, from the College of the Pacific.

Loaned by Mrs. Ruth Clarke



A MAN WITH A HOE

Coke's father shows a friend (and landlord) how its done. From a snap taken about 1919.

Courtesy of the Wood Family

California", Dr. Rockwell Hunt; "Mr. Mother Lode", Archie Stevenot; and "Mr. Calaveras", Judge J. A. Smith, as members.

Coke was active in the Calaveras County Historical Society and rarely missed a meeting until recently. He also edited the *Las Calaveras* quarterly from October, 1952, until October, 1964, when the present editor, Willard Fuller, succeeded him. Coke served as an officer for many years and as Honorary Director for the past five years. He was also one of the principal founders of the Tuolumne County Historical Society in 1953.

Coke helped organize the Conference of California Historical Societies (California History Foundation) with Dr. Robert Burns, Dr. Rockwell Hunt, and others, at meetings in 1953 and 1954 at Columbia State Park. He served as Chairman of the By-Laws Committee of the Conference, and as the foundation's Executive Secretary. He continued in this position for eighteen years, receiving no salary or reimbursement for his expenses. He was given Honorary Life Membership in the Conference for his services as Executive Secretary, in 1972. He was especially proud of his record of never having missed an annual meeting. He served as the Conference's President 1975-76 during the Nation's Bicentennial Year. He died in the December, 1975, issue of the *California Historian*:

What a great year to be president of the Conference of California Historical Societies. Never in our twenty-three year history has the interest, enthusiasm and membership been greater. Part of this fine spirit is due to the fact that these are our country's bicentennial years and every historical society, museum, association, or organization is doing its own historical project, and part of it is due to our twenty-three years of successful service to our local and regional societies.

Coke helped organize the Stockton Corral of Westerners in 1958, with Dr. Glen Price, Dr. Rockwell D. Hunt, V. Covert Martin and others. He served as Range Rider (program chairman) for ten years until he became Sheriff in 1969.

He was a member of the Board of Directors of the San Joaquin Pioneer and Historical Museum and Haggin Galleries for twelve years, and also served on the Stockton Heritage Council (City of Stockton) since 1970.

In 1964, Coke was given the "Award of Merit" by the California Historical Society for his outstanding efforts in organizing State and local historical societies, and for the preservation of California history.

He was appointed in 1965 as a member of the State Landmarks Advisory Committee (which approves the marking of historical sites) by Governor "Pat" Brown. He was reappointed by Governor Ronald Reagan in 1968,

and again for another term by Governor Jerry Brown. He served as the Committee's chairman for two years.

In 1966, Dr. Wood was named to the "Hunt Chair" in history at the University of the Pacific as the first lecturer of the Rockwell D. Hunt Foundation.

By concurrent resolution of the California State Legislature in 1969, he was designated as "Mr. California" for his work in the preservation of California history. He was also given special commendation by Governor Ronald Reagan when he was presented the resolution. To be proclaimed "Mr. California" was an achievement of great merit. Although born in Oklahoma, Dr. Wood chose to call California his home.

His great love for the gold country was reflected, too, in his love for E. Clampus Vitus, whose history goes back to the days of the '49ers. This organization had been inactive for many decades but was reactivated by Carl Wheat in 1931. Coke joined Matuca Chapter at Mariposa in 1958. He was named Clamphistorian of the Grand Council in 1965, and with others helping, he published the pamphlet, *E.C.V.—Then and Now*.

In 1970, he helped organize the Tuleburg Chapter of E.C.V., and was chosen the First Noble Grandhumbug, was appointed Clamphistorian and the Clamparchivist by the Clamproctors of the Grand Council of E. Clampus Vitus.

In 1970 he was appointed to the California American Revolution Bicentennial Commission which was to plan for a suitable observance of the Bicentennial in 1976. He was nominated by Assemblyman Bob Monagan and appointed by Governor Reagan.

On April 2, 1975, Tuleburg Chapter of E.C.V. erected a bronze plaque honoring him. It was installed at the entrance of the Holt-Atherton Pacific Center for Western Studies on the University of Pacific campus. The Mayor of Stockton proclaimed April 12, 1975 as "Dr. Coke Wood Day."

At the request of Don Clausen, a Member of Congress, the United States flag, flown over the Capitol at Washington, D.C., on June 27, 1979, in Coke's honor, was sent to him. On Tuesday, December 18, 1979 this same flag was flown at half-mast on the UOP campus, the day of the R. Coke Wood Memorial Service.

Coke received his B.A. from the University of the Pacific in 1932, his M.A. in 1934, and his Ph.D. at the University of Southern California in 1950.

This sixteen-year lapse between Masters and Doctorate degrees was part of a pattern of his continued effort to succeed, despite repeated illness. Coke struggled with ill health most of his life, and in fact, had a lung resection just prior to beginning his doctorate. He was warned by the doctor that it would be too strenuous and that he wouldn't last a year, but ironically, he outlived the doctor.

Coke has received many honors. For twenty-one years

he taught at both San Joaquin Delta College and the University of the Pacific (at that time they were just across the street from each other). He retired from Delta in 1971, and from UOP in 1976, as Professor of History.

He was the Director of the Holt-Atherton Pacific Center for Western Studies at UOP from 1968 to 1976. He also directed the Pacific Mission Tour, better known as the California Mission Tour, from 1961 through 1976. The tour was started in 1958 by Dr. G.A. Werner as a symbolic tracing of the Spanish beginnings and heritage of California. Hundreds of students enjoyed and profited culturally by taking this interesting trip with Coke.

Coke also taught a television course for the University of the Pacific in 1958 over Channel 10 and again in 1963. The course, *California History*, was offered by Delta College in 1970–1971, and Dr. Wood was given an Award of Merit by the American Association for State and Local Government for his leadership abilities.

His educational honors include his election to Phi Beta Kappa at the University of Southern California in 1951. He was elected to Phi Delta Kappa in 1954, and honored by them by being elected “Educator of the Year” in 1965 by the Pacific Chapter.

His love of California was reflected in all of his writings, especially those concerning the Mother Lode.

Coke Wood has authored the following books and pamphlets: *Murphys, Queen of the Sierra*, (1948); *Tales of*

Old Calaveras, (1949); *Calaveras, land of Skulls*, his Ph.D. thesis (1955); *California Story*, in cooperation with Leon Bush, (1957); *California Government*, (1958).

In collaboration with V. Covert Martin, he published *Stockton Album Through the Years*, (1959). Other publications were: *The Big Tree Bulletin*, (1960); *A Night in Wingdom*, (1960); *O’Byrnes Ferry Covered Bridge*, (1961); *Mark Twain and the Jumping Frog*, (1961); *Centennial History of Murphys Congregational Church*, (1966); *Story of E. Clampus Vitus*, (1966); *Ebbetts Pass and the Big Trees Road*, (1969); *Murphys Diggins*, (1970); *The Owens Valley As I Knew It*, his masters thesis, (1972), and *The Calaveras Grove of Big Trees*, (1973).

Four paperbacks on Calaveras County towns have been edited and published by Coke through the Old Timers Museum. They are: *The Annals of Mokelumne Hill*, by Emmett Joy, (1968); *Chronicles of San Andreas*, by Emmett Joy, (1972); *Untold Tales of Murphys*, by Elizabeth Kaler, (1972); and *A Brief History of Angels Camp*, by Ed Leonard, (1973).

Together with five of his students in 1971, Coke published *California-Colonial Time Line*, under auspices of the Bicentennial Commission; *Stockton Memories*, with Leonard Covello (1977); and *Mother Lode Memories*, again with Covello, (1979).

Even after retiring from the University of the Pacific, Coke Wood remained actively interested in writing and was in constant contact with his many friends and as-



MISSION TOUR — 1967

Coke and Ethelyn Wood, tour directors, pose with their group before boarding the bus, in front of U.O.P.’s Burns Tower. Among others in this picture are Ronald Limbaugh and Hugh

Hayes, to left of Dr. Wood’s right. Tod Ruse is in the front row. This was the 20th tour, and the sixth under the Woods’ leadership.

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The Calaveras County Historical Society, a non-profit corporation, meets on the fourth Thursday of each month at the Grange Hall in San Andreas—except for dinner meetings which are held each quarter at different places in the county.

Back issues of “Las Calaveras” may be purchased from the Society at a cost of 75¢ per issue to members or \$1.00 to non-members, plus a charge of 25¢ per issue for envelope and postage if mailed. Xerox copies of out-of-print issues will be supplied at 60¢ per issue plus mailing charges. Back issues may be purchased over the counter (without mailing) at the San Andreas Museum.

Note

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In Memoriam

Winifred P. Peek Richard Coke Wood

Illustrations

Unless otherwise credited, the illustrations were supplied by the Holt-Atherton Pacific Center for Western Studies.

sociates. He was able to realize his fervent dream to see his last book, *Mother Lode Memories* in print, and was able to attend two autograph signings just hours before his death.

Behind the quiet and pleasant demeanor of Dr. R. Coke Wood was a talented and aggressive mind. His memory was phenomenal, his patience was unlimited. He always had time to listen to others. He was dedicated to the interests of Murphys throughout his life. He remained a deeply religious man, strongly influenced by Christian principles. He was a teacher loved by his students. He took time with each one of them. He had sterling qualities of loyalty to his friends.

His memory and influence will be kept alive by the works of his students and by the families and friends he touched in many dimensions.

“Little old Murphys Town” is indeed privileged to have been the home, and to remain that in all eternity, of Dr. R. Coke Wood, Beloved Historian, Teacher, Friend and Old Timer. May his spirit and good works remain alive in our hearts and minds, and may we always be reminded and inspired by the presence of this Christian gentleman.

