Chapter 4

Origins

The orphanage was begun fifty years before our arrival by John Haymes Mills, a tenderhearted man of extraordinary vision and tenacity. We learned of its history as it became our home. About four thousand others in need of love and care, had found it there before us.

Henry and Ellen McNeill came by train a few days before Christmas, 1893, tags around their necks and in the care of two kindly conductors. Ellen was five and Henry eight. The train stopped after dark at Mr. Mill's house out in the country three miles from the orphanage, near the railroad tracks. Mr. Mills listened for the train whistle as it passed the orphanage entrance, and by the time the steam engine had covered the three miles, he and two gangling boys waited at the tracks waving their lantern.

Mr. Mills was tall and barrel-shaped. His eyes sparkled with enthusiasm and hope when told, "Here are new children for you, Mr. Mills."

He lifted Henry and Ellen from the train and with the boys in front, lighting the way, he carried Ellen as Henry followed. Martha, Mr. Mills daughter, took immediate charge, getting the children supper and putting them to bed. Early the next morning she took them to her room

and they sat as she made her bed. From a dresser drawer she gave them each, as Ellen remembered, "a bar of the prettiest peppermint candy I had ever seen."

When dressed they went with Mr. Mills in the cold to hitch the horses to a big rock-a-way buggy. They lurched and shifted over frozen roads to the orphanage. Mr. Mills lifted them from the buggy and, holding each by a hand, led them into a girl's cottage, the Mitchell House. He turned Ellen over to Miss Naomi Judd, the teacher, and Mrs. Vic Swann, the matron.

"I was seated among the biggest bunch of younguns I ever saw. They were as quiet as they could be, learning their ABC's from a wall chart. I was only five, but I already knew mine," Ellen related. Henry was taken to the Durham House, a boy's cottage.

That evening Mrs. Swann bedded Ellen down in a room filled with other girls in iron beds. She kissed Ellen goodnight and left. Ellen burst out crying. Heads popped up everywhere.

Bettie Farrier came over and asked, "What's the matter little girl?" "I want my brother to come and kiss me," Ellen said. Mrs. Swann was called.

"You can see Henry in the morning," she said. "Bettie you sleep with Ellen, and the rest of you get quiet." The heads vanished.

Ellen snuggled up to Bettie. Bettie asked, “Did you say your prayers?”

“No, I don’t say prayers.”

“Don’t you know the bad man will get you if you don’t say your prayers.”

Ellen wasn’t afraid of the bad man but she was terribly afraid of that strange, new dark, so she hugged closer to Bettie and covered her head.

Drowsily Bettie compromised, “Well, you can say ‘em laying down this time I s’pose, but you’ve got to say ‘em.”

Together they murmured: “Now I lay me down to sleep.”

With the ready adjustment of a child Ellen was soon sound asleep beside a warm friend in a kind, but alien world.

Mr. Mills met and overcame callous indifference, ignorance, prejudice, and hostility in his effort to establish an orphanage. Many locations were visited and rejected. In January 1885, a friend, Mr. Scarborough, called on Mr. Mills at his home. They discussed the orphanage into the night. Early the next morning they set out to see an eighty acre plot three miles to the east.

Mr. Scarborough, almost seven feet tall, and Mr. Mills, six feet two and over three hundred pounds, rode in a road cart, a two-wheeled vehicle with a single seat. It was pulled by Tar Heel, a spindle-legged colt that had carried Mr. Mills all over North Carolina in his search.

The site was known as Paradise Hill, so named because great crowds of black people came every August to sing, preach, and praise God in revival. They built a brush arbor on the highest point, beneath a giant hickory tree and near a generous spring of good water. At each corner of the arbor they constructed a wooden platform and covered it with earth and there set great fires at dusk. Their spirituals and preaching were heard for miles into the late night.

Mr. Mills bought the land and hired L.E. Peace to take charge of clearing the land in preparation for building a cottage for children. Mr. Peace was assisted by Ransom Oaks, a laborer, and three mules, Sandy, Samson, and Delilah, were bought to do the hauling and heavy work. Uncle Ransom, as he was called, was a faithful black man who sang "Pharoah's Army" as he worked. Once, while ditching, he came down on his great toe and cut it off, thinking it was a turtle's head.

Mr. Mills and Mr. Peace walked the acreage until they knew every spring, every tree, hillock, gully, and dip. Mr. Mills wanted a new kind of house; one for a family of twenty-four, with a school room, and rooms for sleep and play. Mr. Peace studied each plot of land, sketched its contour on paper and located the building in the best place, drawing in ground space for chickens and a cow. Mr. Mills insisted that the children in each cottage be like a family, each with its living quarters, cook house, and sustaining animals. He planned for an orphanage of not more than one

hundred fifty children living in six cottages, three each for boys and girls. The Mitchell House was a ground-level building for twenty-four girls but there were so many orphans that the first building for boys, the Durham House, built the following year, was a two-story house for thirty. Mr. Peace, a skilled builder with a natural talent for design, gave each new building its own character.

As cottages were built, those to the west, arrayed in a row with a dirt road in front, were for boys and those to the east were for girls. Those areas were known thereafter in orphanage language as the Boy's side and the Girl's side. A road, known as the horseshoe, connected the roads from the boy's and girl's sides. As the years passed Mr. Peace built along the horseshoe a laundry, sewing rooms, an infirmary, a printing shop, and an office building. A large grassy meadow, known as the Valley, separated the boy's side from the girl's side.

Most of the children were country-bred, and the orphanage boys learned to farm, tend livestock, and, in some cases, printing. The girls learned to use simple tools and easily mastered their assigned chores. But what was of special significance was the establishment of each child in a routine of life, a routine of habits equipped each child to get along in the world. But the children were not passive receptacles, and they shaped the character of the orphanage even as they themselves were molded

by their collective experiences. Each cottage, beginning with the Mitchell, had its own character.

The Mitchell House was a rectangular brick building ninety feet long and twenty-four feet wide. The north end was a residence for Miss Judd, the teacher, and Mrs. Swann, the matron. The south end was a school room. In the center was the sleeping room, eighteen by fifty feet, with a fireplace at each end. There were fifteen iron beds, two girls to a bed, in space built for twenty-four girls. Across the road and facing the cottage, was the eating house, measuring sixteen by sixty feet and divided into four rooms, dining room, kitchen, provision room, and the cook's sitting room. The eating house was built away from the cottage in case of fire. The matron was housekeeper, house mother, and cook. She and the teacher lived there with the children, the chickens, and the cow, nurturing and teaching the children, and caring for the animals.

In 1893 when Ellen McNeill came to live at the orphanage there were five cottages, each housing twenty-six to thirty children, a chapel, an arbor for holding the annual meeting for friends of the orphanage, a printing house for publishing the orphanage paper, an office building, and a bath house. Two hundred ten children had grown up there and had gone forth to work, study further, or to form their own families.

Shared experiences, some good, some bad, some strange and mysterious, brought the children together into a family larger than that of

the cottage group; it encompassed the whole. Grand and sometimes sad orphanage tales evolved as friend told friend about the special times and what they meant to him or her. Such stories began naturally enough for they were the stuff of life itself and sharing them made it all the richer. There were routine first-time experiences, how to sew, how to hoe, how to do multiplication tables, how fast you learned a poem, how to milk a cow, how to harness a team and work the land, and how to run a printing press. As time passed the orphanage became more complex, more self-sufficient, and new experiences were added in the process.

Ellen told about the time she was a water girl at the Mitchell cottage:

> "Every girl had a duty. I was water girl. The spring was about one hundred fifty yards from the cottage and several times each day I carried buckets of water for drinking or washing. One day a girl told me that the water bucket was empty and I grabbed it and started to run. I grabbed a bonnet at the door but it was someone else's. It was a rule that we wear bonnets whenever we went outside. The girl who owned the bonnet tattled to the matron, and when I got back I was sent to the school teacher. Miss Judd laid me across her lap and tightened my drawers and worked on my behind with a hairbrush. I thought I'd never stop crying."

The teachers and matrons were attracted to orphanage work as though it was a missionary activity, and it was. They meted out a lot of justice, sometimes tempered with mercy. The two great laws: "Thou shalt," and "Thou shalt not" had little flexibility. Water was carried from the spring in cedar buckets and poured cold into tin wash basins for daily ablutions. It was a lick and a promise on the hands and face during the week, but on Saturday the water was heated and poured into big tubs and grime was removed by dunking and scrubbing until shiny. Two buckets of foot-water were carried from the spring daily and poured into a small tub that stood in the corner of the porch – a mute reminder that all feet were to be washed at night. A common tub, a common towel, for the last person it was just too bad.

Later a Mrs. Lilly sent enough money to erect a bath house for the girls. A steam engine pumped hot water into a four by six by eight foot tank where eight to ten girls soaped in luxury. Water was pumped by hand into a hogshead on the second floor and they rinsed by shower. It was years ahead of its time and far more luxurious than many non-orphans had in their own homes.

Ellen learned to sew, to keep house, to read, to write, and to figure, and later, how to cook. She became a kitchen girl. It was up at four, summer as well as winter, shake down the ashes, take them outside and dump them on a pile to be spread on the flower gardens, and build a

wood fire in the iron stove. She sifted six quarts of flour, mixed them for biscuits and rolled, cut, and baked enough for each girl to have two. At six she rang the breakfast bell.

There were good times such as the visits of Mr. Mitchell, the benefactor who had paid for the cottage. He came often and brought news of the world outside as well as gifts which expressed his love for the children. Ellen recalled his visit:

> "When he came we would run to meet him. He was a small man with gray hair and a white beard. He had never married but we were his children. He took as many of us in his arms as he could hold. Tears would roll down his cheeks. We went on to the cottage and sat down with him. He asked us to sing. We sang, 'We'll work until Jesus comes and then we'll gather round. We'll work till papa comes and then we'll gather round!' At the end of each visit Mr. Mitchell gave the matron a dollar to buy us candy."

Sweets were a Christmas-time treat except for special times when Mr. Mitchell bought candy. Sugar was kept under lock in the pantry and in Sunday School when the teacher counted through the thou shalt nots of the Ten Commandments and paused on "Thou shalt not steal," sugar was the item in mind.

There is no record of the orphanage having an ice house and I know of no official document stating the first making of ice cream but Ellen recalled her first taste of it:

> "It was early spring and we were all itching to get out, to take off our shoes and start going barefoot. A cold siege blew in and laid a deep snow. The weather warmed and melted the snow enough that Mrs. Swann could push a small wooden wheelbarrow through a shoveled path to the edge of a small pond. With an ax she broke the ice, filled the wheelbarrow and carted it to the cottage. She laid out the ingredients according to a recipe for vanilla ice cream. The girls clamored to help and she assigned some to break up ice while others mixed the ingredients. She shooed the remainder to the study where they fidgeted and milled around in a carnival atmosphere. Soon the bowls were put out and filled, and we all filed out to a sunny spot on the south side of the house. We sat in the warm sun on a board seat and swung our feet back and forth through the melting slush and tinked our spoons in the bowls. We pulled each spoonful through the mouth just enough to make the tongue tingle in delight. Slowly we repeated it, drawing it out, time and time again, making it last just as long as it would."

Each cottage had its own garden, flock of chickens, pig or pigs, and cow. The cows were distinct personalities. Some were brindled and

mule-headed. “Old Horny,” was one such. For the most part, however, the children loved them and could hardly wait till school was out (12:30 o’clock) and dinner over to run to the barn and get their cows.

The big girls and boys milked and the little ones grazed and fed the cows. Lush grass and wild clover grew everywhere, sometimes causing overeating and foundering. When things went wrong the grazers went into a huddle, diagnosed the case and then treated it according to their veterinary lore. A case of indigestion was pronounced hollow horn if the horns were cold; hollow tail if there seemed to be a vacuum in that member. If, after boring the former or splitting the latter, they got no results, they resorted to drenching with a salt water mixture.

Once old Horny was ailing and failed to respond to treatment. When she didn’t chew contentedly the girls made a cud of dish cloths and coerced a boy, D’arcy Belch, to help force it down her throat. She soon began chewing.

The supply of milk and butter was not always adequate, for Beaut, Old Moses, Old Horny, and Cot were subject not only to doctoring but were kept from grazing in peace by boys and girls who took advantage of their docility and struggled aboard for short bareback rides.

Most of the doctoring of children was done by the matrons and teachers but in serious cases Drs. Bird, Julian, and Flippin were available. The only surgical case at the orphanage during those early days was the

amputation of Peter Muse's leg when it was hopelessly crushed by a train. It had to be taken off near the hip without benefit of hospital. Drs. Julian and Flippin did it in the infirmary as helpers held the lamps and heated the water. Miss Cora Bronson passed the instruments. The boys kept the fires going. Although he hovered in the shadows for days after his traumatic surgical ordeal, Peter pulled through. A strange thing, when he began to get better, he complained that his lost foot itched!

Pete Muse was a popular orphanage boy and the story of his accident was printed in the orphanage paper, *Charity and Children, on January 20, 1894.*

> "Last Saturday while a heavy freight was climbing a steep grade, Peter Muse attempted to take a ride. He fell and his left leg was crushed. He was carried to the infirmary, and the doctors cut if off. Peter has been with us several years, and has been considered a handsome, bright, and good boy. He lost much blood and is very weak. We hope he may recover. He bitterly resents his folly; but is cheerful and tries to take care of his stump."

To pass the time of recovery and to make certain that he didn't repeat such folly his teacher and matron presented him with a Bible.

"Master Peter Muse's Book
presented by
Miss Effie Cain
and
Mrs. S. W. Hall
Peruse this book with utmost care,

Each verse preface with a prayer,
Eternal joy in them you'll find;
Record in your soul the truths combined.
Many days shall be added to your youth
Upon the observance of one great truth;
'Search the Scriptures' is a Divine command,
Ever cling to the Omnipotent hand.
Jan. 20, 1894."

Not long after the orphanage was opened for children Mr. Mills brought a giant bell and placed it on a tower. It called the children to breakfast, to worship, to school, and on occasion it told of a death.

Ennis Atkins was the first child to die. The other children were crushed. School was dismissed. The children gathered in groups and were too sad to play. A grave was dug on a knoll among a grove of sassafras, dogwood, giant oaks, and hickory nut trees, and there at the funeral Mr. Mills wept. Soon death claimed others, including Stella Lambert, a beautiful favorite with black curly hair and pansy blue eyes. Death often splintered families. There were five Perkins boys: Jacob, Fuller, Arthur, John, and Willie. Arthur, freckled and crazy about horses, often drove Mr. Mills around. His death was a great shock as well as a deep grief. It was probably caused by appendicitis.

There were four Belch children: Tom, Ella, D'arcy, and Quinton. Quinton was severely hunched from an accident which broke his back in babyhood. He was a victim of typhoid fever. There were others but as sanitation improved and the children became better nourished the number of graves in God's Acre grew at a slower rate.

These were sad times that disrupted the routines of work, school, church, and play. The memories took on a somber hue when the sad times were due to sickness, for there was no defense. Ellen lived at the Mitchell cottage with Fannie Sharpe, Eugenia Sharpe, Mae Ammons, Eloise Herring, Tola Morrison, Mattie Laura Blanchard, and others. Her special friend was Sally Price. They loved each other. Ellen told of Sally's death:

> "Sally Price was my best friend. We slept together. She was so smart I believe she would have grown up to be famous. About five o'clock one evening she went to make a fire and, when bending over, took a headache. She got bad off with it and through the night couldn't sleep. She asked me to go call the teacher. We weren't supposed to make a noise after we went to bed. I went and knocked on the door two or three times, but she was asleep and didn't hear. I didn't know what to do so I came back to bed. I told Sally that the matron was asleep and didn't answer. I wet a cloth with cold water and put it on Sally's head. When morning came, she couldn't sit up. After breakfast the children got off to school and the matron went to see about her. Mrs. Swann called Mrs. Boone, and she went to fetch the doctor. But before he got there a fit came on her. Doctor Julian came in a little while and stayed all day. He tried to help her, but the fits got worse and

worse, and about five o'clock that evening she died. They let us go in to see her two at a time. She had three brothers, John, Jim, and Gomer. They were at the foot of the bed crying. They tried to locate her mother, but were unable to find her, and had to bury Sally without her mother knowing about it. She was buried in God's Acre – the orphanage graveyard."

Ellen McNeill recalled a scary, mysterious time, the disappearance of Clarence Withers. It was a time when the orphanage became obsessed with fear and suspicious of strangers, a characteristic alien to its usual nature. Clarence was a surly boy of thirteen who lived at the Durham Cottage. He was restless and nursed a yen to be on the road, a trait inbred in some men. Impulse was stronger than plan. The first time he carried his trunk and got four miles down the railroad. Mr. Mills helped him carry it back. The next time he went without the trunk. Mr. Mills met him at the Yadkin River and they came back together.

Mr. Mills assigned Clarence to work with Buck, a large gentle oxen bullock sometimes used for log dragging and heavy hauling but whose primary duty was to pull a large two-wheeled cart built on the style of an ancient chariot with ponderous oak wheels rimmed with steel. Where Buck was the boys were and they clambered on his back and filled the cart hoping for a free ride. Mr. Mills hoped that comradeship with Buck

and the other boys would sway Clarence but it never did. In his heart he yearned to be gone more than he yearned to belong.

The Durham cottage sat among a grove of oaks, bordered to the rear by an open meadow which ran to the Johnsontown road. The meadow was the boy's playground and the road which circled its edge was the entry to the outside world. During the late days of spring a large family of Gypsies in two wagons drove in from the road and set up camp at the far end of the meadow. Their brightly lacquered wagons with tools, pots, and pans strung along the sides irresistibly drew the orphanage boys and they came to gawk as their olive skinned visitors settled in.

The matrons and teachers were suspicious of the Gypsies and told the boys to stay away but the entreaty went unheeded. The pull was too strong. In the evening the Gypsies built a great bonfire of wood foraged from the orphanage land. Their women, heads bedecked with scarves of bright crimsons and deep blues, jangled as they scurried around, their arms flashing from dangling, tinkling bracelets. They were truly foreigners from an exotic land. Over beds of coals pulled to the edge of the bonfire they simmered and stewed pots of food which gave off a mouth watering spicy fragrance. The bland orphanage winter fare of pinto beans, Irish potatoes, thick molasses, biscuits, corn bread, and milk was no match for the enticing odors from the Gypsy cooking pots.

In the late evening the orphanage boys scurried home as the matron rang the come-in bell. They sat for devotions in the study hall, messed around for awhile and then went to bed. They raised their bedroom windows and lay in bed or sat on window sills and listened to the Gypsy sound. Spirited music wafted upward from the campfire as Gypsy men plunked their mandolins and strummed their guitars. It was a mysterious sound, a rousing and summoning sound.

There were Gypsy children who kept to themselves, peeking with suspicion from the insides of their wagons at the light-skinned, bony visitors. They kept to themselves until Clarence drove up in his cart pulled by Buck. The Gypsy young were drawn to Buck and petted him as the orphanage boys timidly gathered around. A breakthrough came in the standoff when a Gypsy boy made friends with Clarence, trading him a small iron bell for the privilege of brushing and currying Buck. The friendship deepened. Clarence spent much time in the Gypsy camp.

Mr. Mills, home from his travels for a few days, visited the Gypsies and asked them to move on. They left early one morning.

Clarence moped around for days. He was scarcely able to eat, missed important details in his work, and was more surly than usual. Three days passed and then, late in the day, one of the wagons returned but stayed only an hour or two. The wagon drove away in a great hurry. In the morning Clarence was missed when he did not appear for breakfast.

His clothes were gone. The story of his disappearance ran quickly from mouth to mouth, spreading first amongst the orphanage children, and then to everyone in surrounding neighborhoods so that the people there would be vigilant.

A search was considered but delayed. Mr. Mills was away again. For six days they waited with fearful fantasies and speculation. Clarence was likely dead for, after all, were not the Gypsies skilled in foretelling the future through communication with the dead? There was fear that they would come again and grab other children.

Mr. Mills returned, gathered those facts he needed, and headed out to search for Clarence. He stayed away four weeks, followed clue after clue and lead after lead but discovered nothing. He called a halt to the search and rode east to tell Clarence's mother that her boy was gone.

The mother was a gaunt farm woman who had been widowed by disease and had not remarried but had borne Clarence out of wedlock. She lived in a run-down tenant house on a cotton farm. When told about her boy she made no demand for details other than what Mr. Mills knew and as she spoke her eyes looked down and to the side but never to his face. "He warn't mine nohow," she said, "youns took him to raise. Maybe he'll come back some day."

About five years later, after Mr. Mills died and Mr. Boone became the orphanage manager, a Baptist preacher told Mr. Boone what happened. The mother lived on at the farm and one day while tending a fire, heating water for washing clothes, she was approached by a wagon carrying a Gypsy woman who asked for a drink of water. On her way to the well the mother glanced inside the wagon. A young man lay asleep. There was a vague something about him that interested her and she drew closer for a better look. He awakened. It was her son. The reunion was joyless but he decided to stay with her and did so for one year but then left and was not heard from again. The mother told the preacher, "He warn't mine nohow."

A teacher, Miss Kate Durham, told the following story about Mr. Mills:

> "Back in 1894 Mr. Mills was on the orphanage grounds one night after the silent bell had rung and all lights were out. He went into the Watson building to get a boy to drive him home. As he entered the dormitory he heard a boy praying. In the dark he saw the form of a boy on his knees offering the following prayer: 'Good Lord, we need a barrel of flour; and please send us a barrel of meal. We would thank Thee for a barrel of sugar and we need a barrel of pepper – oh hell, that's too much pepper'."

In 1934, when John, Cal, and I arrived there were about five hundred forty children in fifteen cottages. And so we came, each life

reflecting the essence of a personal tragedy. Taken collectively our early impressions comprise a gritty American tragicomedy. For each of us life contained trust, puzzlement, skepticism, and innocence. Some had a look that wondered, but demanded no explanation; a look like our father had near the end of his days, that of being overwhelmed; the look of humanity come to the last ditch, beyond help or the hope of help. We came because we had to come. We were children. We came because a place had been prepared for us, a place of hope, by people of great vision.