

P.S. — A SENTIMENTAL JOURNEY

Knowing that I was about to complete the promise I had made several years ago to Elizabeth Cole and Shirley Brother to write this story, I decided to go out by myself and travel around to recapture something of what I had experienced when I first began to put shape to a library dream — if only to touch the soil where it all began.

So it happened one April morning early, while the dew was still fresh upon the grass and shrubs, I made my way back to the high western hills of Carroll County, retracing my first route of over three decades ago, when our program was in its morning, with the dew of expectancy and hope fresh upon my heart and mind.

It is easy driving now over blacktopped roads, considering the road conditions I first encountered there. I recognized a feeling of aloneness that took possession of me. Later I would remind myself that this is what happens when one looks backward, not forward. Seemingly the only other traveler out on the open road was the rural mail carrier, who scurried in his little bug of a car from one mailbox to another. A dog barked as I drove past one home, but I heard no other sound. I turned my head to gaze upon a spring-green apple grove, thinking of how lovely that spot would have been two weeks before, when the apple blossoms must have touched the trees with white delight. Dogwoods were still in bloom all through the woods, and spring had touched the oaks, the blackgums, the elders, and the poplars into another awakening.

I passed near a great ploughed field, readied for planting, and across the way, a tractor in the distance moved along the rows. The man riding it waved at me and I waved back, remembering another field in April long ago, and a man behind a mule and a plough.

Big Indian Creek still wound its way across the road, through the woods till it meandered from sight. My little car climbed higher and higher. The scattered neat brick and white-framed homes all have television aerials now atop the roofs, I noted, and most of them had at least one car nearby; but I did not see a single lilac bush.

I came upon a crossroad. Which way to turn? I mused. I noticed a very small child perched on an enormous tractor beside a lush green lawn that stretched up to a lovely brick home, tied to the landscape by beds of flowers and flowering shrubs. I am sure it was the Mother who came out, bare of foot — a beautiful young woman, who smilingly came towards me.

“Hi!” I said. “It’s lovely here.”

“Hi, yourself, thank you,” she greeted me.

“I am Edith Foster,” I began, “and . . .”

“Oh, the librarian from Carrollton,” she broke in to say.

I grinned. “All the side roads are blacktopped and I am finding it confusing. I am trying to re-trace my first route across this part of the country and to the peak of Haralson where I used to kick up the dust or slush the mud about in that first little puddle-jumper of a library wagon. I’m sort of gathering atmosphere for the book I’m writing. I simply must see the old abandoned Smithfield School and the houses nearby and High Point Community.”

“I heard about the book,” she said. “It was in the news a few weeks ago,” she said, directing me to the proper turns along the way to get me to Buncombe, to Garrett’s Chapel, to Smithfield, and on beyond — waving goodbye with the words: “Good luck with your book.”

If I don’t have good luck, it will be my fault, I thought, as I drove on; for the people, the places, and the events have quietly made library history.

I took the turns as I was directed, through the Garrett Chapel Community where Nell Garrett Smith and her husband live in the old homeplace, then to Buncombe Settlement where memories came floating back till I clearly could see the wonderful Grand Prize-winning float in the Big Parade, long, long ago, when “Operation Library — a Tournament of Books” transpired; the laughing moments I shared at Johnson’s Store every time I crossed the top of the high hills there; the joyous “hellos!” that greeted me all up an down the roads across the country.

As I turned back and neared Smithfield I saw honeysuckle climbing the posts and spreading out across the fences, its tubular yellow flowers heavy with rich nectar. Around a curve in the road I came upon the spot I had been seeking. There was the barn, now weathered by time, closed and obviously abandoned.

I know that time is change; but I was not prepared for this. I pulled up in front of the home I remembered so well, turned off the ignition and sat in the silence. I knew at first glance that the Smith dwelling was no longer a home — except in memory. It is just a house now, locked and silent. Mildred and Earnest do not live there anymore. He has entered “that mysterious realm” and she since her stroke has lived with her son in Jonesboro.

Off to the side near the road is the store where we once served the community of Smithfield. I relived the moment when I would lightly tap the horn as a signal and Mildred would come running out of her home, across the yard to the store, greeting me with book talk. I looked away from the house to the store on the corner of the yard, down near the road showing the weathering of rain and winds and blistering suns. The paint was peeled. The windows, spider-webby, crossed with iron bars which now are rusted and bent, that bespoke to me of utter emptiness. In other days the outside appearance would beckon with its fresh whiteness; the inside, its clean shelves neatly stocked with food for body and mind, promised an immediate interlude of browsing and sharing against a later experience of satisfying some hunger or other which persistently returns to urge, to press, to demand — .

The school on the hill adjoining is also abandoned — given over to the theory that “bigness is greatness.” When the neighborhood school goes, something very precious goes with it, I thought, as I looked across where once a large schoolyard was crowded with happy children and the teachers upon seeing me coming, would call out for me to join them and share a cool drink in the shade — .

I turned and walked up to the front door of the Smith home, looking in, a flood of memories swept over me. I knocked. I knew nobody was there; but I knocked. Again I knocked. A hollow, dead sound broke the spell of nothingness momentarily, then eerily echoed against my heart. Walking around the house I passed a wisteria vine hanging as in weariness under the mid-morning sun, intertwined about a magnolia and a holly. I heard the humming sound of bumble bees at work among the blossoms, the only sound to break the stillness. In the corner at the front was a snowball bush as tall as the roof of a house. I quoted aloud for myself lines from Thomas Gray’s *Elegy*:

“Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.”

I went back to the car and sat — and wept. Why? I don’t know. How does one account for the ache the heart experiences at such a

time? I had no books — anyhow, there was no Mildred there; but — well — I know it is sufficient that our lives once touched, which is what this library business is all about (and all of life, is it not?) and that we shared our laughter and our thoughts along with our books — .

I drove to High Point and parked, looking down upon the valley below, the vista stretching far away down green slopes into the mist of a far-away ridge. **No matter what you did — I said to myself — the library program has not reached its “high point.” Around every bend in the road lies a new challenge, another adventure. You pioneered. Those who come after you will follow as yet unthought-of avenues of library service — You have one thing, however, that doubtless will never be repeated: that great chorus of eager voices at the crossroad store and the small rural school, greeting your arrival with . . . “Yonder she comes!”**

Come to think of it, I'd settle for that as my Sweet Chariot swings high — up in sight of those Pearly Gates!