

MacRae, Elizabeth Ann ^[1]

MacRae (McRae), Elizabeth Ann

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13 Nov. 1825–8 Apr. 1907

Elizabeth Ann MacRae, missionary and teacher, was born in Marion County, S.C., the daughter of Daniel S. and Harriet Brown Harlee. In 1842 she married Dr. Neill McNair and became the mistress of Argyle, the McNair home in Alma, near Maxton, in Robeson County ^[2]. They attended Centre Presbyterian Church in Maxton.

Dr. McNair died in 1863, and their only child, David Harlee, was killed at Fort Caswell ^[3] in July 1864. During the post-Civil War period, Mrs. McNair suffered much at the hands of the Henry Berry Lowry ^[4] gang. Shortly afterwards she married Alexander MacRae, of Wilmington ^[5], who died in 1881. Already reputed as capable of training the young, Mrs. MacRae had been responsible for teaching many of her young relatives and neighbors.

After the death of her second husband, her teaching and missionary work spread throughout the region. A Presbyterian, she began a campaign to organize missionary societies for the women of the Fayetteville Presbytery. Her own minister, Dr. D. H. Hill, encouraged her in her work, but this was not true of a majority of his fellow ministers. Mrs. MacRae faced opposition from the men and a lack of interest among the women. She refused to be deterred, however. At her own expense she visited all the churches of the presbytery scattered over eight large, sparsely populated counties. Since railroads were not always available, she traveled most often by horse and buggy. If no one came to a meeting, she scheduled another one for a later time. Gradually she wore down resistance, and the Missionary Union ^[6] grew. When she was seventy she traveled eight hundred miles to visit fifty-three communities, and by the end of 1896 she had traveled a total of nearly six thousand miles, generally in an open buggy regardless of the weather.

Meanwhile, Elizabeth MacRae continued her teaching. Most of the year she taught in her home community, but she spent her summers teaching in the mountains. Once the success of her missionary societies was assured, she went out in search of a new career. In the areas around Banner Elk and the Tennessee border, known then as the "Lost Provinces", she and Rev. Edgar Tufts worked to provide social, education, and religious services to the people of the area. In 1900, Tufts established a school of 12 female students and two teachers. Tufts named the school the Elizabeth McRae Institute to honor her work and dedication to the region. Later, once a department at the school opened for boys, Tufts named this part in honor of Susanna P. Lees, who gave generously in support of the school. From it was established the present-day Lees-McRae College ^[7].

During a five-year terminal illness Mrs. MacRae lived with her stepdaughter, Mrs. J. F. Payne of Wilmington ^[5]. At her own request, she was buried at Centre Church Cemetery, Maxton.

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