

Zachary Taylor Winfree

(1846 – 1918)

Zachary Taylor Winfree, one of the most colorful and interesting figures in Chambers County history, was a bundle of enigmas wrapped within a human form. He was a preacher who left one church for another, and then left his wife only to be reunited with her later. He was a Winfree, and yet he wasn't. He was named for one of the greatest military leaders in and then came back to her. He was a writer, a postmaster, a newspaper publisher, a county official and also a cattleman.

Our subject came into the world on December 29, 1846, in Galveston and was the son of Mr. and Mrs. A. H. Long. With the nation in a celebratory mood after the American victory in the Mexican War, his parents named the baby boy Zachary Taylor Long, in honor of the commanding general of the U.S. forces. Mr. and Mrs. Long were newcomers to Texas, having arrived here from Pennsylvania a short while before their son's birth. His mother died either when he was born, or two hours afterward, which left his father in a predicament.

Unable to care for the baby himself, the elder Long sent the infant to one household after another. Mrs. Enoch Brinson at Cedar Bayou had him for a time. Later a Mrs. Brooks cared for him, and Elizabeth (Winfree) Barrow later took him in. None of these situations proved permanent, and so Jacob Freeland Winfree and his wife Polly finally took him in. The couple later adopted the young fellow. Many local genealogists refer to him as Zachary Taylor Long Winfree. The young fellow reached the age of maturity and immediately enlisted in the Confederate Army in March 1864.

He was at that same time married on March 14, 1864 to Mary Catherine Fisher, a daughter of Jeremiah Conrad and Sarah Ann (Barrow) Fisher. The wedding took place at the Fisher home on West Trinity Bay. The young couple later became parents of six children: Edwin Hamilton, who married Mary Elizabeth Hunt; Zachary Jeremiah, who died young; Kinney Monroe, who married Annie Hunt; Sarah Elmira, who married Wilson Epperson; Ernest Watson, who married Sarah Amanda Dutton; and Otis Keton (best known as O. K. Winfree), who married Atha Mamie Moody. All of his five surviving children became well known residents of Western Chambers County. One of his grand- sons, Guy Hamilton "Cobb" Winfree, was elected as county commissioner and later served as county judge.

Around 1888, when he was forty-two years of age, Z. T. Winfree embraced the Methodist church and was described as a "zealous" member for one full year. Over that same period of time, however, he began a study of the scriptures and convinced himself that the Church of Christ was following the true teachings of Christ. A biography of Winfree states that "he was baptized by Brother Bonham and immediately began preaching the Gospel." He traveled throughout Southeast Texas and his wagon became a familiar sight to the faithful of the region.

Winfree had a civic side to him as well. He became the first postmaster of Mont Belvieu, and is widely attributed with having selected that particular name for the post office. He operated the facility out of his own home. He also served simultaneously as justice of the peace and county commissioner from 1891 to 1893, being succeeded in both offices by Mr. F. M. "Frank" Fitzgerald, Jr.

He was also the publisher, briefly at least, of a religious newspaper known as "One Body," which was published in Mont Belvieu in 1902. The newspaper survived only briefly. Winfree enjoyed greater success with writing religious books. He seems to have three to his credit, namely "Man of Sin," "The Woman in Scarlet" and "The Woman in White."

One of the strangest incidents in his life was the divorce from his wife Mary Fisher Winfree on August 29, 1901. The couple was later remarried on May 7, 1902. The original petition, which might have shed some light on the incident, is missing from the district court records of Chambers County. The Winfrees apparently had a brief reunion, and they were later divorced again. Family records show that Z. T. Winfree was married secondly to Verdie Morgan. They lived in Westfield in Harris County. Winfree died there in 1918 and was buried there.

Mrs. Mary Winfree, his first wife, died in 1935 at Mont Belvieu and was buried in a small family cemetery.

-- Kevin Ladd