

Sula (Turner) Hillhouse

The day was a Sunday - it was hot and dry with hardly a leaf moving: a typical day in Decatur County, Tennessee. My Aunt and Uncle from Bemis had been visiting our family during the weekend and now were getting ready to go home. When my Aunt Ethel and Uncle Wafford (Bates) were about ready to leave, I started begging to go home with them. (They had no children and I loved being with them - most especially because they petted me to death.) My parents hesitated, but Aunt Ethel said it was okay with her - so Mom and Dad relented and allowed me to go. I was so excited.

Now, school was in session in Bemis, but in Decatur County the schools had been dismissed for a few weeks for the fall "cotton picking" season. In those days (the 1940's) crops were harvested by hand, and families needed every school-aged child to help with the awesome task of picking acres and acres of cotton. So it was the custom in rural communities to suspend class for a few weeks so children could help their families (and sometimes their neighbors) pick cotton. If I'd been a very good "cotton picker" Daddy might have thought more than once about allowing me to be away from home for a few days; but the fact was, I was not a very productive picker of cotton - thus permission was granted!

It was getting dark by the time we drove into my Aunt and Uncle's driveway on Old Kentucky Street in Bemis, so I couldn't see well enough to tell much about the neighborhood that night. You see - this was my very first visit, and I was anxious to see what all the houses and yards looked like. (Where I lived, we couldn't even see our neighbor's house.)

The streetlights were on and reflected off the multicolored foliage on the trees that lined every street. It was a beautiful sight, and I thought Bemis must be the most beautiful place in the world. While my Uncle unloaded the car (Mom and Dad had loaded them up with fresh fruits and fall vegetables), my Aunt fixed something for us to eat. We usually ate supper much earlier than this and we were all hungry. I'll never forget that first meal at this house on that fall night in 1943-- sandwiches made with sliced bread, bologna, cheese, sliced tomato and real mayonnaise! That was the first time I'd ever eaten store-bought loaf bread and bologna and I thought that was the best food I'd ever tasted...never mind the country ham, home-ground sausage, pork loin and chops, fresh eggs with hot biscuits and gravy, fried chicken, fresh picked vegetables and hot cornbread, fresh fruits, made-from-scratch desserts, fresh milk that had been cooled in our "spring-house". All of this was home grown and homemade, and was what we had all the time and I was used to it - so the soft, fresh loaf bread and bologna were a treat to me. We were all pretty tired, so we got ready for bed early. I could hardly think about sleeping because I was still so excited. Soon after crawling into that fluffy feather bed I started missing Mama, Daddy and my little sister, June. They seemed so far away--60 or 70 miles to me seemed like halfway across the state!

Soon, though, I feel asleep. We didn't have to get up early because Uncle Wafford worked on the Second Shift and wouldn't have to go to work until 2:00 o'clock Monday afternoon. On the farm we always got up really early, and Daddy went to feed the animals and milk the cows about 4:00 o'clock. While he did that, Mama cooked a really big breakfast - every day! You see, people who worked on the farm had to work so hard they needed a big breakfast to keep them

going until lunch time -- there was no mid-morning snack-break in those days! At the same time Mama was cooking our breakfast, she also cooked foods to be packed for Daddy to take to the field and for us to take to school for lunch. So, since my "biological clock" was set to get up early, I woke up before my Aunt and Uncle did. I tried to be quiet and not wake them -- but I just had to peek out the window to get a look at the surrounding neighborhood, at least as much as I could see from behind the pull-down window shade.

Finally, I heard them stirring and soon smelled coffee, so I knew breakfast would soon be ready. I got up, slipped into my clothes, made my bed and went into the kitchen. I offered to help but Aunt Ethel had everything under control. She was such a happy person--always smiling and I loved being with her.

We ate breakfast and pretty soon after we finished Uncle Wafford said he was going to the Post Office. I learned that everyone in town had a "box" at the Post Office and went there daily to pick up their mail. I also learned that many of the men in town would meet at the YMCA before going to work and play checkers - or just sit and talk. I also learned that the men could take a bath (shower) at the "Y" for a small fee--which many of them did. That seemed so strange to me - we took our baths at home - in a tin wash tub.

I actually don't remember much we did during my first day in Bemis - except we walked up one side of the street and back down on the other side - stopping on occasion for Aunt Ethel to talk to neighbors who were in their yards or on their front porches. The houses were so white - like they'd just been painted, and the yards were all neat and clean. Later we sat in the swing on the front porch and watched neighbors going to and coming from work at the shift change. I remember some people passing by said they were going to the Company Store - others were on their way to the "Block" (which I later learned was "the Patton Block" where a group of stores, a cafe, a taxi stand and Pettigrew's Drug Store were located.)

It wasn't too long after Uncle Wafford left for work at 1:45 before the kids living on Aunt Ethel's street began coming by on their way home from school. The wind was blowing - not really hard - but hard enough to blow some of the leaves off the trees. They floated gently down and danced their way across the sidewalks and streets. Now, living in the country, I'd never thought much about leaves falling off the trees before. There was just something kind of special about their scooting along on the sidewalks and paved streets that caught my attention. Right away some of the kids came outside and began riding their bicycles up and down the street - and even around the block. They'd often call out to one another - and sometimes would stop and talk together for a few minutes. I thought they were the luckiest kids on earth. I don't know if I felt jealous - or just a little bit intimidated; maybe both.

I soon learned a few of the kids by name: Barbara and Elizabeth Hinson, Georgia Pearl Kennon and her brothers Farris and Larry, and Willard Cagle, who lived next door. I can't say I got to know any of them during that first visit, but at least knowing their names was a start.

One of my most favorite treats, during that first visit to Bemis, was going to Pettigrew's Drug Store on the Patton Balock to get a chocolate sundae - my very first one ever! I remember it had two scoops of vanilla ice cream served in a tall, clear, footed glass dish and covered with yummy

chocolate - piled high with whipped cream and a red cherry on top. That was the best thing I'd ever had to eat in my whole life....even better than bologna, cheese and tomato sandwiches!

While we were eating our chocolate sundaes, a lady came in and stopped to talk to Aunt Ethel. Her name was Miss Annie Phillips - and she talked to me, too, asked all kinds of questions. I thought she was a very nice and friendly lady. When she started to leave she told me she hoped I'd come back to visit Aunt Ethel again and come with her to Sunday School. I got the feeling she really meant it - and that made me feel real good.

All too soon my first visit in Bemis came to an end, and I had no idea when I'd ever get to come back. I remember looking longingly at kids playing on lawns, on sidewalks and a couple of boys tossing a ball as we drove slowly down the street on our way back to my home in Decatur County. Some months later, two men I'd never seen before, came to see Daddy. They talked for a long time and after they left I learned they were from the Bemis Cotton Mill. They had come to ask Daddy to come back to Bemis to work in the Mill. Daddy had lived and worked in Bemis for several years before I was born - so he was what they called an "experienced hand". They told Daddy that he was really needed because the "Draft" had taken several of the Bemis employees into the Army and left the Mill short of help. The material made in the Mill was in such demand because of the war, that the Bemis Bro. Bag Company needed to increase production. In order to do that they needed to hire more employees.

Daddy told the men to give him a little time to get the rest of his crop out of the field and he'd come and "help them out for a little while". The first Sunday afternoon Daddy left to be gone for a whole week, I cried and cried. Mama, June and I were all by ourselves. We heard all kinds of noises during the night -- and for the first time ever, I felt afraid. I know it must have been hard on Mama, too. She had to do most everything by herself. June and I helped as much as we could, but for the most part Mama had it all to do.

For what seemed like a very long time (it may have been only a matter of weeks) Daddy would ride the Greyhound Bus to Jackson and then catch a City Bus to Bemis on Sunday afternoons. He would work all week and then make the return trip home on the following Friday. Sometimes they had to work six days a week and he didn't get to come home for the weekend - and that made it really seem like a long time. I can remember sitting on a stump down by the road, in front of our house, watching for Daddy to come walking up the hill on Friday afternoons.

The War just kept escalating and the Mill kept hiring more people. Before long nearly everybody in the extended Turner family, who was old enough, was working in the Bemis Cotton Mill--my Granddaddy (Ben) Turner, my uncles, aunts, cousins, my sister Opal, and Daddy.

By the spring of 1944 I suppose Daddy either decided, or was convinced by his superiors, that he was needed in Bemis long-term so he made arrangements to move his family to Bemis. I was both excited - and scared. The school year was about over and I especially dreaded changing schools. At first, we moved into the house with my Mammy and Pappy Turner - they lived on Davidson Street. Their house was near the railroad tracks and trains ran day and night. Every night I thought for sure the train was going to come right through the house! They were so loud and

always blew the train whistle at every "crossing." I think there were about four crossings in Bemis, so the whistle blew continually all the way through town.

One thing we learned very quickly while living near the railroad tracks: If you had a washing on the clothes line and heard a train coming - you'd better get the clothes off the line before the train got there or the clothes would get sprinkled with tiny balls of coal soot!

Then came that faithful day - our first day to go to school in Bemis, and I was so scared. Mama walked June and me to school. Oh my! It looked so big. It was a brick, two-story building located next door to the Methodist Church. I was assigned to Miss Mildred Pearson's fifth grade class on the second floor - at the west end of the hall. She just could not have been sweeter or nicer to me - but I felt as "lost as a goose". I had been attending a country, one-room school (almost like the one on "Little House on the Prairie") and our textbooks were altogether different from those I was given at my new school. "How in the world will I ever understand what all they're talking about?" was the question that kept running through my mind.

First thing every morning we'd say the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag. Every day we would sing patriotic songs. I remember that Joel Brooks got to lead the singing more than anybody else. He sat right in front of Miss Pearson's desk and it seemed like his hand always went up first when she asked for volunteers to lead the singing. I loved singing the songs -- and sometimes, even now -- nearly sixty years later - I break out singing, "Over hill - over dale, we have hit the dusty trail..." Often we'd get to go outside, line up single file and practice marching like soldiers. I thought that was lots of fun, and it was -- but it was much later that I realized how very much the War influenced about everything we did during those years.

Another thing I soon learned about, that the students were very excited about doing, was the buying of "stamps" for ten cents each, which they would stick into a stamp book. When a book was filled with stamps it would be exchanged for a \$25.00 War Bond. People everywhere were being encouraged to buy War Bonds to help support the War effort. I begged dimes from all my relatives and before school was out I managed to accumulate enough stamps to get a War Bond.

A few year later I used that War Bond to buy a piano and Mama and Daddy let me take piano lessons from Mrs. Greer (I believe her name was Lessie Mae.) In 1958 we gave that same piano to the newly organized Northside Methodist Church - to which we moved our membership and became Charter Members.

Miracle of all miracles! I passed the 5th Grade! I may have received the first "social promotion" in the Madison County School System.

Not long after school was out, Daddy found and bought a house on Chester Levee Road. We were glad to have a house of our own again - and have more room to spread out. There was a lot to do getting everything moved and in place. Mama and Daddy planted a late garden. They always had a garden and we were expected to help with the planting, the cultivating and the harvesting - so that kept us busy during that first summer.

We moved our membership to the Bemis Methodist church and Brother L. L. Jones was the pastor. (My parents continued their active membership there until their deaths: Dad in 1993 and Mom in 1999.)

Soon fall was upon us and June and I were now starting the 2nd and 6th grades in Bemis. June still attended classes in the brick, two-story building beside the Methodist Church, but the 6th and 7th grades met in a white, clap-board building across the street, west of the brick building. To my surprise, I didn't feel so lost any more - I suppose it was getting to start "on the same page" with everybody else. I actually started to like school for the first time ever. I made several really neat, new friends and felt so lucky to be going to school in Bemis - and really surprised myself by making good grades.

It was during the sixth grade, I believe, that World War II came to an end. We had no TV so we only saw the excitement in our neighborhoods - and heard it on the radio. The War is over! The boys will be coming home! How excited everybody was. Our family was just as happy the War was over but we couldn't be totally excited because my very-most-favorite cousin, Ben F. Blount, who was born and grew up in Bemis, wouldn't be coming home. He had joined the Army as soon as he was old enough and transferred into the Paratrooper's Division soon after Basic Training. He was killed on his first "jump" into a battle zone in Sicily. We, as all families were who lost family members in the war, were devastated.

Ben F. was especially close to us because as a young boy and teenager he would come and stay with us during the summers and help Daddy on the farm. He loved working outside - and my Dad had no sons to help on the farm - so Ben F. was a great help to him. Ben F. was like a "brother" to Opal, June and me.

After his family first received word that he was "missing in action", I remember sitting on that same stump down by the road in front of our house (where months later I waited for Daddy to come home from Bemis on Friday afternoons), and looking expectantly down the road for Ben F. to come walking up the hill. That was not to be....before too long my Aunt got another letter from the Department of Defense notifying her, with much regret, that Ben F. was now classified as "killed in action".

After the War was over, my Dad thought the boys who had left their jobs in the Mill to go to the Army, would be coming back to their jobs and that he would no longer be needed in the Bemis Cotton Mill. But, as it turned out, the Government passed the G. I. Bill of Rights and many of the Bemis veterans took advantage of that opportunity and went back to school to continue their education. Therefore, Daddy's job and the jobs of lots of other people in the Mill, were secure.

I was really glad because I had come to love our life in Bemis. Why, for a quarter we could go to the movies on Saturday afternoon, buy a coke and a bag of popcorn! We grew up on Roy Rogers, Red Ryder and Gene Autry.

My world continued to expand when I was allowed to go swimming in the Bemis swimming pool and learn to skate at the Bemis skating rink. Bemis kids were so blessed to grow up in such a special "village community" where everybody knew everybody else. Members from all Bemis families either worked, played, worshipped, or went to school together. There was never any fear

of walking home from the movies or skating rink at night or walking to a friend's house after dark to spend the night.

Seventh and Eighth grades were a time of growing - physically, emotionally, socially and spiritually. In those days nobody ever thought about objecting to Scripture being read daily at school, or prayers being voiced in the classroom. We had wonderful Christian teachers who not only were intent on our learning the 3-R's but were interested in preparing us to experience well rounded, diverse and productive lives as we journeyed through the ensuing years. The teachers and Principal knew us personally - and knew most of our parents. There was an unwritten and unspoken collaboration between teachers and parents in the education of the children in Bemis, Tennessee....an arrangement that in my opinion just cannot be improved upon.

Now, in the fall of 1947 I went to J. B. Young High School -- a freshman, and a "green one at that"! J. B. Young was a beautiful brick, two-story building and was not very old. Principal Alton Copeland insisted that it be kept impeccably clean, and personally saw that it was "spit and polished" at all times. He took great pride in the school's appearance, as well as his students' successes.

Mr. Copeland was a good man and every student who ever darkened the door of J. B. Young High School has heard him read, several times, his very favorite scripture: Ecclesiastics 3:1-12. He read that particular passage on many occasions during our four years there.

During our time at J. B. Young High School, we were exposed to different cultures through the monthly programs brought in from outside and presented to the student body in the school's auditorium. The girls were taught to cook, sew and the art of housekeeping by Mrs. Frances Mercer and later by Mrs. Eleanor Baxter and Mrs. Bettye Neely. Several Home Economics students were chosen each year to fill the role of "Hostess-Servers" at the many business, social and professional luncheons and evening banquets held in the large Meeting/Dining Room on the second floor of the Y.W.C.A. This was an unique opportunity and we were meticulously trained in the proper method of serving at both formal and semi-formal occasions. For instance....."always serve from the left side of the diner", etc., etc. Not only was it good training for young high school girls - but it was a lot of fun as well.

The guys were taught by Mr. Kirby McKnight to do wood working projects, how to work with electricity, and do many other practical things in the Vocational Shop that would be of benefit to them throughout the course of their lives. Quite a number of Mr. Kirby's students were so impacted by his teaching, and by the content of his character, that they chose their life-time careers in some phase of work they were exposed to in his Shop Class at J. B. Young High School. This stands as a testimony to Mr. Kirby McKnight's profound influence on the lives of the young men he taught.

J. B. Young students were also taught the importance of proper nutrition, personal hygiene and physical education. Some may be surprised to learn that as far back as the 1940's and 1950's we received some introduction to sex education in Health and Home Economics classes - in segregated groups of course! We were taught that character was more important than popularity - not in a formal or required subject, but every teacher used the opportunities they had on a daily basis to instill in each of us the qualities necessary to become a good citizen and a good and decent person.

We received all this valuable training, and more, in addition to the curriculum required by the State and by the School Board.

I'm sure every J. B. Young student could share favorite stories about one of our favorite teachers of all time -- Miss Sally Sweeney. She was a tiny "bundle of dynamite" who Joe Nip McKnight swore had eyes in the back of her head. She taught all of us, all that we could absorb, in the areas of math, algebra, geometry, etc. I'm sure all of her students would agree that there will never be another "Miss Sallie."

Sports were always of great interest to most of the residents in Bemis. Through the years there were always successful sports teams fielded through different Bemis recreational organizations. Likewise, sports were an important part of our high school experience. All J. B. Young teams were very much supported by the community. During our freshman year, while a new gymnasium was under construction, we practiced and played our basketball games in the gymnasium at the Y.M.C.A., as had the school's teams in years past. Mr. Copeland, with the help of skilled volunteers who loved the game of basketball, coached the teams.

When we, the Class of 1951, started our sophomore year, J. B. Young High School had its very own, brand new gymnasium - what a beauty! We were so excited and so proud! Now everybody was able to enjoy the new gym because physical education classes were a vital part of the required curriculum. No longer would the basketball teams have to leave the campus to practice.

In the spring, prior to our sophomore year, Mr. Bill Leftwich joined the teaching staff as teacher and coach. And coach he did! He worked that spring and summer organizing, recruiting, preparing and training J. B. Young's first football team to be ready to take the field that coming fall. Nobody - not even the coach - expected the team to be very successful that first year. Most of the boys who ultimately became "the team" had never played football and knew very little about the game.

They won all of their games that first season. Mr. Bill said years later, when asked how he'd been able to field such a powerhouse that first year (with only part of a season to coach and train this new team), "I guess it was because they never had time to learn how to lose." Whatever the reason, that first successful season established J. B. Young's football team as "the team to beat" from then on.

While successfully guiding the football team through a winning first season, Mr. Bill had to start working with the basketball teams (both boys and girls) as soon as school started in order to be ready for the season when it opened in November. He recruited a friend of his, Howard Thomas, (who loved girls' basketball) to come as a volunteer coach and help him - at least until football season was over. Mr. Thomas was tough - boy was he tough! - but he knew basketball and was an excellent coach. He enjoyed it so much that he continued to come to our practice session (and to our games) even after football season was over.

Mr. Bill was very successful during his years at J. B. Young and produced many winning teams. Many of his student athletes went on to become very successful men and women in a wide variety of professions, businesses, the military, the clergy, in education, as well as in other types of work careers.

Suffice it to say that through the past fifty-plus years, Bill Leftwich has kept up with almost every student he ever coached and continues to be interested in their lives. He's still a great fan of basketball and follows many local teams - being especially interested in the teams at Union University.

High School was definitely the highlight of my life, up to that point, and although more than half a century has passed since my high school days, I continue to have fond memories of my years at J. B. Young High School. My experiences as a member of the girls' basketball team are forever indelibly imprinted in my memory. It saddened me to see, earlier in this year, our dear old J. B. Young High School building razed. I do understand the need for progress - but I also understand the need for preserving and maintaining quality structures for their utilization and for posterity.

I, for one, am grateful - and I'm quite sure that hundreds and thousands of current and former Bemisites could join me in grateful appreciation to the Judson Moss Bemis family for choosing to locate a Cotton Mill in an area south of Jackson, Tennessee, and for building a Model Village for the families of their employees. In addition to building and maintaining the homes, they built a house of worship, a Company Store that carried nearly anything anyone would need to buy, and all the recreational and entertainment facilities the community could have hoped for. All this was provided so employees and their families could live comfortable and productive lives, could raise their children to enjoy their childhood, and could prepare them to evolve as useful and productive citizens throughout the course of their lives. To this end, I believe Bemis Bro. Bag Company was more than successful.

I count myself very blessed to have had the privilege of growing up in the very unique and special place called Bemis, Tennessee.

Sula (Turner) Hillhouse