

The artist's wife: Or, who was Mrs. J. Wesley Little?

Williamsport Women

by MARY SIEMINSKI

J. Wesley Little was a well-known artist from Picture Rocks whose career extended from the 1890s to his death in 1923. His work hangs in the Thomas T. Taber Museum, other area museums and in many local homes, including mine. Most of his paintings are watercolors, and they often feature sheep and cattle, fertile fields and streams. Because he was prolific and his paintings and sketches sold well, he was able to support his family as an artist.

But who was Mrs. J. Wesley Little? I discovered that she, too, led an interesting life.

About J. Wesley Little

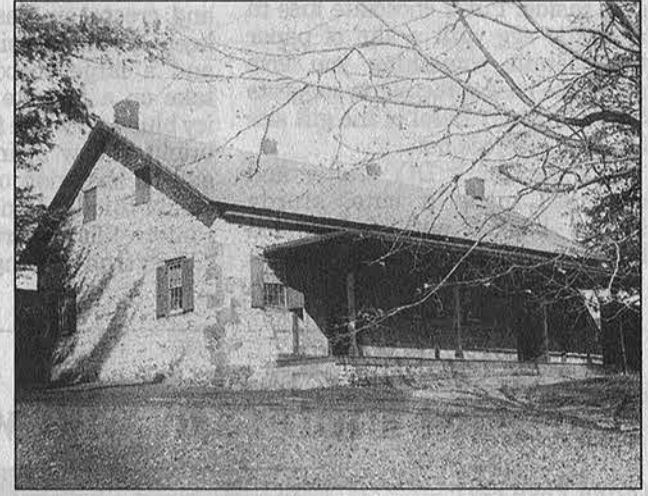
John Wesley Little was born in 1867 near Forksville, the youngest of nine children. The Little family had been early settlers in Pennsylvania. J. Wesley's grandfather Theophilus Little, a Revolutionary War soldier, bought tracts of land in Sullivan County in 1799 and was instrumental in the development of the county and of Eagles Mere. J. Wesley Little taught summer art classes at the Eagles Mere Chautauqua from 1897 to 1904.

J. Wesley grew up in Picture Rocks and lived there for many years with his wife and children and was buried there. Although he studied in New York and traveled in Europe and the United States, the inspiration for most of his work was our local region.



About Susan Heim Little

Susan Heim's family also had been early settlers in the area. "Susannah" was born on Feb. 22, 1873, in Quaker Hill, Eldred Township, over the hill from the Blooming Grove Meetinghouse. She was the fifth of seven children of Christian David Heim and Elizabeth Gross. Her family traced its Blooming Grove heritage



PHOTOS PROVIDED

At left is a watercolor by J. Wesley Little. In the above photo, provided by the Blooming Grove Historical Society, is the Blooming Grove Meeting House.

to 1804, when three of Susan's great-grandfathers, Leonard Ulmer, Leonard Steiger and Frederick Gross, came with their families from Germany to escape religious persecution.

As a child, she attended the "new" brick schoolhouse at Quaker Hill, built in 1866 to replace the original stone schoolhouse constructed in 1835.

Susan attended Muncy Normal School, the county's teacher training institute, graduating in 1893 when she was 20. She was hired as a grade school teacher in Picture Rocks.

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The marriage

The details of the courtship of Susan Heim and J. Wesley Little were recorded by their children in a book about their father: "John Wesley Little: 1867-1923: Biography of an Artist," by Eleanor Little Eanes, Jean Edkin Little and Thomas Morton Little (1966).

The couple met at a party in Picture Rocks given by Mrs. C. W. Burrows, who was known for her matchmaking abilities. J. Wesley made many visits to the Heim farm, although, according to the children, "Neighboring farmers thought Sue Heim was 'keeping company' with a mighty queer young fellow who went out in the meadow and painted the picture of a cow!"

The courtship was interrupted by J. Wesley's painting trip to Europe. The couple exchanged letters almost daily while he was abroad, and the Rev. E. R. Powell married them in Warrensville on Dec. 4, 1900.

The newlyweds settled in Fort Washington, near Philadelphia. Their first child, Eleanor Heim Little, was born there. Susan and Eleanor accompanied J. Wesley on a six-month trip to England.

The family moved back to Picture Rocks in 1906. Their second daughter, Jean Edkin Little, was born that same year, and their son, Thomas Morton Little, was born in 1910. In 1911, they moved from their farm to a home with a studio at the corner of Center and Water streets. The house still stands today.

One Little biographer, Lewis Edwin Theis, paints a picture of Susan as a devoted wife, "more like a mother than a



PHOTO PROVIDED

Shown in this photo from West Branch Magazine, Jan. 1924, is a pencil drawing by J. Wesley Little in 1899.

wife." In her, Theis said, J. Wesley "found a companion of rare understanding and ability, without whose sympathetic help he could never have won the success he did."

Theis describes J. Wesley as a temperamental man who "could not be disturbed when he was at white heat" and sometimes would not say a word at dinner ("J. Wesley Little — The Man" by Lewis Edwin Theis, West Branch Magazine, J. Wesley Little Special Issue, vol. 1, No. 7, Jan. 1924).

Susan's obituary, newspaper stories and notes from their children depict an active, genial and committed woman. During World War I, when her children were young, Susan chaired Picture Rocks' Red Cross efforts. She was active in the women's suffrage movement.

A widow

In 1923, after being ill for several years, J. Wesley Little died. Eleanor, 22, was a stu-

dent at Bucknell; Jean was 17; and Thomas was 13. J. Wesley had painted feverishly in his last years to produce paintings that might support the family after his death.

All three children graduated from Bucknell. In November 1925, Susan held a public sale of her late husband's paintings in Lewisburg. Archival records at Bucknell indicate that one Little painting, "A Misty Morning," was acquired by Bucknell "in payment of the tuition of Thomas M. Little, B.U., 1931."

While Thomas was at Bucknell, census records show that Susan was employed as a house-mother at the English House at Susquehanna University.

In her later years, Susan lived with daughter Jean in Williamsport. Susan was a volunteer worker at the Williamsport Hospital during the labor shortages of World War II and worked weekends at the hospital as a receptionist until she "retired" at the age of 87. She was a deaconess and a Sunday

school teacher at the First Baptist Church.

Susan gave frequent talks about her husband's career, and she wrote engaging stories about life in the small town of Blooming Grove, where people held quilting parties and made apple butter. Excerpts from her memoirs were published in Now and Then and the Journal of the Lycoming County Historical Society.

She made headlines in 1959 when, at 86, she took her first airplane trip to a Heim Family Reunion in Humboldt, Nebraska. Susan was the sole surviving member of her original Blooming Grove family.

She died at 91, on Jan. 5, 1965, 42 years after her husband. She is buried in the family plot in Picture Rocks Cemetery.

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