



**William Esco
Phelps**



**Rose Honor Davis
Phelps**

William Esco Phelps was born June 22, 1891 in the Middlesettments Community of Blount County, Tennessee. He was the oldest son of Daniel Richard Phelps and Sarah Jane Lebow Phelps. His siblings who survived to adulthood were Rhoda Ethel, Richard Earl, Vola Beatrice, Vivian Blane, and Henry Verlan. Three sisters died in infancy prior to his birth. He was known by his middle name, Esco.

During Esco Phelps' youth, the family owned and farmed 166 acres in the Middlesettments Community near what is now called Lovingood Spring. It included part of Grey Ridge and Long Hollow. The farm was purchased jointly in 1867 for \$1450 by Esco's father, Daniel Richard, his grandmother Rhoda, and younger brothers, George and Hiram.

Not quite 20 years old, William Esco Phelps married Rosa Honor Davis on April 30, 1911. "Rose" lived on an adjacent farm and was the daughter of John Brownlow Davis and Mihaska Bright Davis. She described their wedding in a note written on their 66th wedding anniversary, "we was setting in a buggy in the middle of the road..on the north side of and at the foot of gray ridge, god had that side of the ridge covered with birds and wild flowers". Her full note is in the media section.

Soon after their marriage the young couple built and furnished a two-story house on top of Grey Ridge. Within months of its completion, the house caught fire and burned to the ground. Rose and Esco were not at home when the fire started. All their possessions were lost except a rocking chair that was on the front porch.

Rose and Esco Phelps became parents of a son on February 28, 1912. They named him John Richard after his grandfathers. Sadly, he died of whooping cough within two months. The young couple's second child was born in the spring of 1913 and was named Geneva.

William Esco's father had not written a will before he died in 1910. By law, the farm on which Esco, his widowed mother, and several of the children lived had to be sold at auction to satisfy the legitimate claims of all the heirs. The sale took place at the Blount County Court House on December 13, 1913. The highest bid was \$3502. At the end of the day, W. B. Lovingood was the new owner of what had been the Phelps family farm.

Daughter Edna Earle was born in late 1914. With young daughters Geneva and Edna, Esco and Rose moved to Texas about 1916 to work on the ranch of W. E. Love. The ranch was seven miles north of the small town of Hansford in the flat, windswept Texas panhandle. With World War I in progress, William Esco Phelps signed his draft registration card on June 5, 1916. In the spring of 1917, another son was born and named Daniel Edward.

By 1918 Esco and Rose Phelps had moved from Texas back to Tennessee. To support his young family, Esco went alone to Wilmington, North Carolina where work was available in the wartime shipyards. The year 1918 is remembered for the armistice in Europe, but also as the year of The Great Influenza Epidemic. Living in a boarding house near the shipyard, William Esco caught the deadly flu. His story of his several feverish days between life and death was grimly riveting. Many of his fellow boarders did not survive.

Daughter Anna Reva Phelps was born in the autumn of 1919. During the 1920s the Phelps family continued to grow. William Esco provided for his wife and children by working part-time as a carpenter and farming at several locations in Blount County. New son William Darrell arrived in 1921, daughter Juanita May in 1924, and their last child, Jerrod Gilbert in 1926.

In the mid-1930s, Esco and Rose Phelps settled on a 40-acre farm on Grey Ridge that had come into the family by inheritance. They lived in a temporary house as Esco went to work on a proper home to replace the one that had burned higher on the same ridge 20 years earlier. A building site was selected at the center of a broad step in the ridge. When time could be spared from his farm duties and with help of some of his sons, lumber was cut, a cistern was dug, red oak shingles rived and a foundation laid. The house took years to complete but was a work of art when finished. It was two-story with outer walls of cured pine logs placed vertically. The shingled upper story included two dormers on the front for added light and space. A gabled roof covered the front porch.

William Esco Phelps was a farmer at heart and better farmland was never far from his mind. He loved "to see things grow", he said. Experience had taught him that it was hard to get ahead on a ridge-side farm. River bottoms and level land grew the best crops and when Esco learned in 1948 of a 200 acre farm that had both, he made arrangements to buy it, though it was 70 miles away in Bradley County.

Esco and Rose were near 60 years of age when they tackled their new farm in Bradley County. Daughter Juanita and her husband Bill Jackson partnered in the venture. The farm had an acceptable barn, but needed a second one.

The house that was on the place when they bought it was barely livable. The Jackson's also needed a house, so the foursome went to work and built two new houses and a barn.

In the mid-1950s with age beginning to take its toll, Esco Phelps retired from farming. He and Rose moved back to Blount County and lived their later years near family. Son William Darrell and his wife Marie lived next door and, along with other family, helped them to live independently until their late 80s. William Esco died on March 2, 1983. He is buried in Sherwood Memorial Gardens, Maryville, Blount County, Tennessee. Rose survived him by three years.

William Esco Phelps is remembered as a kind and gentle man. His energy and strength seemed boundless, but his manner was quiet, humble, and considerate. He spoke softly but directly. He was an ardent listener and his responses were always careful and well considered. His honesty was beyond question. His word was his bond. As one admiring grandson put it, "Whatever he told you, you could take it to the bank".

No one was a better story teller than Esco Phelps the grandfather. His grandchildren listened to stories of the family with rapt attention. Much of what we know about the Phelps family was passed to younger generations by his stories. Most accounts were of major life events and of a serious nature, but some were humorous and no one laughed harder at the end than the teller.

He loved to hunt and fish and was good at both. He was also a good cook and often got in the kitchen to fix for the table whatever he had brought home from field or stream. One grandchild remembers baked quail on a bed of dressing, another freshly caught catfish fried in special cornmeal batter. A daughter remembers that he always whistled while he worked in the kitchen and that he made wonderful cornbread from freshly picked, almost-hardened corn, grated by hand on a grater that he had made himself. His love for sweets was well known, the more sugar the better.

William Esco Phelps lived close to the land all of his life and considered the long hours of a farmer a labor of love. When asked in later years to reflect on a life that had its share of difficulty, he responded quickly with a convincing gleam in his eye and no hint of regret, "Farming is the best life there is."