

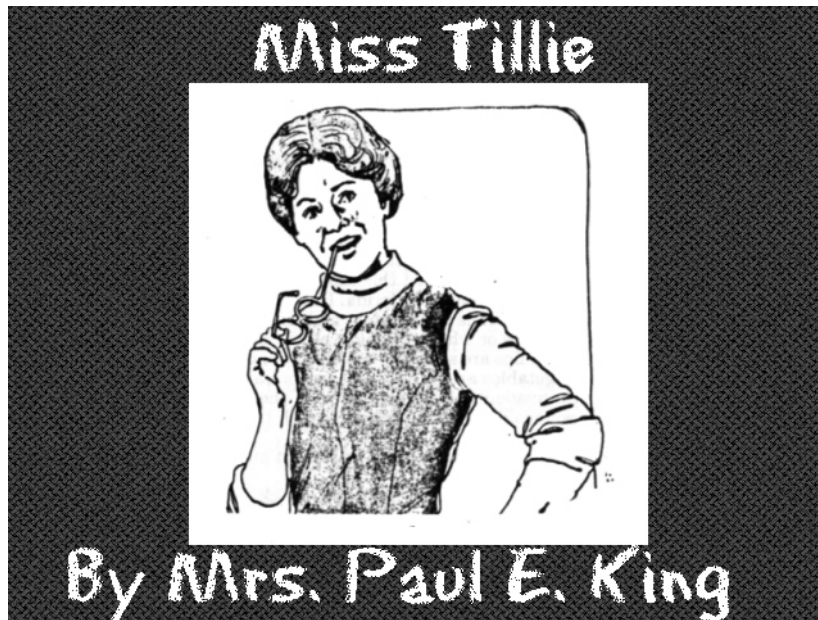
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The Sunday School Beacon
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MISS TILLIE
(Part 1)
By Mrs. Paul E. King

I'll always remember Miss Tillie. Always and forever.

I was in fifth grade the year she came to our community to teach in the one-room, red brick school house less than a mile from our farm. Miss Tillie was like no other teacher we had ever had at Pheasant Hill Mountain School.

I guess we all knew it the moment we laid eyes on her. I fell in love with her immediately.

Our little school was situated in a grassy, flower-strewn meadow at the very fringe of a beautiful mountain, which was our mountain. At least, we felt it was ours. It gave of its bounties so unselfishly and generously. In the spring time its myriad wealth of flowers provided our neat and well-kept school with bouquets that would have rivaled the finest of flower shops in the city. Fragrance-wise, there was no comparison. None whatever. This was after Miss Tillie came. She seemed to bring with her a mixture of perpetual springtime and summer; a brightness of sunshine, blue skies and flowers and singing birds. I never realized how pleasant and enjoyable and wonderful school time could be until Miss Tillie arrived.

She told us about the hidden treasures in the mountain. Our nature study hikes unearthed the leaf-covered violets and the delightfully-fragrant arbutus that bloomed and blossomed and spread their perfume abroad in spite of their heavy, dark, damp, rotting leaf blankets. We discovered the edible -- and unedible -- berries; the delicious edible mushrooms and those which were poison. All this, after Miss Tillie came.

Like I said, I was in the fifth grade when Miss Tillie came to our school. Billy, my brother, was in the fourth grade. We arrived early. "A good habit," Mama said she wanted us to establish. "We're not rich folks," Mama often said, "but slothful and dirty we'll never be. 'The soul of the diligent shall be made fat,'" she quoted to us often.

I found it for myself one day in the big Bible from which Papa and Mama read to us daily. I didn't need to memorize it since Mama had drilled it into us by her repeated declaration of it.

I learned even more, the day I located the verse from Proverbs 13. I learned that, "a wise son heareth his father's instruction." (I told this to Billy and I urged him to be "a wise son." He promised me that he would be one.)

I learned, too, that "a righteous man hateth lying," that "wickedness overthroweth the sinner," and that "Whoso despiseth the word shall be destroyed: but he that feareth the commandment shall be rewarded." (Billy and I both covenanted together that, for always and forever, we would fear the commandment and love the Word.) Oh, I learned ever so much the day I

found that scripture portion for myself of Mama's quoting about the soul of the diligent being made fat. I began to read the Word for myself from that day on.

Like I said, Billy and I arrived at our little red brick school house early that beautiful September morning, I had almost forgotten about us getting a new teacher, for the day was so intoxicatingly gorgeous and beautiful. The sky was a deep, deep blue with, here and there, little puffs of white clouds scudding across it like ships a-sail on an ocean, or like woolly lambs skipping in the sky. The leaves of the sumac and the woodbine were a scarlet-red, looking much like the brilliance of the cardinal, and the goldenrod and purple gentian made me gasp in awe of the combination of pure gold and purple. I couldn't resist gathering a bouquet. Maybe -- just maybe this teacher wouldn't toss my gift of love into the grate of the stove with a warning to, "Never bring flowers in here again. I can't stand them. They make me sneeze."

We stood outside the door, waiting for other students to arrive, too shy and timid to go in alone, when the door opened wide and the sweetest voice I believe I ever heard said merrily and kindly, "Well good-morning, my dears. I believe you must be Alice Marie and William Ray Gooding.. Mrs. Plummer told me your mother always sees to it that you arrive in plenty of time for school -- for Sunday school and church too."

"Oh, she does, she does," I cried happily. "And, yes, I am Alice Marie and this is Billy, my brother."

"I am so happy to meet you, Alice Marie and William Ray. I am Miss Tillie, your new teacher. And what do we have here?" she asked, seeing the glorious blooms of purple and gold held in my hand.

"For you, Miss Tillie," I said shyly as I extended the love-gift to her.

"Oh, how beautiful! How beautiful! And so thoughtful and kind of you, Alice Marie. My first bouquet ever as a teacher!"

Tears came to her eyes. She pulled the flowers to her lips and kissed their cool petals, still wet with the early morning dew.

I thought she looked like an angel; a beautiful earth-angel, if there was such a being.

She threw her arms around both Billy and me then and whispered softly, "Thank you. Thank you, Alice Marie and William Ray. No matter how many bouquets I may receive after this one, yours will always be special. Very, very special. It is a love-token -- my first ever love-gift -- from two very special pupils of mine." And then she went to her desk and took the lunch, which she had brought, out of her lunch box and arranged the goldenrod and purple gentian in the lunch box and put it on her desk for all of us to enjoy.

Looking down at Billy and me, she smiled. "It's beautiful!" she exclaimed happily, adding, "And now, William Ray, maybe you can pump some water for the flowers. After all, they must drink too or they'll dry up and die. And Alice Marie, I can use another pair of hands to help me with these papers. You're in the fifth grade, I understand, and Mrs. Plummer tells me you're good with letters and figures and. . . ."

"Do you know Mrs. Plummer?" I asked quickly, feeling instantly embarrassed over my stupid question.

"Oh, I should have told you," Miss Tillie said quietly-soft without any hint at all that she thought my question was stupid and inane. "I'm boarding with Mrs. Plummer. It's a perfect boarding place. I love it. Mrs. Plummer said she was quite lonely before I moved in. I'm sure she was, too; for I know how lonely my mother was after Father died. I told Mrs. Plummer that she must meet my mother. They're enough alike, Alice Marie, to be sisters. Now that's a fact. And Mrs. Plummer lost her husband the same year my father died. Isn't that something?"

I agreed that it was. And by the time Billy returned from the pump with a bucket full of water I felt like I had always known Miss Tillie.

It was an interesting morning as, one by one and sometimes two by two, the students came inside the building to be greeted warmly by Miss Tillie, who seemed to know each one by name. Mrs. Plummer must have described and depicted us perfectly, I thought, as Miss Tillie made a little game out of it, saying, "Good morning. You must be Jane Endersby. I heard all about your beautiful red hair," or, "You are Nathan Stahr. I was told you had a million dollar smile, and this morning you gave a part of it to me."

One by one the pupils filed in and not once did Miss Tillie give the wrong name to the wrong pupil. We were spellbound. She captivated us with

her brilliance and her smile. Never before did Pheasant Hill Mountain School have a teacher like Miss Tillie. And never before did I see John Henry Abbott so speechless and wilted looking.

John Henry Abbott was the biggest boy in school and he had a way of "throwing his weight around." Generally, without exception, every single boy in school did what John Henry told him to do. John Henry never picked on the boys who were in the lower grades, however: it was those who, like himself, were in the higher grades.

There he stood now, in the school doorway, all five-feet-eleven and a-half inches of him. His broad shoulders seemed to reach almost from one door jamb to the other.

Miss Tillie smiled at him, then said warmly, "Well, good morning to you, John Henry Abbott. You look like you're all ready to go out on the ball field and coach a game of ball for us. Come inside while we get better acquainted. I've heard what a strong young man you are, and how excellent you are at figures; math especially. Someday, God willing, you and I will have a math match, John Henry. All in fun, of course. But we'll show the others how much fun math can be."

John Henry looked pleased, but abashed, too. Without further to-do, he walked into the room and took his seat, the same one he had had for so long as I had been going to school.

The simple act of him taking his seat without balking, or talking back and making a scene, was so unlike him that it elicited a gasp from the entire group of twenty-eight pupils. Miss Tillie seemed not to hear or to notice.

Smiling, she stepped down from behind her desk and stood, center stage, in front of us, looking us over with what I felt was pure love and pride for each one in the room.

"What a fine group of students you are!" she exclaimed. "And I am so thankful the Lord sent me here to be your teacher. He has been so good to me. I know we're going to have a wonderful year together. Cooperation and unity bring marvelous results. I am asking the Lord to give us these two special 'helpers.'

"You perhaps have learned my name by hearing your parents talk, and tell you that you would be having a new teacher this year. Yes, I am Miss Tillie -- Miss Annabelle Marie Tillie. . . ."

She smiled significantly in my direction.

"I am boarding with Mrs. Amanda Plummer; the widow of Aaron Plummer whom, I understand, along with John Henry Abbott's father, made it possible for each of you to have this beautiful and very neat new school house. And just in case you have been wondering how I knew your name and who you were, well, you'll have to thank Mrs. Plummer for this. She told me so many nice things about each of you until it was easy for me to recognize you when you came inside.

"Now, to acquaint you with the schedule of things, I have asked Alice Marie to pass out the paper I prepared for you. As you will notice on your paper, each morning session will be opening with Bible reading and prayer, followed by a hymn and a patriotic song and our pledges of allegiance to both our United States flag and the Christian flag. After this, we will begin the lessons. Are there any questions? If not, I will begin by reading from the Bible. . . ."

It was while Miss Tillie was reading the Bible that I noticed how tiny and dainty she looked. She couldn't be more than five feet tall; if that, even. And she was thin. Too thin, really. We were, for the most part, poor. But I felt that she must have exceeded us in her poverty. She needed mush and milk, like Billy and I got each morning for breakfast. And sometimes for supper, too -- fried, with brown sugar syrup to pour over it.

My mind wandered while she read, trying to figure out ways to help her in her "poverty." She was beautiful, I felt. Almost like a living, walking doll, with her wheat colored hair, her deep blue eyes and her lips almost as red as a cherry. And all of it natural, too. "Now, let us pray. . . ."

I came back instantly from my "wandering" and bowed my head reverently as I folded my hands together. Miss Tillie's prayer was doing something to my heart. She prayed for each of us, earnestly. I peeked, and saw tears coursing down her cheeks. She had God's attention. I felt it. We all felt it. It was like God was right there in the room with us. Suddenly, I knew

what "he that feareth the commandment shall be rewarded" meant, and I loved Miss Tillie more than when I first met her only a short while before.

(Part 2)

September skipped away on golden slippered feet of sunshine, taking with it the goldenrod and the butterfly-laden purple gentians. October rushed in with the first frost and the honking Canadian geese, bringing with it God's palette and His canvas, flamboyantly splashing color everywhere. Pheasant Hill Mountain was on "fire" with color. So were the hills. And the dear little meadow surrounding the school house looked like it was ready for its winter nap.

"Hey, the creek's freezing around the edges!" Marlin Winters shouted one crispy-cold fall morning as he ran across the frosted meadow toward the school house where some of the boys were pitching a ball back and forth.

A shout went up from the group with Marlin's announcement. "Hooray! Hooray!" they shouted.

"It won't be long now until we'll be going skating," Marlin said. "You know how it is here, generally; when the creek begins to freeze around the edges it doesn't take long for the real winter cold to set in. And then the pond freezes over. Thick. I can hardly wait till we can go skating."

Calvin Erb spoke up. "Don't get too excited, Marlin; you know how disappointed we were when Mr. Crabtree wouldn't allow us to go near the pond, even. And it had ten or twelve inches of ice on its surface! Maybe Miss Tillie won't let us go there either," he said, as, he finished speaking.

"But Miss Tillie isn't old Mr. Crab . . . Marlin exclaimed. Loud laughter followed his exclamation.

"Sh-h! Not so loud," Melvin Dornby warned. "Miss Tillie doesn't allow us to call names or to make fun of people."

"I got part of his name in," Marlin stated with a laugh. "And just between us, my shortened version of our former teacher's last name fits him perfectly. You'll have to agree, if you're going to be truthful. And you know how much Miss Tillie stresses that in all things we must be truthful. But say, I really like

Miss Tillie. She's the best teacher we've ever had. At first, I wondered how she was going to make it here. With John Henry especially. After all, she's so tiny and thin."

"But she loves us!" It was the voice of Wesley Joseph Partee. Shy, seldom-heard-from Wesley!

The other boys gasped. Then, one by one, they admitted that Wesley was right.

"Guess that's what John Henry Abbott feels. And knows," Melvin said thoughtfully.

"Or . . . well . . . do you think that . . . that maybe Miss Tillie's tiny build sort of . . . well, sort of scared John Henry? After all, we never have had a skinny, tiny-looking girl teacher before," Marlin stated.

"We sure did have a lady teacher, Marlin: Miss Fisher."

"But Miss Fisher was anything except tiny and skinny and little girl looking. Why, she was six foot one, if she was anything. And she was . . . well . . . she didn't seem like a real lady. I mean, well . . . you take Miss Tillie; she's a lady. A real lady. She looks like a lady and she talks like a lady," Marlin declared. "She is a lady." Wesley again! The fellows seemed speechless.

"Miss Tillie not only loves us, she loves the Lord very much too," Wesley added. "Miss Tillie brings God to school with her. God is Miss Tillie's Instructor in how to teach us."

Silence reigned for a while. Then Melvin spoke. "You're right, Wesley Joseph," he said. "This is what sets Miss Tillie apart from all the other teachers we've had -- God. This is why she is patient and kind to us, even when she must get firm."

"And you know what?" Calvin asked. "I don't even mind it when she corrects me. She looks so kind all the time. Like she always loves us."

"That's the Lord Jesus Christ in her," Wesley said in his quiet kind of voice. "And she really does love us, 'cause anyone who loves Jesus like Miss Tillie does loves people too."

"You know a lot about her, Wesley," Melvin said.

"It's only because I've come to know Miss Tillie's Savior, fellows."

"You . . . what?"

"I am saved. Converted," Wesley declared. "Ever since Miss Tillie began reading in the New Testament, since school began, something inside my heart made me feel funny; like I was wicked. Sometimes it felt like an arrow shot right through my heart. I listened closely to where Miss Tillie said she was reading from, which book and chapter, then afar school I'd run home and find it in Grandpa's old Bible and read it all over for myself. And that's when I learned that unless I became born again and had my sins forgiven I'd burn forever in the lake of fire, 'where the fire is not quenched,' the Bible says, 'and their worm dieth not.'"

"What did you do, Wesley Joseph?" Calvin asked seriously.

"I looked up toward the sky and I asked the Lord Jesus to forgive me of all my sins and to please come into my heart. And to keep me from going to that awful lake of fire, 'where the fire is not quenched and their worm dieth not.' And just like that, Jesus came into my heart and forgave me of every single one of my sins. It happened in an instant's time. Oh, my soul was so happy and I felt like a feather; so light and free. I still do. And I'm changed. The Lord made me new inside. He changed my desires. I'm so very happy."

"You really are different, Wesley Joseph," Calvin declared. And then the bell rang for school to begin.

During the reading of the Bible, Marlin and Calvin and Melvin paid close attention to what was being read, especially so since Miss Tillie had asked John Henry Abbott to read the chapter for that morning, stating that, "John Henry has beautiful inflection when he reads. Please listen carefully as he reads, and to what he reads. This is God's Word. Let us reverence it by being quiet and attentive to what John Henry will be reading to us."

I marveled that John Henry Abbott had stepped up to the front and without any balking or back-talk or fuss, had taken the proffered Bible from Miss Tillie's hands and had begun to read. Something certainly was happening to John Henry, I knew: under ordinary and usual circumstances, John Henry would fuss and fume and carry on until he usually got his way and was granted leniency from what he was told to do. Not so with Miss Tillie, who stressed "working together" -- cooperation -- and declared that she would "not allow a single drone bee" in her "hive" of wonderful pupils.

I listened as John Henry read. It was beautiful, the way he read that chapter from the Bible. I felt like I was right beside Jesus as John Henry read.

"Inflection," Miss Tillie had said John Henry had "beautiful inflection." I wasn't sure what inflection meant, at the time, but I knew it was beautiful the way John Henry read it. And it was so quiet in the room that you could have heard a pin drop. It really was. Miss Tillie got the reverence she asked for. And we all respected Miss Tillie for making us be reverent -- and obedient.

After the opening exercises were finished and John Henry had walked proudly back to his seat, walking like a man and looking like a man -- no stomping, thumping noise while he walked! Ah no! -- Miss Tillie stood in front of her desk and, with tears in her eyes, told us how much she loved each of us and how very proud she was of us. Then she smiled broadly and in an excited but quiet voice she said, "Boys and girls, this is a wonderful time of year; just like each and every season is a wonderful time of year."

The entire schoolroom was electrified with smiles and excitement. But we remained quiet. Miss Tillie taught us that class time was a quiet time, out of respect to the class session and to the others who were studying.

"Thanksgiving Day will soon be here, God willing. Then Christmas won't be far behind. I shall soon be giving out parts for you to memorize and learn for our Christmas program. The Lord willing, you will be presenting the true meaning of Christmas to your parents and friends. Mrs. Plummer has volunteered her help at making costumes. . . ."

There were wiggles and giggles -- quiet ones -- but wiggles and giggles nonetheless, of excited and eager anticipation all over the room.

"Next week I want each of you who can, to bring some vegetables to school. We will need carrots and onions and. . . ."

"And turnips?" Missy Drewry asked quickly, raising her hand.

"And turnips. Yes, Missy." Miss Tillie smiled. She knew that Missy's folks were very poor. But they had plenty of turnips and turnip greens; also carrots and potatoes. The Drewry garden had yielded an abundance of these. "By all means, turnips, Missy," she said again.

"The Lord willing, we will be making a big pot of vegetable soup right here in our beautiful classroom, on top of this marvelous little coal/wood burning stove that keeps us so comfortable and warm during these frosty/cold days. We'll get double use out of our nice, new stove. I have ordered a big meaty bone and some boiling beef from the butcher in the village. Bring your own spoon and a bowl. Your mothers will not need to pack a lunch for you that day. I know you're wondering what day we will be doing this, aren't you?"

Heads nodded affirmatively and voices piped, "Yes. Yes. Please tell us."

"Thursday of next week will be Thanksgiving Day. School will let out after dinner on Wednesday. Next week only. So we will have our Thanksgiving dinner together here, on Wednesday of next week, the Lord willing. Don't forget to bring your own spoon and a bowl. If you don't have a bowl, bring a cup. We can fill a cup just as easily as a bowl. And, oh yes, please have the vegetables cleaned and peeled and ready to go into the pot."

Talk about excitement! I could barely do my lessons for thinking about our Thanksgiving feast right there in our schoolroom. And since practically every one of us was poor and seldom had beef of any kind on our tables, the thought of that meaty bone and the additional boiling beef activated my tastebuds to their highest pitch. Already, I felt like I could taste that soup with its chunks of tender beef floating deliciously and like king's fare among the golden carrots and Missy's turnips.

I looked up at Miss Tillie with pure gratitude and adoration. Never before had any teacher done so many interesting and nice things for us. But

then, we never did have a teacher who loved the Lord the way Miss Tillie loved Him. Was she, after all, an angel?

(Part 3)

None of us will ever forget the Thanksgiving feast in the schoolhouse. Never. Never! It seemed almost unreal; like we were in another place.

Billy and I arrived early, like always. And when we stepped inside the door and saw a cut-out pilgrim standing upright on each desk, we were speechless -- a girl pilgrim on each girl's desk and a boy pilgrim on each boy's. They were dressed just like the pilgrims from our study books. Pasted in the middle of their back to a strip of lightweight cardboard which was bent slightly outward, the pilgrims stood on our desks as reminders of a long-ago past. But the thing that really very nearly overwhelmed me was the delicious smell of the beef.

"Look!" Billy cried, the moment we stepped inside. "Look, Alice Marie. Did you ever see such a big pot?"

I acknowledged that I hadn't. Then, with a counter question I asked, "But Billy, did you ever, ever, in your whole life, smell anything that smelled so wonderful?"

"I . . . I guess not. And, oh Alice Marie, I can hardly wait until dinner-time. Did you bring my spoon and a bowl?"

"Mama put everything right here in this bag," I assured my brother as I patted the bag which I carried and which I took up front to Miss Tillie so she could take out the offering of vegetables from Mama.

"Why thank you, Alice Marie and William Ray," Miss Tillie said graciously and kindly when she saw the vegetables Mama had sent to go into that heavenly smelling beef broth.

"Thank you much! And are we ever going to have delicious soup! Please thank your mother for sending along some great northern beans. I love great northern beans in my vegetable soup." And she poured the dried beans into the simmering pot on top of the stove, explaining, "We'll have to cook them longer than the other vegetables."

She lifted the lid carefully and as she did so, Billy and I stepped close to the stove. We got a glimpse inside that big pot and we gasped in awe of the chunks of meat which we saw bubbling up from within its cavernous depth. The broth was what Mama would have called "rich." To my eyes, it was more than rich; it was very rich.

With a large, long handled spoon, Miss Tillie stirred the beans in. Then, winking at Billy and me, she scooped out a rounded spoonful of meat chunks and dropped them onto a plate nearby, saying, "The early bird gets the worms, right? You are my two dear little early birds. No worms, mind you, but chunks of meat. And this is our own little secret. Your special treat this cold morning for always being here early enough to help me wash off the chalkboard and to clap the dust out of the erasers. And, since we've been needing a fire and William Ray always sees to it that the coal buckets are filled each morning and that the ashes are carried out to the ash pile, this is my special treat to my early bird helpers."

"Oh-h, Miss Tillie, thank you! Thank you!"

"You are most welcome, indeed, and so deserving," Miss Tillie replied, as she speared us each a chunk of meat with a fork which she had brought to school. "The meat's good and tender," she told us. "I cooked it for a while last night."

"It . . . it's delicious!" both Billy and I exclaimed, chewing it well and eating it ever so slowly so the spoonful would last longer.

Our Thanksgiving school day morning was completely different from what any of us had thought it would be. We had anticipated and expected our regular morning class schedules after the opening exercises were finished. What a surprise was in store for us!

Immediately following the opening exercises, Miss Tillie brought out something from behind her desk. Shaking it out to its full length, she asked, "What is this?" Her eyes were merry looking. "A burlap bag," was chorused in unison.

"You are right, boys and girls." Quickly she reached for something from the seat of her chair. "Now," she said, as she held up smaller bags, all cut

down to smaller size and made from the larger burlap bags, "beginning at my right, each of you will come up and get your own bag. Stay in line, please. Beginning with Ned Holsterman, get to your feet and come up in the same order in which you are seated -- Gertrude will follow Ned and Melvin will follow Gertrude: You get the picture. And while you are coming I will tell you what we will be using the bags for. This morning we are going nutting. Oh, by the way, don't forget to thank Mrs. Plummer when you see her -- she made your miniature burlap bags. Each should hold a good five to six pounds of nuts.

"Calvin's father told me where there is a thick stand of hickory nuts not too far into the mountain from here, and Melvin's father told me there's an abundance of black walnuts and butternuts on the back road toward the pond. They said everybody knew where the pond was and that you could show me the way there. I take it that there must be several ways to get to the pond. Only, for our share of the nuts, we'll have to take the back road."

"Oh, Miss Tillie, you'll love the pond!" several of the pupils said in unison.

"I'm sure I will. Does it ever freeze over solidly enough to go skating on it?" our teacher asked.

Talk about creating excitement! Miss Tillie's question set things in motion. It seemed everybody was talking at once. It sounded a lot like our ducks and geese when they all started squawking at the same time.

Miss Tillie motioned with her hand for silence and suddenly a beautiful quiet settled down in the room.

"Now," she said sweetly, "that's better. I couldn't understand a thing anyone was saying. Please raise your hand if there's anything you want to tell me about the pond. I'm glad to know we have a pond nearby, although you must never go there at any time without permission. Ponds are beautiful; but they can be dangerous, too. All right, Wesley Joseph; I saw your hand raised first. What do you have to tell me about the pond?"

"You asked if the pond froze over solidly, for ice skating. Our parents, all of them, cut chunks of ice, sixteen to twenty or more inches thick, out of

the pond. This is how we get ice for our refrigerators all year long. So, yes, it freezes over solidly, Miss Tillie."

"Thank you, Wesley Joseph. Thank you. I didn't know this. I suppose you store the ice in an ice house then, with sawdust for insulation."

"That is what we do, Miss Tillie. And believe me, chips from a block of that ice during haying and threshing season taste almost like something from another world."

Hands shot into the air like sparks from a fire, and each upraised hand was there for the same question -- "May we go skating when the ice is thick enough? Please. . . !"

Miss Tillie laughed. "May we go skating?" she parroted. "Indeed you may, God willing. We'll all go. We'll wait for a day like today, when we can take an hour or more. You did so excellently at doing your classwork a day in advance this week, so that's why we're going nutting today. We'll consider it a celebration for work well done. And the soup will be ready for us to eat upon returning back here. Now, quietly, get your coats and boots and hats and gloves on. Then it's off to the woods we go. . . ."

We gathered nuts until the big burlap bag bulged fat and round and was almost filled to the top. Miss Tillie said we'd have to leave enough space so it could be tied up tightly at the top. And then John Henry Abbott heaved the bag on to a sort of pole sled he and some of the bigger boys had rigged together with wild grape vines and limbs of trees that had been blown down by strong winds. It was a jolly and happy procession that hurried back toward the school, bringing with us the nuts, plus acorns and teaberries, vining crow's foot and clumps of velvety-soft moss.

We were almost at the building when the door flew open and there stood Mrs. Plummer, smiling and greeting us with, "Come in. Come in, my dears. Dinner is ready and waiting for you."

We left our "treasures" from the "expedition" outside, then we filed in and removed our heavy and warm outer garments before washing our hands in the pans of clean, warm water Mrs. Plummer had readied for us. Quietly, we took our seats and waited for Miss Tillie to come to the front and ask the blessing on our food.

More than once, I closed my eyes, then opened them, to prove to myself that I wasn't dreaming; that what I was smelling was actually real and that I was, indeed, as wide awake as ever I could or would be.

Never, for so long as I live, will I forget our Thanksgiving feast. Knowing that most of our families rarely ever were able to have hot dogs, Mrs. Plummer treated every one of us to this delicious but rare (for us) delicacy. I felt ours was a feast fit for a king -- bowls of succulent and delicious, steaming, thick vegetable soup -- all we could eat! -- with chunk after tender chunk of beef surfacing in our bowls -- or cups -- seeming to beg us to eat them, plus the addition of a big, fat, juicy brown hot dog cradled between an airy-light bun of Mrs. Plummer's making, with dandelion yellow mustard and cherry-red ketchup to spoon on top.

We left school that early afternoon with full stomachs, light hearts, and the best kind of good, warm feeling a child can ever have the feeling and knowledge that we were loved!

(Part 4)

Pheasant Hill Mountain School was a beehive of activity from day one after we arrived back from our Thanksgiving Day weekend. There were nuts to crack, nuts to be picked out, Christmas parts to be read and looked over -- all this besides the normal and regular classes and book work.

We were excited and almost beside ourselves with joy when Miss Tillie told us that we would be giving our parents small gifts of cookies and candies, made with the nuts we had gathered and helped to pick out of their hard shells. And besides that, there would be a bag of nuts that we could present to them after the Christmas program was finished -- a gift of the bag in which we had gathered the nuts -- before emptying them into the big burlap bag -- plus nuts which our hands had gathered and picked up by ourselves.

"This is to be our secret," Miss Tillie said. "I want your gifts to be a surprise for your parents. Do you understand?" All heads nodded in assent.

"Today we will begin going over all the Christmas parts. I want everyone's part to be memorized. This is good work for our brain. Did you

know you can get a lazy brain by not using it and by not working it? You can. Memorization is an exercise that works the brain. We must concentrate in order to memorize; and repeat the lines over again and again. . . ."

I sat in my seat as still as still could be, but in my heart I was skipping and jumping and laughing for joy. I just knew this was going to be the most wonderful Christmas program that any of our parents had ever seen and heard. Miss Tillie said this program was going to show what the true meaning of Christmas was all about. Some of us knew why Jesus was born, and why He came from the beautiful city of Heaven to earth, but some didn't know. Or, they seemed not to know.

It seemed our days flowed like a soft melody of song into each other as we made Christmas cards for our parents and our brothers and sisters (from paper Mrs. Plummer had sent over with Miss Tillie the prettiest red and green paper I had ever seen), and cookies (at Mrs. Plummer's house) and candy (again, at Mrs. Plummer's house). Oh, we were busy. And not a word was peeped to our unsuspecting parents. There were times when I thought I was going to burst with excitement over our well-kept secrets. But of course I didn't. I guess what helped me through those glorious days was the fact that I had Billy to talk to and with, over our secrets.

We memorized our parts; every single one of us did. And to the exact wording, too. Miss Tillie said she would not allow a single one of her smart pupils to stand up front and not be able to say his or her part by memory. No, she wouldn't. So we drilled and practiced and practiced and drilled, the older pupils helping the younger, smaller ones, until every single one of us knew our part -- or parts -- by heart.

The night of the big program was getting closer and closer and my heart was jumping and throbbing so joyously and loudly until I was afraid that, sometime, it would jump out of my throat.

The costumes were all made and tried on and fitted. How beautiful the angel costumes were, I thought, as I saw Mrs. Plummer hang them up on the wooden pegs behind the door. I could scarcely wait to see what I looked like in mine. And the day when Mrs. Plummer brought a big, long mirror in her Model T Ford car and stood it up against the wall in the schoolroom, and told each of us to step in front of that giant mirror and see how pretty we looked in

the gowns and costumes which she had made for us, was one of the happiest days of my life.

The long, white, ample muslin angel gown was trimmed prettily around the neck and the sleeves and even partway down the center front. The wire wings, encased in gauze, had the same trim all around them. Our halos were made completely of the shiny-bright tinsel. Oh, they were beautiful, those angel gowns!

Mrs. Plummer was like a second mother to us. She delighted in making and doing for us. The shepherds' costumes were colorful, much like the Bible stated Joseph's coat was. Even the turbans were made of the same lovely colorful material which, in my silent opinion, made each and every shepherd boy in our school the most outstanding looking shepherd boy one would ever be able to see at any school play.

The robes of the wise men were in a brilliant red, a bunting blue and the prettiest purple I had ever seen. Mary's gown was of softest blue and Joseph's garments were a gentle and lovely brown.

Poor, dear Miss Tillie, how we must have tried her patience as we paraded around the room in our beautiful costumes, hoping to get just one more peek at ourselves in Mrs. Plummer's wonderful mirror before it was carried out to the shiny black Model T Ford and taken home.

Everybody had a costume; every single one of us did. Mrs. Plummer felt it was only fair to make one for those whose part was in something other than the story of Jesus' birth, so she made a costume befitting the parts of the others. And every one of them was beautiful.

"It is now time to get the tree for the program," Miss Tillie said, one beautiful snowy morning. "We have the popcorn and the cranberries all strung and ready for putting on the tree. And the snowflakes you made from the lace in the corners of your mothers' and aunties' and grandmothers' old, worn-out handkerchiefs are beautiful since they've been 'sugar-starched' and are now stiff and dry and ready to be displayed on our tree. The chains are made and. . ."

"Don't you like the stars, Miss Tillie?" Maggie Mae asked in her tiny little voice.

"Oh indeed I do, Maggie Mae. I love those shiny gold and red and green and silver stars. I guess I love them especially much since they represent a real sacrifice on the part of so many of you in here. Those stars will always remind me of the unselfishness in each of your hearts, since those foils were treasures of yours."

Miss Tillie got all choked up then. She knew that each small square piece of foil that had been brought in was a treasure indeed of the child bringing it. It was a love gift of the truest kind, for boxed candy was a rare treat in many of the homes of her pupils. But when a box of candy was given, there would be two, maybe three, pieces of candy which would be wrapped in bright foil. These "treasures" were removed carefully from the candy which they were "hiding." They were then smoothed out lovingly and gently and put away among the child's treasured things.

"You're a wonderful, wonderful group of pupils!" Miss Tillie finally managed to exclaim as she brushed tears off her cheeks and smiled lovingly down at where we sat.

The walk to the mountain was wonderful. Miss Tillie let us skip or run or jump -- whatever we felt like doing. We sang the carols which we memorized for the program and then we sang "Jingle Bells," over and over again and again, until we were nearly breathless from singing. Oh, we had so much fun.

We looked at big trees and little trees, skinny-tall trees and plumply-fat ones. "It must fit in the corner," Miss Tillie reminded us, with laughter bubbling from her.

"I found it!" Ray Ashford shouted a short distance away from where we were.

"Indeed you did!" Miss Tillie declared, complimenting Ray with, "It's perfect. Just perfect for the corner. Ray, you did an excellent job at knowing what was needed. . . ."

We skipped and ran all the way back to the schoolhouse. I had never known our mountain had so many beautiful evergreens until this day. Miss Tillie allowed us to break off small branches from bushes that were loaded with bright red berries, saying, "They will be beautiful, tucked here and there

in our tree, among your lovely decorations." Then she added, "But we don't want to take more than we will use; the birds need the berries for their winter food."

By the time we were finished decorating the tree, it was time for us to practice for the Christmas program. It seemed as though we were in another world. Our school was transformed. Never did I smell a pine more fragrant and never did I see our school Christmas tree more beautiful than it was this year.

We were midway through the practice; John Henry's "Why Jesus Came to Earth" was next on the program. It was a beautiful, lengthy reading and John Henry had it all memorized perfectly.

He stepped up to the platform and began in his usual, clear and distinct manner, his voice rising and falling as emphasis was needed or not needed. His diction was wonderful; his inflection beautiful. (I felt like laughing when I remembered that Sarah Haggard told me her tiny sister Julie had gone home from school and told their mother that Miss Tillie had said John Henry Abbott had "such beautiful infection" when he read).

John Henry always captivated us with his first few words. We listened in silence now, feeling the meaning of the words deep in our hearts. His lips began to quiver. And then John Henry did what I had never ever seen John Henry Abbott do before; he began to cry!

"Miss Tillie," he said, in a voice as meek as a little child's. "Miss Tillie, I . . . I . . . I need the Lord Jesus to come . . . into . . . my heart. I . . . I just cannot give this . . . this reading with Him standing outside, wanting to come into my heart. I want to . . . to change; from the side I'm on to Jesus' side."

"Oh, John Henry, I'm so proud of you!" Miss Tillie cried. And right there on the platform she and John Henry prayed until John Henry's face shone brighter than the tinsel on our angels' costumes. John Henry was saved. Saved! You could see it on his face.

He looked down at us then and smiled. And then he said, "I'm saved. Saved! I really do know the true meaning of Christmas now: I have the Lord Jesus in my heart." And then he gave his reading in a way like he had never before given it.

The night of the program will stand out forever in my memory. It was a beautiful night a-glitter and aglow with myriads of twinkly, shiny, blinking stars and a silver half-moon. The snow crunched and squeaked beneath our boots as we walked across it. Papa and Mama seemed as young as we were, laughing and talking and singing like a couple of carefree school pupils. It made me feel good all over. I felt warm through and through. I could scarcely wait till they would see Billy and me in our costumes.

As we entered the schoolroom the fragrant pine greeted us pungently. Oh, I loved it! The entire room seemed to have yet another transformation, prettier even than when I left it only those few short hours ago -- the flickering lamplight made it and everything in it a wonderland of magic. I stood in awe of it all.

Miss Tillie and Mrs. Plummer were busy as work bees, dressing us in our costumes behind an improvised screen then sending us quietly and silently to our "reserved" seats up front. The angels had to sit -- barely -- on the edge of the seat lest we crush the wings. Small sacrifice, however, to be an angel! I thought, as I sat still as still can be.

The big moment had finally arrived! Miss Tillie stepped up near the platform in the middle of the room. "Let us bow our heads in a word of prayer," she said.

The room became very still and quiet. Miss Tillie prayed as only Miss Tillie could pray and God seemed to step down and stand center stage instead of Miss Tillie. When the Amen was said, everybody there knew Miss Tillie loved the Lord and was on His side.

Then, to the singing of three little girls, the curtain was pulled open. Our school platform seemed to have been transformed into a wonderland of delight. The tree in the corner sported tinsel that sparkled marvelously beneath the glow of two lanterns that were hung from something on the wall, one on each side of the tree. The warm, soft glow of their light showed off the foil stars beautifully, as well as the red and green paper chains and the lovely "snowflakes" and the long strands of popcorn and cranberries. Everything looked so lovely.

The parents and friends clapped loudly when the curtain opened to reveal the cherubic singers, each one an angel, standing on little stools on our decorated platform-stage.

Miss Tillie welcomed everybody to our program and then it was time for us to present to our community the true meaning of Christmas.

What a program! I heard Papa and Mama blow their nose and sniffle numerous times while the beautiful Christmas story came to life on our platform. And many more than Papa and Mama, too! And when each child presented his and her parents with their very special homemade gift of love, well . . . I don't know how to describe what happened except to say that I guess I never did see so much hugging and kissing and crying for joy -- and pride in their children--as I saw that night. It was truly wonderful.

I heard many a father and mother tell our Miss Tillie how much the program meant to them and how very much it had helped them. Some even told her that they would be starting back to church again; that they needed to "do their first works over" and get right with God. Miss Tillie's eyes were bright with tears.

And then, to everyone's surprise except those who were in on the secret, John Henry Abbott's father stepped to the platform and, speaking for everybody there, he called Miss Tillie to his side. After saying ever so many nice things to her and about her -- how she had helped each of their children; how their children's grades had improved since she was their teacher and how well-mannered they had become in the home; how, through her shining, living example, some of the pupils had given their heart to God and were converted -- he presented her with a beautifully wrapped box and an envelope.

Miss Tillie stood there in total shock. Then she cried, "Thank you. Thank you!" She could scarcely speak, so moved and choked up was she.

Taking special care to not tear the paper, she began to unwrap the box. When the box was opened, she gasped. And then she drew the lovely, heavy, warm coat out and held it up for everyone to see, exclaiming tearfully and gratefully, "Oh, thank you! Thank you. God is so good to me!"

"Your coat has been much too thin for our bitter/cold winters," John Henry's father remarked hoarsely as he daubed a handkerchief at his eyes. (I noticed he didn't say, "much too worn out," and for this I was glad!)

"You dear, dear wonderful people! I love you all!" Miss Tillie exclaimed as shiny tears trickled from her eyes and skipped down her cheeks. "Thank you for this beautiful coat. And thank you for the privilege of teaching and loving your children. I must have the most wonderful pupils in all the world. I am so proud of them. . . ."

Opening the envelope brought a flow of fresh tears to Miss Tillie's eyes. On the inside of the lovely card were the names of each pupil's father and mother and twenty dollars in one-dollar bills. She was overwhelmed. Between her tearful outbursts, she thanked her kind benefactors.

Nor did Mrs. Plummer's many kindnesses go ungifted. Ah, no! There were apples -- a whole bushel of them -- and potatoes -- another entire bushel of these and turnips galore, plus a handsomely plump, big turkey for Mrs. Plummer's Christmas dinner.

It was a wonderful, wonderful night! Calling all of us pupils up to the platform near the Christmas tree, she pulled out a box which was cleverly hidden and concealed in the far corner beneath the fragrant branches of our lovely tree. Then she called our names and gave each of us a bag heavy with gifts. For the boys, there was a bag of the prettiest marbles we had ever seen. The little girls received a small doll of equal value to the boys' marbles, and the older girls received a good reading book, also of equal value to the marbles. And then we found popcorn balls, carefully wrapped in wax paper and twisted on each end to hold the paper intact, an orange (an "exquisitely" rare treat indeed!), English walnuts, Brazil nuts, almonds and peanuts, all in their shells; two peppermint sticks and a big, fat gingerbread boy, also wrapped in wax paper, but not ready to run away, like in the story book, but ready to be eaten. How delicious he smelled!

After telling Miss Tillie goodnight and thanking her over again and again, Papa took Billy's and my hand and we hurried out of the warm building to where Mama was talking to Mrs. Plummer, who said she would take us home, since she passed our house to get to hers.

It was indeed the night of all nights for me, up to that time, And, for so long as I live, I shall always treasure the memories that are wound around and centered in on Miss Tillie, the most wonderful teacher we ever had.

-- The End --