

Miss Daisy

IN THE FOURTH GRADE ALL THE A-through-GRs (still Patricia Abernethy through Thomas Greene, though Leon Connor had gone to Jackson Training School for good by now) ended up in Miss Daisy Rose Boring's class.

Miss Daisy was one of the six daughters of Mr. Robert Boring. Mr. Boring had started Boring's Hardware in 1909, and having no son to take over the business, had hired Daddy to work for him in 1924.

Sixteen years later Mr. Boring died, and the six sisters sold the store to Daddy, who still ran it as Boring's Hardware. That same year he married Mother, having waited, properly, until he could adequately support a wife and family.

Instead of entering the hardware business the six daughters had years before become school teachers...for life!

I had not had Miss Lily, who taught second grade at Sulpher Springs School. She taught the GU-through-M class.

Anyone who had one of the Boring sisters for any grade in school usually spent the next year wondering, "Will I get the next one?" They taught all the even-numbered grades (2, 4, 6, 8, 10, and senior English) at Sulpher Springs school. If your name fell just right in the alphabet, it was possible to receive half of your entire public education from the Boring sisters.

Mr. Robert, their father (we never heard anything about their mother), tried to give all of them botanical names. He did well through Miss Lily, Miss Pansy and Miss Violet. He must have thought Miss Daisy Rose would be the last, for he used two flowers in naming her. (Perhaps he was convinced a boy would come next.) When two more girls appeared, he started on

gemstones. The youngest were Miss Opal and Miss Pearl.

Miss Daisy had taught fourth grade for forty-one years. She was a tiny, frail-looking woman in her early sixties. Her bird-like appearance prompted all of us to begin our first day of school wondering whether that little old woman could really handle us. We had, after all, been at this for three years already. The A-through-GRs were a tough bunch!

As we were whispering and wondering, Miss Daisy was giving what she called "housekeeping" instructions to the class. This consisted of instructions on everything from how to use the pencil sharpener to where to hang your coat.

The door of the classroom was standing open to the hall, and a mouse, who had had the entire school to himself all summer and was now trying innocently to escape this first-day invasion of wild children, came into our room in search of a safe place of retreat.

The mouse, scared to death, made its way a few cautious steps and sniffs at a time along the base of the blackboard wall just behind Miss Daisy.

No one was watching Miss Daisy. Every eye in the classroom was on the mouse. All of us secretly knew that very soon Miss Daisy would realize that we were not watching her. "This will be the test," I thought. "As soon as she turns to see what we're watching, we'll see what she's made of!"

In a few moments Miss Daisy caught on. She turned to see what we were staring at, and spotted the brown mouse just as it reached the corner of the room. She didn't make a sound.

Very quietly she opened the side drawer of her desk and took out two brown paper towels. We all watched, rapt, as the tiny woman slipped quietly toward the corner where the mouse was, squatted slowly to the floor, reached out, and caught the mouse in the brown paper towels.

She carried the mouse back to her desk (still in the towels), held it up in front of us. With one hand—*crunch*—crushed it to death and dropped it in the trash can!

Not a sound came from anyone in the room. ("Quiet as a mouse," I thought later.) After that, no one ever had any doubts

about Miss Daisy's power; we listened to every word she said.

The whole course of the year was going to be great fun. As she described her plan to us, Miss Daisy was going to take us, without our ever leaving our room at Sulpher Springs School, on an imaginary trip around the world.

It was going to be a year of play. Each day we'd get out our maps and plan our travels. Then, with Miss Daisy's help, we'd go on our travels for the day.

She didn't pass out the spelling books. She didn't even pass out the arithmetic books. We were just going to play all year.

Our imaginary plan was this: we would get some of our parents to pretend to drive us to Atlanta in their cars. I was not sure about whether Daddy would take the blue Dodge. He didn't usually like to travel very far from home.

Once in Atlanta, our plan was to board the train. Miss Daisy told us all about it. It was "the wonderful Southern Crescent," with a dining car that had fresh-cut flowers and real sterling silver on the tables. We were all to ride the train to New Orleans.

After a day or two in New Orleans, we would load up on what Miss Daisy called a "tramp steamer," and steam away for South America.

The real truth was that Miss Daisy had never actually been out of Nantahala County in her life except for four brief years some forty-one years in the past when she had ridden the train less than a hundred miles to Asheville Normal to learn to teach fourth grade. But for forty-one years she had sent away by mail and had ordered thousands and thousands and thousands of picture postcards. It was not possible for us to go anywhere on our imaginary travels, from a small town in Alabama to a temple garden in Japan, without Miss Daisy being able to dig down through her files of shoe-boxes to finally come up with a postcard to show us what that place looked like.

Some of the cards were very old, with black-and-white pictures and ragged edges. We were fascinated by the old ones most of all.

As we went on our travels, we had to write down the names of all the places we visited and the things we saw: states, towns,

geographical and historical sites, even crops and industries. We made long lists of famous people who had lived everywhere we went. We learned about all the things they had done.

All year long we worked at this without ever figuring out that Miss Daisy had us making up our own lists of spelling words. They were words which were much harder than those in the slender fourth-grade spelling books she had never bothered to pass out.

We also never figured out (or was it because we didn't want to admit it) that as we calculated how far we had traveled each day, how much money we spent for gasoline or food or tickets, how to change money from one country to another, and how to calculate latitude and longitude, we were doing arithmetic. Miss Daisy never called it that. We were just doing what you have to do to make your way around the world.

The class was divided into four "travel teams." Most of each morning was spent in planning each day's travels. Each team was given certain parts of the journey to take the class on. Miss Daisy would flit from team to team as we planned. She was informer, guide, questioner, always insisting that no matter how much we learned, she could always learn more in a day than we could!

Each afternoon, on a strictly alternating schedule, two of the four "travel teams" would take the class on their assigned part of the journey.

Miss Daisy explained it this way: "It takes twice as long to plan anything as it does to do it, so you get two days to plan before you present. 'Plan-plan-present, plan-plan-present,' that's the pattern we work on."

She called the first day of planning "rounding up" and the second day "closing in on it."

On Fridays Miss Daisy did all the presenting herself, filling in our gaps and giving us what felt like a day off. This did help to make up for the tests, which also always came on Fridays.

We worked our way to Atlanta, then on to New Orleans, where we finally boarded a steamer named the "Aurelia" for our trip to South America.

The first day of sailing was very rough! One of the "travel teams" was charged with teaching us all about the ship we were sailing on. They decided it would be a good idea to list all the parts of the ship, and learning to spell those awful words with their apostrophes and unpronounced extra letters nearly made some of us seasick.

On Friday of that week we came to school very excited, wondering what Miss Daisy might have in store for us on her day to present. As we gathered in the room a boy named Lucius Grasty, one of the last of the GRs, came running into the room.

His head was stooped and he wore a wool knit toboggan. The home-made hat was pulled way down over his ears. He wouldn't take it off though it was still September, and not even beginning to get cold yet.

Lucius went straight to the back of the room, squatted in a corner, and refused to come out.

Miss Daisy came breezing into the room, took little notice of Lucius, and began the day.

"Today, children," she started in a hurry, "we cross the equator!"

"That was fast," I thought.

"Have any of you ever crossed the equator?" she asked. We met the question with blank stares. We didn't even understand what she was talking about.

"Good," she went on, "because when we cross the equator we must have a big party for Neptune, King of the Deep."

As she kept talking about King Neptune, she went back into the cloak closet and started bringing out things that had been left there by kids at the end of school for forty-one years. Out she came with old coats, abandoned caps and hats, odd galoshes, umbrellas with broken ribs, even brooms and mops.

"On a ship, we have to work with what we have," she said as she began to dress us up for the party. Mop-heads became wigs and we took off our shoes and socks like sailors. She pulled the shades way out from the windows and twisted them at an angle to make sails for the ship. We found a rope and took turns throwing one another overboard out the first floor window, and

pulling each other back onto the ship again. She came up with a shaving mug from somewhere, lathered the boys up, and shaved them with a sword made from a yardstick.

"Some sailors even have their clothes run up the mast," she said. No one volunteered for that one!

"And some," she said, as she eased back through the room to where Lucius was still squatting in the floor (he had taken part in nothing), "...some *special* sailors, like the captain's son on his first voyage, even have their heads shaved!"

As she spoke those words, she lifted Lucius's toboggan. There we saw it: he was the sailor whose head was shaved! We were all jealous. How did *Lucius* get to be the special one?

It was a long time later that I overheard Mother telling a friend about that day and learned that when Lucius had gone home the day before, his mother had found lice in his hair. She had shaved his head and washed it in kerosene to get rid of the lice. Miss Daisy had taken that little boy with the blistered head, and in a moment had transformed him into the hero of crossing the equator.

At last we made land in South America. After leaving the steamer, we visited our first city, Belim, where we discovered that everyone spoke not Spanish but Portuguese. Then we hired small boats and guides to take us up the Amazon River.

Miss Daisy would stand in front of the classroom and say, "The Amazon is the longest river in the Americas. There are giant ferns there, ferns as big as trees. And butterflies—there are butterflies so big you could ride them...if you could catch one!"

Some of us who thought we were pretty smart would try to argue with her about the "longest river" idea. We would gather the maps and say, "Miss Daisy, what about the Mississippi and the Missouri put together? That's really just one river. They just got two names on it a long time ago. If you put all of it together, it's longer than the Amazon, isn't it?"

"Two names, two rivers," she replied. "The Amazon is the longest. Remember that—it will be on the test!"

No matter where we went after that (all the way down to the tip of South America, on an imaginary ice-breaker to the South

Pole, up the Congo and down the Nile), the Amazon was always my favorite place.

That was because my big art project for the year was making a butterfly "so big you could ride on it."

Several months earlier my Uncle Floyd had tried to invent a flying machine. He had made a two-part framework out of copper tubing and the flat sides of orange crates. It was joined in the middle by a long piano hinge so that the wings could flap.

Once the basic construction was finished, he had glued what looked like two million white-leghorn feathers to both sides of the "wings." Finally he rigged a harness to the underside so that the wings could be strapped on his back and he could flap them with his arms.

When the glue was all dry, he carried the huge wings up a ladder to the roof of the front porch of his house.

He told us all about it later. "I was going to try a little test flight from the house out to that red maple tree," he said, "but a downdraft got me!"

He sprained his ankle crash-landing. He was lucky he hadn't broken his neck.

The lucky thing for *me* was that the crash didn't tear up the wings. As soon as the Friday after the art project assignments came, I started begging Daddy to take me to Uncle Floyd's. Once there, I started begging Uncle Floyd for the wings.

After taking off the harness straps to be sure that I couldn't try to fly with them, he gave me the wings for the foundation of my butterfly. We folded them by the piano hinge and took them home in the blue Dodge.

I went to work. The body was made out of some big mailing tubes with the ends stopped up. The head was a rubber ball, with pieces of coat hanger bent to the shape of antennae.

The big job was painting the wings. It took nearly all day Saturday. Yellow and green, blue and red, purple and orange, swirls and patterns, matching on both sides of both wings, until by the end of the day I had created a butterfly so big you could really ride on it.

The only problem was that with the body and all the paint I

had used, the wings wouldn't flap by the piano hinge anymore. It took all day Sunday for the paint to dry.

On Monday morning Daddy said he would take Joe-brother and me to school in the blue Dodge. "I don't think that thing will go through the door of the school bus," was his excuse.

Now that the paint was dry and the wings were stiff, it wouldn't fit through the door of the Dodge either. So Daddy drove us to school very slowly, with the window rolled down, holding the big butterfly outside the window. Several times he pulled to the side of the road to let the cars pass which had backed up behind us as he drove slowly enough to keep the butterfly from taking off.

When I got to the classroom with the butterfly, Miss Daisy was thrilled! She fastened a wire to the butterfly's back, climbed on top of a desk in the middle of the room, and suspended the butterfly from one of the light fixtures.

For the remainder of the year it hung there, multicolored and beautiful, decorating the room and reminding us of the Amazon.

We traveled overland from the headwaters of the Amazon to the very tip of Cape Horn, took an icebreaker for a brief visit to a scientific research station on "that frozen, southernmost continent," then sailed to Cape Good Hope and up the west coast of Africa to the mouth of the Congo.

We hired small boats and guides to travel up the Congo. Miss Daisy showed us a postcard picture of logs being burned out to build dug-out canoes, and we were sure they were ours.

To our surprise, the Congo was not like the Amazon at all. Here we met shining black tribes ranging from Pygmies to Zulus, and we saw sharp-nosed crocodiles instead of alligators.

At the head of the Congo, we joined a safari which took us by Jeep and then on foot all the way to Victoria Falls, and on to the very beginning waters of the Nile.

As soon as the Nile was navigable, we built huge rafts, supplied them, and floated for days and days until we landed at last beside the pyramids.

After a short time of sailing on the Mediterranean, we

landed for a visit to the brand-new country of Israel. It could have been an old country as far as our visit was concerned, because all the things we visited were, in Miss Daisy's words, "nearly two thousand important years old."

If the United States Supreme Court (the "Nine Old Men in Washington," Uncle Floyd called them) ever happened to come down to Sulpher Springs School to be sure that the separation of church and state was being properly maintained, they would have found Miss Daisy dutifully teaching us to spell the names of the leaders of the new nation of Israel, and other important fourth-grade facts such as the distance from Jerusalem to Cairo.

They never came, though, and so when school let out for Christmas holidays, Miss Daisy told us we could stay over in Bethlehem while school was out. In spite of what the Supreme Court may or may not have seen had they been there, none of us was at all uncertain about why it was important to her that we go home for Christmas thinking of Bethlehem.

After Christmas, we again set sail on the Mediterranean, this time bound for Greece and then on to Europe.

While we were in Greece, one of the four "travel teams" was assigned to take us to the ancient Olympic games. This group decided that we really should have Olympic games of our own. Miss Daisy thought the idea was great.

"There is only one thing I must warn you about, boys and girls. In the old Olympic games the athletes competed with no clothes on." We all looked around the room and stared at one another.

Miss Daisy went on. "But since it's wintertime, I suppose we will have to wear clothing for our Olympics. Does anyone mind that?" It was as quiet in the room as when the mouse died.

On Friday (no tests this week) we all came to school with sheets to wrap over our clothes. It looked more like a ninth-grade Latin banquet than the Olympics, but we didn't care. Miss Daisy had even made laurel wreaths for the winners.

It was a day of great competition. Relays were run back and forth from one end of the playground to another, passing a

baton made from an empty paper-towel roller.

There was shot-put with wooden croquet balls, javelin throwing with sharp wooden tobacco sticks, and finally a marathon which went from the school yard out and all the way down Railroad Street, around a big oak tree at the post office, back behind the stores on Main Street, ending at a finish line on the school ground just across the creek from where we had begun.

Running wrapped in a sheet was going to be difficult. We did as well as we could to tie the sheets up between the legs of our blue jeans so we could move more freely.

I wasn't much of a competitor in either the shot-put or the javelin contests. Not being able to throw straight made it all but impossible to figure out just how far you could throw when a straight line was the object. Pauletta Donaldson won both these contests, but then she was the biggest kid in the fourth grade, boy or girl, and had longer arms than all the rest of us.

The relays were more even. Our team of four came in in second place and could have won if the baton hadn't been dropped twice (the winning team only dropped theirs once). At the very end of the day came the marathon.

The fastest down-and-out runner in the class was a tiny boy named Hallie Curtis. Everyone was pretty sure that Hallie could take the marathon with no competition.

Hallie was very small and had two cow-licks in his hair. One was over his right eye and the other near the crown of his head. His hair insisted on standing up in these two places, and Hallie couldn't stand it. It was hard enough being teased about being little. The cow-licks were too much.

Hallie would put lard on his hair in a futile attempt to make the wild spots lie down. It never worked for very long. The lard, however, vulnerable as it was to Hallie's body temperature, gradually ran down his face and neck. His shirt collar was always dark and greasy with melted hair-lard.

Hallie had the longest arms for his body of anyone we had ever seen. His hands seemed to dangle alongside his knees as he walked along. Hallie's special trick was that he could bend just a bit and run on all fours, just like a greyhound or a whippet—

though he looked more like a greasy, escaped, dressed-up baboon. It was simply true: Hallie Curtis, running on all four legs, could completely outrun any boy or girl in any grade at Sulpher Springs School.

Before the marathon started, everyone complained to Miss Daisy that Hallie's four-legged running was not fair. So, to be fair, Miss Daisy warned him, "Now, Hallie, no running on your hands. You have to run on two feet like everybody else does. Those old Greeks didn't run on four legs!"

Miss Daisy lined us up. "One for the money, two for the show, three to get ready, and four...to...GO!"

Off we went, sheets flapping, girls screaming, across the playground, then spread out a little now, through the schoolyard gate and down the side of the empty street which ran behind Main Street and along by the railroad tracks.

The first half of the race told nothing. The sprinters rushed ahead, then started to wear out as the whole column began the mid-point turn around the oak tree at the post office.

On the way back the race really settled down. There was one good solid group of runners in the middle, with a slowly growing assortment of stragglers stringing out behind.

Out in front of everybody else, the real race was between Hallie Curtis and Pauletta Donaldson. She was nearly a foot taller and ran with flailing arms and long, gangling paces. Hallie's little legs seemed to spin like eggbeaters. His individual short strides couldn't even be seen as separate steps at all.

When they entered the gate to the school-yard and poured on the heat for the finish line, Pauletta began to pull farther and farther ahead.

Hallie couldn't stand the thought of losing to a girl. He didn't care if Miss Daisy had said that he had to run on two legs. He dropped to all-fours, and looking like a greasy-headed dog wrapped in a sheet, began to close the gap as the two of them outran everyone else toward the finish line.

A little creek ran down the middle of the schoolyard and the finish line was across this little creek from where we were coming back onto the playground from the post office. The last

thing all the runners had to do before crossing the finish line was to jump the creek.

It wasn't a hard creek to jump. We jumped it every day during recess as a regular part of most games, but I had never seen Hallie jump it while running on all fours like a dog.

As Hallie and Pauletta approached the creek, Hallie took the lead. He was nearly twenty feet ahead of her when, with a great push of his hind legs, he took to the air, arms reaching out in front of him, then coming back to touch the ground as his legs moved forward for the next step.

Something happened. Hallie's legs seemed to tangle in mid-air so that he couldn't pull his knees up. Instead of sailing across the creek, he fell like a rock, flat on his belly, in the middle of the water.

Pauletta never missed a step. She jumped right across him, and with a look of certain pride on her face, crossed the finish line alone.

Later we learned what had happened. Hallie's nose was itching as he came across the playground field on all fours. He tried to hold back a sneeze as long as he could, but just as he started to leave the ground for his great leap across the creek, the long-saved-up sneeze burst loose. The great escape of the held-back sneeze snapped Hallie's belt right in two, and his blue jeans fell down to his knees, where they tangled hopelessly with the sheet which was tied up between his knees.

The sheet did protect his modesty, but the tangle had brought him down in great agony of defeat. He had lost to a girl.

Pauletta was simply disgusting as she wore her laurel wreath for the rest of the entire day.

When we finished with Greece, we made a great circle through Europe and spent the rest of the springtime crossing Asia: China, Japan, down to New Zealand and Australia, then over the Pacific, past Pearl Harbor and on to Los Angeles.

The last month of the school year was a long imaginary train ride, not across the United States, but across *North America*, Canada to Mexico, until on the last day of May, there we

were, right back in our classroom at Sulpher Springs School.

The next year the A-through-GRs got Mrs. Kinney for the fifth grade. Mother said Mrs. Kinney was very smart, that we were lucky to have her, but it seemed like a long year as she tried to teach us how interesting the Greeks and Romans were, straight out of the book.

I had none of Miss Daisy's sisters in later years, and gradually I forgot about her as the importance of growing up made the fourth grade unreal, unimportant, and further and further behind.

At least ten years passed. I had graduated from Sulpher Springs High School and been away from home and college for a couple of years when I came home to work for the summer.

My job for this particular summer was working as bus boy in the dining room of the Mountain Vale Inn. The Mountain Vale Inn was an old hotel which topped the hill above "Old Main Street." It was the kind of place where retired Floridians spent the entire summer, while residents of Sulpher Springs had still not learned to charge them Florida prices.

It was a place with a dining room, a place where local residents went out for evening meals and after church on Sunday.

We served supper each evening from five until eight o'clock.

One afternoon about four-thirty I was outside sweeping off the steps and the sidewalk to the dining room when an old two-tone brown LaSalle sedan pulled up into the parking side of the yard.

Though I had not seen it in years, I knew the ancient car well. With its double-spares on the back and its landau trim, there was not another car like it anywhere in Nantahala County.

The LaSalle belonged to the Boring sisters. It had been their father's last car, new when he died, and they had carefully kept it. More than twenty years later, they were still keeping it—and driving it, it seemed, all over Nantahala County.

Miss Lily was driving that day. She opened her door and got out. As she walked around the long nose of the LaSalle, the other front door opened, and Miss Opal got out. The two of them

opened the back door, lifted something from the back seat, and began to walk side by side up the sidewalk to the dining room.

I looked more closely and saw that they had between them all that was left of my old Miss Daisy.

A tiny skin-and-bones figure, less than half, it seemed, of the tiny thing she had been more than a decade earlier when I was in the fourth grade. She was between them, with each holding an arm as they brought her up the walk, little toes barely touching the ground. They were taking her out to supper.

As soon as I recognized them, I hurried down the walk to meet them. Miss Lily recognized me at once and spoke to me. Then she turned to Miss Daisy and said, "Look, Daisy. Look! It's one of your little boys...all grown up."

Miss Daisy lifted her head and it did turn toward me, but her eyes were colorless and blank and empty. Nobody in there. After a long moment, her head dropped back to her chest.

My curiosity asked for a response. It came from Miss Lily. "Daisy has had a stroke," she offered.

While I was thinking that perhaps they were pushing things a bit having her out too soon in this condition I asked, "When did she have it?"

In unison they replied, "She's had it six years." Miss Lily continued, "She got it when she retired."

I stood aside and watched as they partly led, partly carried, Miss Daisy up the steps and into the dining room for her supper.

Once inside, I tried to do my work without staring, but from time to time did glance to see Miss Lily and Miss Opal cutting up tiny bites on Miss Daisy's plate. They mashed green beans and bits of potato, then helped her swallow it with drinks from a small glass of milk.

Part of my job was to clear the dishes from tables as soon as people were finished with their meals so that the dessert tray could be brought to the table.

It looked like they were finished, so I rolled my dish cart to their table and began clearing things away as quickly as I could.

Suddenly, in the midst of my doing this job, I was paralyzed by the strange feeling of someone staring at me. I looked toward

the feeling, and it was Miss Daisy.

She was staring straight at me, and her eyes were sparkling and clear. They were alive, and as blue as they had ever been.

Her lips began to quiver and then move as from somewhere way down inside of her tiny body a thin, wispy ghost-of-a-voice came to life and softly said, straight to me, "The Amazon is the longest...there are butterflies here we can ride on..."

Then her eyes went blank and her head dropped back to her chest.

I grabbed my dish cart and ran for the kitchen.

Mr. Gibbons, the old cook, was looking out of the kitchen door and muttering to himself, "Isn't it sad about poor Miss Daisy...isn't it sad?"

"No, it's not!" I thought, but only to myself. "No, it's not sad." Until a few moments ago I had thought the same thing, but now I felt as if I had made the greatest discovery in the world and had to find some way to explain it to Mr. Gibbons.

Then I remembered. "Mr. Gibbons," I said, "way back in Miss Daisy's room in the fourth grade sometimes we would get so full of learning new things and so tired of that traveling that we would look at her and say, 'Miss Daisy, why do we have to learn all these things?' " In memory, I could still see Miss Daisy holding her mouse-crushing fist high in the air, clenched, as she answered the question.

"She would say, 'Because, boys and girls...*because!* One of these days, when you grow up, you'll be able to go anywhere you want to. When that day comes, you simply must know where you are going!'

"You see, it's not sad, Mr. Gibbons," I pleaded, returning to the present, "because I have seen that Miss Daisy is in a world in which she can go anywhere she wants to go, and she knows where she's going. Why, she can even ride the butterflies."

We looked back into the dining room, but they had finished and were gone. We heard the LaSalle whining from the driveway. I never saw Miss Daisy again.

Dr. York

DR. YORK DROVE A STUDEBAKER. Daddy said that made him a good doctor.

"Why does driving a Studebaker make him a good doctor?" I asked.

"Well," Daddy answered, "It shows that when he makes up his mind he sticks to what he believes in, even if it's a whole lot of trouble to do it."

"I still don't understand," I complained.

"It's like this," he continued, "You can buy a Ford or a Chevrolet or even a Plymouth right here in Sulphur Springs. But you have to go all the way to Asheville to buy a Studebaker!"

I was still not sure of the logic of it all, but I did know that Dr. York owned not one Studebaker but two.

He himself drove a two-door 1949 "business coupe," with a multi-sectioned rear window that wrapped all the way around the back. There was no back seat, just a flat cargo area (normally used for salesmen's samples) where he carried his medical bag and other assorted medical devices.

Mrs. York, a tall, broad-shouldered woman a full head taller than the slender doctor, drove a 1950 four-door Studebaker "Commander" sedan. Like the doctor's coupe, it had a pointed nose that looked more like it belonged on an airplane than on a car—but it *did* have a back seat.

These two cars were the only Studebakers which actually belonged to people who lived in Sulphur Springs.

A frail, balding man who wore wire-rim spectacles, Dr. York was the family doctor, and that meant the *whole* family. In addition to taking care of Mother, Daddy, Joe-brother and me, he

Experience

HIGH SCHOOL AT LAST! RED, Freddie, Charlie, and I were all now in the ninth grade. While the entire seventh-through-twelfth grade classes at Sulpher Springs School shared the same buildings, there was a vast psychological and social difference between being in the eighth grade and being in the ninth grade. Eighth graders were junior high school *children*. Ninth graders were High School Students.

After eight years of public school education in Sulpher Springs, we were all experienced at dealing with teachers. We were ready and eager for the ninth grade. It took us some time to come to realize that the ninth grade was also ready for us.

One of the first things we noticed about the ninth grade was that all of the teachers were old. The oldest teacher we had ever had up to now had been Miss Daisy Rose Boring, back there in the fourth grade. Here in the ninth grade, all of the teachers looked as old as Miss Daisy had ever looked, and this entire old bunch seemed to be tough.

English was taught by Mrs. Amelia Harrison. Her class consisted of sentence diagramming, vocabulary drills, and manners lessons. Manners were very important to Mrs. Amelia, and every third day, alternating regularly with her other two priorities, we had manners lessons.

Each day of the world, she stood by the door as we entered the classroom. As we filed past her imposing presence, she held out a brown paper bag and sang a little song about "please leave your chewing gum and razors at the door," which she thought was very cute.

We were all supposed to drop our gum into that bag, though

no one ever exactly figured out the part about the razors.

Every week we had a "chewing gum check," an examination of the underside of our desk tops, to see if anyone with "bad manners" had actually slipped in with chewing gum and, horror of horrors, stuck it on the underside of his or her desk top.

One of the boys in our room was Billy "Bad Boy" Barker. Bad Boy happened to live down on Cold Ridge, and also, my Mother said, was Leon Conner's first cousin. "He can't help it," she tried to explain, "their mothers just happened to be sisters."

Bad Boy, called this all his life by friend and foe alike, had what the teachers at school, after going to a workshop, began to call a "personality problem."

About seventeen years old now, Bad Boy would have quit school by now except that his mother, a real brute of a woman, didn't want his "personality problem" at home all day. So she made him stay in school.

Bad Boy was a long-time tobacco chewer, but he had been suspended from school for spitting in the floor and had learned to put his wad out when he got off the bus at school in the morning. His oral dependency was so strong, however, that he spent the rest of the day with a big wad of Juicy Fruit chewing gum in his mouth.

Mrs. Amelia should have been happy to get rid of the tobacco and let well enough alone, but she didn't. On the day of the first desk check, she found a half-dozen big wads of Juicy Fruit on the bottom of Bad Boy's desk.

"Why did you do it?" was her only question.

"The flavor give out in that Juicy Fruit, and I had to get rid of it," Bad Boy answered.

"That's not what I mean, and you know it!" she fired back. "Why did you dare come in my classroom with chewing gum in your mouth to start with?"

"Aw!" said Bad Boy. That was mostly all he *ever* had to say when he was asked a question.

She watched him like a hawk after that, doing everything but poking around in his mouth as he came into the room each day.

Bad Boy was lacking in many ways, but he was persistent. Even if he came in the door of the classroom empty-mouthed, it was not long until he had slipped a stick of Juicy Fruit into his mouth. He could sit, jaw slack and motionless, for minutes at a time—then chomp real fast whenever Mrs. Amelia turned to write on the board.

It had been so much trouble to have to chip and scrape the gum off his desk the first time he was caught that Bad Boy came up with a new solution for stale Juicy Fruit. Now when the flavor ran out, he just added a fresh stick to the wad and kept the whole thing in his mouth. His taste buds were so toughened by tobacco juice that he was often chewing a whole pack of Juicy Fruit by the time class was out.

As the year rolled on, Bad Boy grew bolder and bolder. Everyone in the room except Mrs. Amelia knew exactly what he was doing, and after a while the big seventeen-year-old ninth grader thought that even *she* probably knew but was just afraid to say or do anything about it.

The big day finally came. One day during vocabulary drill, the word under discussion by Mrs. Amelia was *hubris*. We couldn't find the word in the dictionary.

Mrs. Amelia said that didn't matter, because we needed to learn it anyway...especially in the ninth grade. She began to describe and define *hubris* as "fatal pride. The kind of pride which makes you truly believe that you are not like everyone else...the kind of pride which makes you feel that none of the normal laws of life apply to you...the kind of pride which brings you to a great fall in the end."

No one ever figured out what Bad Boy was thinking about on that day, but as Mrs. Amelia talked on about *hubris*, he very slowly began to chew, right there in front of her, what had to be a full five-stick wad of Juicy Fruit chewing gum.

Suddenly we realized that Mrs. Amelia, still talking, was looking straight at Bad Boy, unblinking, eyes open widely and set in a focussed stare as she talked.

"Hubris is like," she went on, searching for an example, "it's like...it's like...well, it's like thinking"—she was on her feet now,

and moving toward Bad Boy's desk—"you can chew gum out in the open in Mrs. Amelia Harrison's room and somehow get away with it."

Now she was face to face with Bad Boy. She held out her hand and with authority unmistakable even to a seventeen-year-old ninth grader, she said, "Spit it out...NOW!"

What happened next was so fast that it took a few seconds for all of us in the room to actually realize what had just taken place. Bad Boy did spit the huge wad of gum into Mrs. Amelia's outstretched hand. She, in one smooth move, stuck it right on the top of his head where, using the dictionary in her other hand, she smashed the whole, huge wad down into his hair.

"Those who live by hubris," she kept talking as she walked back to her desk, "always get stuck in the end."

Mrs. Amelia had experience.

One of the bigger new things about High School was that we now had a chance to take a real foreign language. There was no choice about what to take. The one foreign language taught at Sulphur Springs High School was Latin. It was taught by Miss Vergilius Darwin, who had taught first-and-second year Latin for forty-six years.

We all called her "Miss V.D." behind her back.

Some days Miss Vergilius would tell us that she had started teaching Latin when it was still a living language. This was her joke, and she did not seem to think it funny at all when Charlie Summerow once asked her if she had ever had a date with Julius Caesar.

Miss V.D. was barely five feet tall and could have weighed no more than ninety-five pounds fully dressed. The main strength and power of at least ninety-four of her ninety-five pounds resided in the bent knuckle of the middle finger of her right hand.

She could grab a two-hundred-pound football player by the shirt, lift him out of his seat, sink that crooked knuckle into his chest and seem to stop his heart for twenty minutes. They rolled in the floor in pain.

One day during a grammar drill, Miss V.D. called on Big Tater McCracken to "conjugate 'carry,' present indicative, all three persons, singular and plural."

Big Tater was not only the first of the Rabbit Creek McCrackens ever to take Latin, but if he made it, he would be the first in his entire family to ever graduate from high school. He worked at Latin seriously and had just spent the entire weekend memorizing the very verb endings he was now being asked for. He was prepared.

There was only one problem. The model verb for this conjugation was the verb "to love," *amo*, and through the long weekend of Latin study, Big Tater had, a thousand times, repeated the conjugations to that verb: "*Amo, amas, amat...amamus, amatis, amant...*" He had it cold.

At this moment, however, an awful truth emerged. While all the verb endings had been memorized to perfection, Big Tater had forgotten to learn the new vocabulary words, one of which was the word *porto*, which meant "to carry."

Miss V.D. repeated the order. "Big Tater, I'm talking to you...conjugate 'to carry,' present indicative, all three persons, singular and plural."

Determined to get it right, especially since he knew all the verb endings, Big Tater sought desperately for the right word. Out of the corner of his mouth he whispered to Red McElroy, "What is it?...what is it?"

Red was the last person who wanted to get in trouble with Miss V.D. He shushed Big Tater, and then finally whispered back to him, "Damn if I know!"

That clue was all Big Tater needed, and he cut loose on the prize conjugation of the year: "To carry: *damifino, damifinas, damifinat...damifinamus, damifinatis, damifinant!*" He was proud to the end that he had done it.

"Whoooo!" Red threw his head back and hollered. "Damn-If-I-Knoooow! HA, HA, HA, HA!"

Miss Virgilius Darwin was on him in a flash, had him by the shirt and up in the air, then down onto the floor while she twisted that bent-auger finger into his chest.

All the breath went out of Red as Miss Darwin looked around the room and said, "Damn-if-you-better-try-that-again with Old V.D.!"

She had experience.

We all knew very soon, however, that experience was much more than a combination of old age and long tenure at school. This was obvious when we realized that our high school principal, in spite of his being principal for thirty-four years, was not a person of experience.

Before becoming principal, Mr. Walter Farlow had been the basketball coach, and as such had produced winning teams for several years. At some point along the way, the School Board decided that Coach Farlow would be a natural at being school principal, and so when old Mr. Wiggins retired, they put Coach Farlow in the office.

The mistake was soon realized, but it was too late, for his father-in-law was also chairman of the School Board.

No one was sure whether it was having to clean up and wear a suit and tie that did it, or realizing you just couldn't make teachers run laps around the gym if they didn't do what you wanted them to do. Whatever, the new job just didn't work. Maybe he just couldn't function without his whistle.

When at our first assembly program Mr. Farlow gave us the school rules, we were slow to catch on. He began his recitation of each rule with the words, "I'd better not catch you..." and then went on to tell us what was prohibited.

It took us nearly a week to discover that that is exactly what he meant. He didn't say "don't do it"; he said "I'd better not catch you," for he had absolutely no idea what he was going to do with any of us if he did catch us in some awful violation.

At every social activity, from sock hops to football games to real dances, Coach Farlow (as he was called forever) could be seen wandering the perimeter with a long, six-cell flashlight. The flashlight was not so he could see what we were doing, but so *we* could see him coming in time to stop so he wouldn't be forced to catch us.

Some of the teachers were heard to say, "He had ten good years of experience coaching basketball, but he's just been principal one year, thirty-four times!"

Coach Farlow did not have experience.

Back on the other end of the scale, the tenure and experience champion of all time at Sulphur Springs High School was Mrs. Ellen Birch Bryan.

Mrs. Birch Bryan, as she preferred to be called, since it "honored her dead father as well as her dead husband," was a huge, towering woman. Six feet tall, with big bones and broad shoulders, she wore her hair in a big gray pile on top of her head, which all went together to make her appear even taller.

Mrs. Birch Bryan was seventy-two years old and had taught typing, shorthand, business, and bookkeeping for fifty-one years.

"I'm not about to retire," she would say, which was no surprise to anyone at all at the time. With almost no retirement benefits and no mandatory retirement age, many teachers stayed in "for life."

"Why," she would say, "I've taught the principal. Not just this one, but the last three. I've taught the superintendent, I've taught every single member of the School Board, and I'm not afraid of the Supreme Court! Why should I stop teaching?"

Freddie, Red, Big Tater, Charlie, and I had Mrs. Birch Bryan for first-year typing during the last period of the day each day.

Every day, class began the same way it had for the past fifty years. We began with our finger exercises. "Now, boys and girls, hold up your hands and extend your fingers. Now, stretch, relax, stre-etch, rela-ax, stre-e-etch, rela-a-ax..."

After a few rounds of such digital calisthenics, we would all insert a sheet of paper, set our margins, and place our fingers on the home keys of the blank Underwood manual keyboards.

"It is now time for letter-by-letter dictation. Are you all ready? F...D...S...A...J...K...L...semi." Over and over again, we repeated that pattern until we all had it perfectly and as fast

as Mrs. Birch Bryan could reel them off, first in order and then mixed up.

As the weeks went by, we added a letter at a time, gradually getting to "G," then "H," and finally on to the exotic fringes of the keyboard including "P" and "Q" and "Z." We could do the entire alphabet now.

Once each week, there was a sacred time in Mrs. Birch Bryan's class. It came at the same time each week, as regularly as church came on Sunday mornings. It was the weekly "timed writing."

For the last ten minutes of the period on Fridays, we would type as fast as we could, copying a measured timed-writing selection, to determine our speed and grade for the week. Divide the total words typed by ten, and you got your words-per-minute weekly score.

Every mistake a person made subtracted one word per minute from the score, so that it was possible—several of us proved it—to come up scores like "minus seven words-per-minute," or once even "minus eleven-words-per-minute." Sometimes after that I thought of just sitting still and not typing at all. At least I would end up even.

"Nothing, boys and girls, and I do mean absolutely *nothing*, must interfere with a timed writing. This is your grade, you are to stop typing for no reason until I tell you." This was the rule and the final word on timed writings.

We typed selections, old and yellowed, printed years earlier as advertising by typewriter companies who always pictured their newest machines at the top of the pages.

Some of these advertisements featured champion typists. Mrs. Birch Bryan's personal favorite was Mr. George Hossafeld. He was pictured at the top of several of the timed-writing selections, pictured seated at a now-ancient-looking glass-sided manual typewriter. He wore an eyeshade, and his sleeves were pushed up and held in place by elastic sleeve-holders.

The legend under the picture proclaimed that Mr. George Hossafeld had attained his world championship status by averaging one hundred and forty-three words-per-minute over a

period of time of one hour.

Mrs. Birch Bryan would hold up the sheet with his picture on it, tell us again what we already knew about his record-setting time, and say, "Aspire, students! Aspire! Some of you only have about a hundred and thirty words-per-minute to go and you'll catch him."

The selections to be typed were all about events which had been current in their time. Now, however, they were history. We typed about such things as Woodrow Wilson and the League of Nations, and even about Mrs. Coolidge redecorating the White House.

Mrs. Birch Bryan had a track clock with red and green stop and go buttons on the top of it. It was bigger and better than any timing device Coach Farlow had ever had when he was in the coaching business. This time clock was used solely for the purpose of timing the timed writings.

When we were all ready, she carefully wound the track clock. Then, as always, she left us with that last important admonition: "Remember, boys and girls, nothing...nothing must interfere with a timed writing. Are you ready? BEGIN!"

With that she punched the green start button on the track clock, and for the next ten minutes we all typed just as fast as we possibly could.

To be sure that we learned to type through any kind of interference, Mrs. Birch Bryan would actually try to interrupt us while we typed. She would sneeze or cough loudly, blow her nose, open and close file cabinets, pop balloons, slam the door, and finally one day she smashed a water glass in the sink. If anyone paused to glance up at her, she would pronounce loudly, "Nothing must interfere...nothing must interfere with your timed writing."

Within a few weeks, all of us could have typed through anything from a tornado to a train wreck.

By the end of the first six-weeks grading period, I was really beginning to become a typist, in *spite* of the discouraging scores on my timed writings. I actually thought about typing a paper for Mrs. Harrison's English class.

That thought vanished when report cards came out.

All of my grades were pretty much what I expected until it came to typing. Instead of a letter grade, there appeared the word "incomplete."

I didn't understand. There had not been a single day when I had missed school or typing class, the usual reason for "incompletes." I went to see Mrs. Birch Bryan to try to find out why I didn't get a real grade. She was ready for me.

"You are going to have to improve," she told me in her most formidable voice as she towered above me. She trembled as she spoke. "You are going to have to improve before I can give you an F. Yes, it would be an insult to the good, hard-working students who are *earning* good, solid, high Fs just to *give* you one for the kind of work you are doing. You must improve... you'll never catch Mr. Hossafeld at this rate."

I was destroyed only briefly, however, as I very quickly learned that Red and Freddie also were going to have to improve in order to get an F.

On the next Friday, when it was time for the timed writing, I had an entirely new thought when, after the usual ritual, Mrs. Birch Bryan gave us the sacred reminder: "Remember, students, nothing must interfere with a timed writing."

Inspired by the realization that when you're already below F you don't have much to lose, I began to wonder—did I really think that *nothing* could interfere with Mrs. Birch Bryan herself during one of those timed writings?

After class, I raised the possibility with Red and Freddie and found out that they had been thinking about almost the same thing.

"Next Friday we'll find out," Red suggested.

On the next Thursday afternoon, we sneaked back to school and climbed in a window (we had taped it unlocked) of Mrs. Birch Bryan's room armed with a big roll of mason's twine.

The room was in an old building with tall windows. Each window had two shades mounted about halfway up the windowframe. The top shade pulled up by a cord which ran through a roller at the top of the window. The bottom shade pulled down

normally. Mrs. Birch Bryan never touched the shades. They were supposed to be fixed in a precise and unchangeable way: top shades all the way up, bottom shades one-third of the way down.

With the big ball of twine, we began tying on string to extend all the shade-pulls until we had a string from each coming around various heating pipes and meeting behind a radiator at the back of the room. After the ends were all tied together, enough tension was put on the cords to release the spring-locks of the shade rollers; then, by one string, the whole window-shade network was tied to the radiator pipe.

We were nervous all the next day about whether Mrs. Birch Bryan would discover the strings or not. She didn't.

Class opened as it usually did, from finger exercises through dictation and even some form-letter practice. Finally, after much instruction and preparation, we began the timed writing.

After waiting for about three minutes, Freddie Patton cut the main string.

There was a great noise all along the back of the room as sixteen window shades all rolled up so fast that most of them popped out of their brackets and fell on the students in the back row, unrolling all over everything.

Mrs. Birch Bryan simply bellowed, "Don't stop!" as if she had planned it that way. After school that day, she took the rest of the shades down and put them in the closet, and for the rest of the year we sat there in the afternoon sun, burning up.

"Let's try again," Freddie said a couple of weeks later. "I've got an idea."

Jean-ette Carlson was in our typing class—the same Jean-ette who almost spent the night with us on the camping trip. Jean-ette had cultivated a special talent. She could hold her breath until she fainted. We had seen her do it at school dances and picnics, and even once right behind the visiting team's bench at a basketball game. We each saved up a dollar, and we offered Jean-ette three dollars to faint during the next timed writing.

As soon as we started typing, Jean-ette began to hold her

breath. It seemed like it took her five minutes until, beet-red, she fell out of her chair and into the floor right in front of Mrs. Birch Bryan.

Mrs. Birch Bryan simply folded her arms and looked the other way. "Nothing interferes," she whispered to herself. Jean-ette had to come back to life all on her own without any help! We could not ever get her to faint again after that.

We were beginning to realize that it was not going to be as easy to "interfere" with Mrs. Birch Bryan as we had first thought. Almost every day we spent some time trying to come up with a plan that might work.

Bad Boy Barker had study hall in the library while we were in typing class, which really meant that he could usually wander all over the school wherever he wanted to during that hour.

We saved three more dollars, plus an extra dollar for what Bad Boy called "expenses," and paid him to acquire a cherry bomb (he seemed to have sources for such things) and to throw it into the room during a timed writing.

He did.

The only result was that before the next Friday came around, Mrs. Birch Bryan had installed a padlock and hasp on the inside of the door, and now, as part of getting ready for our timed writing, she locked us in! This really was going to be hard.

It was a very simple trick which finally did produce results. Without even planning anything in advance, Red happened to come to school the next Friday with a coil of transparent fishing line in his pocket.

While Mrs. Birch Bryan was shooing students out of the hall at class change time, he casually tied one end of the fishing line to a leg of her big oak teacher's chair. From there he ran the line through a drawer pull on the file cabinet at the end of the room and back under the front row of typing tables and tied it to his desk.

She never saw it at all.

We had class as usual: finger exercises, then F...D...S...A, all the way up to Q by now, a long series of form-letters to type, and then, at last, the timed writing.

Mrs. Birch Bryan passed out the yellowed sheets. Today's selection was entitled "President Harding dies in California." She told us again about George Hossafield's record and admonished us to aspire. She wound up the track clock, and then she said it: "Remember students, nothing interferes with a timed writing! Are you ready? BEGIN!"

When Mrs. Birch Bryan pushed the green button on the track clock, Red McElroy pulled on his end of the fishing line.

The entire class was trying to type about poor President Harding's mysterious death while at the same time every eye in the room was watching Mrs. Birch Bryan as she slowly sat down toward a chair which wasn't there. Red had not, however, pulled the string quite far enough, and about four inches of Mrs. Birch Bryan's broadest self tried to sit on a four-inch side edge of the almost-absent chair.

Suddenly the chair popped sideways out from under her like a giant tiddly-wink, flew through the air, and crashed into the file cabinet, while Mrs. Birch Bryan hit the floor not once, but twice.

She sat smack on the floor, hard, bounced, straightened out, then landed flat on her back with her head making a loud *cra-a-ck* against the floor.

The entire room was silent, every typewriter dead still. We thought we had killed her! Sweat broke out in my armpits until they ached, and I could see Red's face flushing.

Then we heard a sound. It started like a groan or a whisper, but then, siren-like, it raised itself to fill the room.

"Don't stop!...Don't stop..." It was Mrs. Birch Bryan, flat on her back and bellowing at the ceiling. "Nothing must interfere with a timed writing."

We gave up on trying after that. Though some future typist might indeed catch Mr. Hossafield, Mrs. Birch Bryan, with a fifty-one-year head start, was clearly out of our class.

Daff-knee Garlic and the Great Drive-In Fire

WHEN I FIRST MET DAFF-KNEE Garlic, I thought he had been given a girl's name as some grotesque commentary by his mother, who had, after all, "married a Garlic." It was much later that I discovered that his real name was not "Daphne" at all, but rather "Clarence." Daff-knee was a nickname shortened from the term "Daffy Knees," a term that he himself used to describe a peculiar but interesting defect of birth with which he had spent his entire life.

"I was born without kneecaps," Daff-knee described himself, "so my knees will bend one way just as far and just as fast as they bend the other way. Why, I can run *backwards* as fast as I can run forwards."

It was true—the running part, that is. None of us in Sulpher Springs ever did have any medical understanding of exactly whether Daff-knee actually did have knee caps or not, but we knew that they did bend both ways and that he could run backwards just as fast as most people could run forwards.

"It is a great advantage," he would say, "to be able to look at what you're running from while you do it."

Daff-knee Garlic was the owner, operator, and sole proprietor of the premier educational institution for teenagers in all of Nantahala County, the Sulpher Springs Big-Screen Drive-In Theatre.

The Big-Screen was the first and only drive-in theatre in the county. Built in an already-natural amphitheatre on the outskirts of Sulpher Springs, the theatre had opened after World War II as