A SPECIAL KIND OF BOARDING SCHOOL
Growing Up In An Orphanage During
The Great Depression

By John W. Chandler | Williamstown, 2016
“Sounds like Deerfield.” That was Jack Sawyer’s surprising response to my brief description of what it was like to grow up in Mills Home, a Baptist orphanage in Thomasville, North Carolina, where I lived for seven-and-a-half years. John E. Sawyer was president of Williams College at the time, and I was dean of the faculty. In 1934, sixteen-year-old Jack Sawyer and the other Deerfield Academy boys were belting out “There is Power in the Blood” and other evangelical hymns in the Deerfield Chapel. As a ten-year-old, I was among the 550 boys and girls who gathered frequently in the Mills Home church, and the hymns that we sang drew upon a similar repertoire. I knew enough about New England prep schools to recognize, after a moment’s reflection, what Jack Sawyer meant. Yes, Mills Home and Deerfield Academy were comparable in some important ways. The orphanage, however, was a peculiar, distinct, and extraordinary institution.
MY ROUTE TO MILLS HOME began in a Southern Appalachian hollow, Holland Creek, about twenty-five miles north of Asheville, in Madison County. Throughout my long life, strong homing instincts have drawn me back repeatedly to two places that I knew as home in my early years: Holland Creek and Mills Home.

When I was about fifty years old, shortly after I had succeeded Sawyer as president of Williams, my brother Ted and I were driving to his vacation home on the property that our family had owned on Holland Creek. We were almost at the upper end of the rough, rocky road that ran alongside the stream and through the valley known as Holland Creek. The car groaned as it crawled along. We could see Ted’s house, perched up against the mountainside near where our parents’ house stood and where I was born. Towering over the other mountains at the end of the valley was Horse House Mountain, so named because it was a hiding place for horses and mules to keep marauding Confederate and Union deserters from stealing them during the Civil War.

On the road ahead loomed a man with a rifle. He swayed and lurched as he walked. He was drunk. His dog began to bark at the car and blocked the road. I stopped the car as the dog continued to bark out his challenge. The man lifted his rifle and zinged a bullet just over the dog’s back. The bark turned into a terrified yelp as the dog fled into the growth beside the road. We waved and nodded as we passed the man, expressing our thanks. I recognized him as Hosie Reavis. He and I had been in the first grade together at Beech Glen School, a bus ride of about six miles. We knew him also as Red Reavis, but the red hair was almost gone.

Hosie’s ancestors, like mine, had settled on Holland Creek many generations ago. My father was a subsistence farmer. As with his seventeenth-century ancestors who grew tobacco in and around Jamestown, Virginia, income from tobacco sales provided most of his cash. Indeed, tobacco was the principal source of income for most Madison County families. The tobacco that grew best in western North Carolina, Tennessee, and Kentucky was burley. While the flue-cured or bright leaf tobacco that flourished in eastern North Carolina and tidewater Virginia provided the primary content of cigarettes, burley—air-cured in open-sided barns—supplied the flavor and aroma most popular with cigarette smokers. It commanded higher prices than bright leaf tobacco.

Baxter Harrison Chandler was fifty-two years old when I was born. My twenty-five-year-old mother was his third wife, the other two having died young. My mother, Mamie McIntosh Chandler, grew up about ten miles away in adjacent Yancey County, where her ancestors were among the first white settlers. Yancey has the highest mountains east of the Mississippi, including Mount Mitchell at 6,684 feet and thirty-six others more than a mile high.

I have relatively few memories of my father, and they are consistent with reports that he was a kind, gentle man with serious health problems. He suffered from hyperthyroidism, a condition that is easily treatable now but for which no reliable treatment was then available. Ted, a physician and medical school professor at Wake Forest University, had seen records that revealed that our father also suffered from congestive heart failure. By the summer of 1930, he had to struggle to meet the needs of a family consisting of a young pregnant wife and three small children. I was the oldest at age six. His health was fragile, and tilling his steep, rocky fields required heavy labor. Mule-pulled sleds resting on runners were useful on that terrain. Anything with wheels would be dangerous.

In 1929 the price for the burley tobacco crop plunged dramatically from levels of the previous decade, when World War I saw increased tobacco use among men as the “roaring twenties” did among women. There was no clear solution to my father’s desperate situation. He probably did the best he could when, late in 1930, he sold his small farm and made a down payment on a somewhat larger farm some five miles away. He probably assumed, as did other tobacco farmers of the region, that the tobacco market crisis was temporary and that the prosperity of the immediate post-World War I period would return. Time would tell that no relief for tobacco farmers would come until the price support system proposed by President Franklin Roosevelt became effective in 1938. My father’s desperate gamble was almost certainly doomed from the start, and it was over within a few months, when he died from pneumonia. The antibiotics that might have saved him appeared a decade later.

My father’s death in early April 1931 left my mother destitute. A new baby had arrived five days before my father died, and that circumstance added to my mother’s despair. By then the Great Depression was tightening its grip on the United States. My mother lost the down payment on the new farm. Because of payment defaults on the old farm, she realized little from its sale.
We moved to Black Mountain, an attractive little resort town some forty miles away, to live with my mother’s sister, Augusta, and her husband, Marion Brackett. The Brackett household also included my invalid maternal grandmother, Mary Deyton McIntosh, and two infant grandchildren of the Bracketts, whose mother had died. My uncle was the town clerk or town manager of Black Mountain. His salary initially covered the basic needs of the ten persons living under their roof. Some cash assistance came from my mother’s brothers in California, but they had their own young families to support.

Within a year, conditions dramatically worsened when the bankrupt town could no longer pay my uncle’s salary, although he continued to work as the town struggled to maintain essential public services. Eventually, just after the beginning of Franklin Roosevelt’s presidency in March 1933, the town of Black Mountain began receiving federal funds to use for improvements to the municipal golf course, building a recreational lake, and improving the sewer and water systems. With my uncle overseeing the federally funded projects, he had a salary again as he combined his old and new duties.

Meanwhile, there was an especially difficult period of approximately a year, beginning in the spring of 1932, before the flow of New Deal money began. To get through that period, my beloved Aunt Gus put on her best game face as she heroically and good-humoredly bought a cow, planted a garden, and got a job in a local cannery. Pat McGraw, the cannery’s manager, permitted her to take home discarded cans of fruits and vegetables, discarded because of dents in the cans. Years after the fact, my brothers and I teasingly accused Aunt Gus of inflicting the dents.

As much as it offended her pride, she took us children to the town hall to receive underwear and other clothing from the emergency relief agencies housed there. She gave me a coupon and sent me to a storefront relief agency that dispensed staple foods. Carrying the bag of flour that came from exchanging the coupon, I ventured onto the sidewalk only after making certain that no one would see me emerging from the relief agency. The same embarrassment kept me from joining the line for free school lunches.

Within a short time, even Aunt Augusta was overwhelmed when my mother suffered an emotional collapse from the bipolar disorder that plagued her throughout her life. At that point, late in 1932, my brother Calvin and I returned to Madison County to live with relatives, the Rice family. Cal was not yet seven, and I had recently turned nine. I had missed so much of the 1930–1931 school year that I had to repeat the first grade when we moved to Black Mountain. My brother Cal, more than two years younger than I, joined me in the first grade. Although the officials at Black Mountain Elementary School might have ruled that Cal, age five, was too young for school, they acquiesced in what amounted to a babysitting arrangement. Cal was well behaved and kept up with the work. When he and I returned to Madison County to live with the Rices, we were both in the second grade. With conditions more stable, we both did well in school. At the beginning of the school year in 1933, the principal at the Beech Glen School advanced me to the fourth grade.

The Rices were a large, cheerful farm family, and they were relatively prosperous by regional standards. Cal and I clearly benefited from the regimen built around innumerable farm chores. From what I was able to discern at the time, conditions were stable, and my brother and I were happy. In fact, however, the economic fortunes of the Rice family were eroding steadily as prices for burley tobacco sank to virtually zero. Failing to attract any buyers for most of his 1933 crop, Charles Rice trucked the tobacco back from the market in Asheville and dumped it on the ground. Meanwhile, the Rices had a new mouth to feed with the birth of their sixth child, Mary Ruth.

I knew that we Chandler children were a problem, and that awareness had been growing ever since the death of our father. I tried to be as little a burden as possible and contribute however I could to the common life of the families that looked after us. On the Rice farms, I became skilled at feeding seedling tobacco plants into the mechanical planter. It was a challenge for me to mount Old Doc, a large draft horse, when I rode him to his various workstations. Harvey Rice and I relished our cowboy roles as we helped round up beef cattle for shipment to market. When it came time to castrate male hogs, my function was to apply a quick daub of alcohol to prevent infection of the wound. The protesting squeal of the hogs would ring in my ears for hours. It also took little time to learn that brushing sweaty skin against tobacco leaves resulted in painful,
itchy welts, and that it was not a good idea to take off my shirt in the tobacco fields. Luckily, my career as a tobacco farmer was brief enough that I escaped the hazard of nicotine poisoning, to which children are especially prone.

When Charles Rice was in his mid-nineties, and after I had retired from the presidency of Williams, I saw him at a family reunion. I felt a surge of pride when he commented on my skill and speed as a tobacco-field worker. That experience reinforced my awareness that as an orphan I had a series of surrogate parents who were important in my development. Charles Rice was one of those. Knowing that the adults in my life strongly approved of academic achievement, I worked hard as a student. I tried to be a “good boy,” although I experienced little enough supervision, especially in Black Mountain, that it was remarkable I survived frequent dangerous episodes. Compared with the remote cove where I was born, Black Mountain was an exciting but hazardous environment for a seven-year-old child unaccustomed to automobile traffic, trains, electricity, and indoor plumbing. Black Mountain also introduced me to such exotic foods as bananas, oranges, ice cream, and bakery-produced bread.

As hard times assaulted the Rice family, I became even more aware of what a problem my brothers and I were when I overheard worried conversations about putting us up for adoption. I interpreted what I heard to mean that adoption would likely mean permanent separation from my brothers. That was a disturbing thought. The talk of adoption so upset one neighbor, Florence Ponder Duck, that she importuned her father, Decatur Ponder, a locally prominent Baptist minister, to seek our admission to Mills Home, a Baptist orphanage in Thomasville. I did not know then that Florence Duck was my first cousin. Her mother, Margaret Chandler Ponder, who died when Florence was a baby, was my father’s sister. Many years later, I became re-acquainted with Florence. On one visit, I asked about her role in gaining our admission to Mills Home. By then, she was in her late eighties, and I had retired from Williams and become president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, based in Washington, D.C. Recalling the circumstances in 1933 that led to talk about putting the Chandler children up for adoption, Florence said, “They were ready to give you away like kittens.” She explained that those who expressed interest in adopting us viewed us as farmhands and future caregivers, as a form of social insurance in a time when government programs made little provision for the elderly.

Soon after Florence’s initiative and her father’s action, Cal and I had a visit from the director of social services at Mills Home, Hattie Edwards. She had already been to Black Mountain to see our mother and the two youngest boys, Ted, age five, and Baxter two. It was much later that I appreciated how skillfully she had interviewed us and interpreted our situation. She had studied social work at Columbia, Duke, and the University of North Carolina. She began her career at Mills Home as principal of the on-campus school. Later, her job was redesigned to include the admission of new children, administration of the Mothers’ Aid Program—which she established in 1920—and college and career counseling. Her task as she interviewed us was to determine that we did not have a viable home situation and that we were healthy, capable of group living, and able to progress normally in school. When Hattie Edwards sized up the situation presented by the Chandler boys in late 1933 she concluded that our needs could be better met by placing us in a large group home than by assisting our mother or other relatives through the Mothers’ Aid program, which provided modest cash payments and counseling. She made the right call.

In January 1934, Calvin, Ted, and I entered Mills Home. Baxter, still an infant, remained with our mother. We became part of a nationwide population of approximately 145,000 orphanage children. That was the zenith of the orphanage movement, which grew rapidly in the aftermath of the Civil War and continued to expand through the first third of the twentieth century. In 1935, with the amendment of the Social Security Act to provide cash subsidies through the Aid to Dependent Children program, orphanages gradually gave way to the foster homes that, ever since, have provided care for the vast majority of dependent and troubled children.

In its early history, the Mills Home School was a private institution. Eventually, orphanage officials persuaded the State of North Carolina to pay the salaries of teachers, at which time it became a loosely affiliated part of the Thomasville public school system. It continued, however, to operate in the fashion of a private school. Except for the children of some staff members, the students were all residents of Mills Home. The teachers lived in small apartments in the residential cottages and dined with the children. They were easily accessible if we needed to talk with them about our studies. The North Carolina public schools at that time provided no kindergarten education, but the Mills Home School included a strong kindergarten
program. In its earliest years, the orphanage admitted no child under the age of eight. That rule was later revised to allow for the admission of children as young as two.

For the children who lived there, the Baptist orphanage was both a home and a school. When the institution became my home in 1934, I almost immediately had the reassuring sense that the orphanage was not a way station and that it would be my home until I graduated from high school and was able to manage on my own. I had grown accustomed to having the bottom drop out of the living arrangements for my brothers and me. Mills Home conveyed a sense of permanence and stability. That was what John Mills had intended from its founding.

_CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:_
My mother and I, in a photo taken by an itinerant photographer (c 1924)
My brothers Ted (3), Cal (5), and I (7) in Black Mountain three weeks after our father’s death (1931)
Aerial view of the Mills Home campus (1946)
Known initially as the Thomasville Baptist Orphanage, Mills Home acquired its new name in 1928 when the trustees renamed the institution as a memorial to its founder, John Haymes Mills. Mills founded the institution in 1885. By 1934, Mills Home was the largest of the multi-unit Baptist orphanage and the hub of a system that provided care for more than a thousand children. Kennedy Memorial Home, in Kinston, North Carolina, began in 1913 on the site of a 1,200-acre plantation that came to the trustees as a gift for that purpose. Kennedy Home, with about 160 children (compared with approximately twenty today), served the eastern area of the state. Mills Home had a population of 550 children, while more than 300 children were beneficiaries of cash support through the Mothers’ Aid program.

John Mills, the orphanage’s founder and first executive head (1885–1895), had been at the top of his class at Wake Forest College. He became president of Oxford College, in Oxford, North Carolina. Oxford College was typical of that era, when private academies provided most of the educational instruction at all levels. Most of the academies were woefully undercapitalized and not subject to accreditation reviews. These conditions prevailed especially in the South and most pronouncedly during the Reconstruction era. When Oxford College failed, Mills acquired the physical plant and started his own school. Concerned with the plight of orphaned children, he converted the school into an orphanage, having persuaded the Masonic Order to serve as sponsor and provide funding for the venture. The success of the Masonic home inspired Mills to expand the provision for orphan children by persuading North Carolina Baptists to take up the cause. There was a division among Baptists as to the wisdom and feasibility of such an effort. The officers of the North Carolina Baptist State Convention did not approve the orphanage in Thomasville as one of its official agencies until many years later. John Mills was a dynamic, charismatic, and brilliant leader who did not suffer bureaucrats gladly. The reluctance of statewide Baptist leaders to embrace his cause left him free to generate financial support on his own and shape the institution according to his own vision. Between 1885 and 1887, Mills bought about 480 acres of land on the edge of Thomasville, then a village of about 500 located in the middle of North Carolina and served by a major railway.

Mills’ strategy was to persuade regional associations of churches to adopt and support his institution. In Baptist polity, the Baptist State Convention had no authority over the associations. This left Mills, a large and imposing man and an eloquent orator, free to take his cause directly to individual congregations and associations. Soon hundreds of churches were taking up monthly collections for the operating costs of the orphanage and providing money for buildings. Later, a Thanksgiving offering in Baptist churches throughout the state brought a large annual infusion of cash. Those of us who worked in the print shop produced a special issue of Charity and Children, the orphanage journal, to promote the Thanksgiving offering.

In addition to appealing to churches, Mills also took advantage of his large network of wealthy friends and associates, especially for gifts to construct buildings and meet other capital needs. That circle of supporters included individuals from other denominations that had not yet responded to the needs of orphaned children. James Buchanan Duke, Benjamin Duke, and Julian Carr—all Methodists—stepped forward with donations for the new Baptist institution.

Arriving at the Thomasville Baptist Orphanage in November 1885, Mary Presson was the first of ninety-two children admitted during the first two years. Thereafter, the population climbed rapidly to two hundred with the construction of additional residential cottages. In addition to a live-in teacher, each residential cottage also had a matron or housemother who had general responsibility for the children living there. In effect, each residence was a one-room schoolhouse. (The one-room school was the most common schooling arrangement at that time in North Carolina, a state consisting overwhelmingly of small villages and towns and no large cities.)

The teachers at the Baptist orphanage—augmented by John Mills, who taught the older children—offered a wide array of subjects, ranging from the alphabet and simple arithmetic to algebra, and from elementary reading and writing to Latin and Greek. By providing for instruction in algebra, Latin, and Greek, Mills was signaling that his dream was to equip the children with a classical education that would qualify them for admission to college or other advanced education. That feature distinguished the education offered by the Baptist orphanage from the industrial training that was more commonly emphasized by orphanages in the United States during that era. As late as 1940, more than half of the American adult population
had attained an education level of only the eighth grade or lower. For the same population at that time, only 6 percent of males and 4 percent of females had completed four years of college. The college-going rate in the South was lower still. Reliable numbers are not available for 1885, when John Mills founded the Baptist orphanage. We may be certain that average levels of educational attainment were far lower than in 1940, especially considering conditions in the former Confederate states during the Reconstruction period. In that context, Mills’ vision was remarkable.

An early riser and meticulous planner, Mills mapped out a day that began at 5:00 a.m. for everyone. During the summer months, the children had an hour’s study period before breakfast. Work assignments, especially farm work, occupied summer afternoons.

During the winter months, academic activities dominated the schedule. There was a study hour before breakfast. Then came a school session in the morning lasting from 8:30 a.m. to 11:50 a.m. School resumed at 2:00 p.m. and lasted until 5:00 p.m.

J.B. Boone, who succeeded Mills as general manager of the Baptist orphanage (1895–1905), interrupted his studies at Wake Forest College to join the Confederate Army. Having survived two years as a prisoner of war, he returned home to find that formal education at all levels in North Carolina had virtually disappeared. Before becoming responsible for the Baptist orphanage, Boone had gained administrative experience as president of Judson College, in Hendersonville, another institution that eventually failed. More pertinent to his work in Thomasville was his background as a school reformer. As founder and superintendent of a “graded” school in Charlotte, he pointed the way forward from the one-room school model to a multi-grade curricular structure and grouping of students. His graded school in Charlotte became the prototype for the future of publicly supported education in North Carolina. Shortly after arriving in Thomasville, he began planning a central school based on the graded model. Completed in 1897, that school building over time became part of an educational complex that included a separate kindergarten building, a separate library, and an adjacent large auditorium that also served as a chapel and theater.

Martin Luther Kesler, still another Wake Forest graduate, succeeded Boone and served as general manager during 1905–1932. At the time of his appointment as general manager of the Thomasville Baptist Orphanage, he was a trustee of the institution and a member of the board’s executive committee. A graduate of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, Kesler attained national standing in child-care circles. He participated in White House conferences concerning child-care policies and was in wide demand as a speaker on child-welfare topics. He was a trustee of Wake Forest College, Meredith College, the Baptist Hospital in Winston-Salem, and the Child Welfare League of America. In 1922, during Kesler’s administration, the Mills Home School added grade eleven, putting it among the high schools with the most advanced instruction in North Carolina at that time. During the Kesler era, the percentage of orphanage graduates who attended college became much higher than that of the general population. In the fall of 1922, five Mills Home boys were enrolled at Wake Forest, one at North Carolina State, and one at UNC-Chapel Hill. The senior class at Kennedy Home in 1930 included nine members, all girls. Five enrolled in college, and four entered nursing schools affiliated with hospitals.

A significant development for orphanages in the two Carolinas during the Kesler era was the creation of the Duke Endowment by James B. Duke in 1924. Duke stipulated that one of its major priorities would be provision for institutions devoted to the care of dependent children. At a special ceremony in 1935, the remains of James B. Duke were relocated to a burial crypt in the just-completed Duke University Chapel. On that occasion, I.G. Greer, the executive head of Mills Home, accompanied by two orphanage children, laid a wreath on the tomb.

Mindful that some orphanages in the nation at large treated children abusively, John Mills had argued that orphanages should be subject to state inspections. Mills was often at odds with his trustees, and they firmly opposed his views regarding state standards and inspections. The Duke Endowment, which provided financial support for orphanages in North Carolina and South Carolina, also offered professional advice and assistance. In effect, the benevolent, watchful eye of the Duke Endowment provided an accreditation function of the kind Mills had in mind. When my brothers and I entered Mills Home, the Duke Endowment was recommending that no more than ten or twelve children
live in a residence and that siblings should live together. While Mills Home eventually moved in that direction, during the Great Depression orphanages were contending with constrained resources and overwhelming numbers of needy children. Those circumstances meant crowded residential cottages, separation of the children by sex, and grouping by age in the housing arrangements.

When we entered Mills Home, the executive head of the system of Baptist homes was Isaac Garfield Greer, who served during the years of 1932–1947. Greer went to UNC-Chapel Hill for his undergraduate education and to Columbia University for graduate study. Beginning as a teacher in a one-room school and later becoming a high school principal, Greer then joined the faculty of what is now Appalachian State University, in Boone, North Carolina, as a professor of history and government. Following the death of M.L. Kesler in an automobile accident in August 1932, Dr. Greer, already a trustee of the Baptist orphanage system, succeeded Kesler as general superintendent.

Large capital outlays for development of the water system and electrification of the campus during Kesler’s administration were followed by the onset of the Great Depression and pressure to admit more children. Those developments combined to produce worrisome budget deficits. After just one year in office, Greer had turned a large deficit into a surplus, a pattern that persisted throughout his tenure and eventually produced an endowment. This result was the product largely of Greer’s effectiveness on speaking tours, where he presented the orphanage’s needs to churches and other groups. That he was an authority on the folk music and ballads of the Southern Appalachians enhanced his ability to represent the orphanage. He gave vocal concerts, accompanied by Willie Spainhour, his wife, on the dulcimer. The Library of Congress recorded many of their renditions. The Greers gave concerts throughout the United States and in Europe. The Greer Fine Arts Center at Appalachian State University became a major repository for their recordings.

The younger children generally thought of Dr. Greer as a distant figure because he was necessarily gone much of the time. Almost all of the older children came to know him well. Dr. Greer made imaginative use of older children in representing the orphanage at churches and at such gatherings as church associations and meetings of the Baptist State Convention. The vocal trio of Eloise Stancil and identical twins Ruth and Ruby Lyon traveled often with Dr. Greer. Ted and I were among those who gave talks at such gatherings. We were free to shape our own speeches and received remarkably little guidance regarding what we should say. Those of us who traveled with Dr. Greer in representing Mills Home cherished that experience. It was a valuable contributor to our development and our self-confidence. It revealed to us that he was keenly aware of what was going on at Mills Home and very much in charge of operations. He was also adept at responding to the individual needs of children. Howard Brown, my Mills Home contemporary, was inconsolably sad when he entered the orphanage at age seven. He recalled going to see Dr. Greer, who gave him a piggyback ride while they talked. That experience cured Howard’s sadness and led to a rapid and happy adjustment to his new home.
During our first few days at Mills Home, my brothers and I were under quarantine at the infirmary, where we had medical check-ups. Ted got off to a bad start when someone stole his piggy bank, which his friends in Black Mountain had filled with coins when bidding him good-bye. A cute tow-headed little fellow who roamed the streets of downtown Black Mountain, Ted became a kind of mascot to the proprietors and employees of the shops and stores, and they showered him with treats and gifts.

After receiving clearance from the Mills Home physician and nurse, our next stop was the Sewing Room, where supervisors fitted us for clothes. A few dozen older girls worked there, and they made most of the clothes needed by the children. As we grew older, more of our clothes came from clothing stores. Outfitted with a supply of knickers, shirts, and underwear, we were ready to go to our residential cottages and start school. As boys came into adolescence and became self-conscious about knobby knees and thin calves, they tried hard to graduate from knickers into long trousers. We believed that if we ripped and tore our knickers we could, within limits, advance the time when long trousers would replace the knickers.

The residential campus was horseshoe-shaped, with girls and boys occupying opposite sides of the horseshoe. The approximately forty-five buildings on the 100-acre residential campus included the seventeen cottages that housed 550 children and provided apartments for about sixty staff members. Other facilities included the school, the library, the church, athletic fields, the gymnasium, the infirmary, a variety of shops, and approximately a dozen houses for staff members. Although all teachers lived on campus, about half of the other staff members lived in town. The farm, encompassing more than 400 acres and numerous structures, included dairy, poultry, and pork divisions, as well as the fields where vegetables and grains were grown. The orphanage also farmed leased parcels of land located a few miles from the campus.

Calvin and I were assigned to Chowan Cottage, thus named because it was built with gifts from the churches of the Chowan Association. Chowan housed about thirty-five boys and our two supervisors—Mrs. Maggie Scarborough, the matron, and Mrs. Daisy Chatham, the dietitian. Mrs. Scarborough, a widow, was the mother of two sons, Cecil and George, who lived with her in her apartment.

They attended the orphanage school, and the rest of us viewed them as orphanage boys. Mrs. Chatham, also a widow, had a daughter, Mary Pearl, and a son, Roy, at the orphanage. They did not live in their mother’s apartment but in other residential cottages with their own age groups. Roy, like Cecil, played on the orphanage football team. The other boys told Cal and me that we were lucky, that Mrs. Scarborough, a former schoolteacher, was the best matron at Mills Home.

Ted’s new home was the Simmons Nursery, which housed first graders and kindergarten boys, along with a few older boys. While Cal and I had lived apart from our mother for well over a year when we entered Mills Home, Ted had a more difficult adjustment because he was leaving his mother, his infant brother Baxter, and his many friends in Black Mountain. In addition, he was barely six years old. Because of what we observed while visiting Ted on Sunday afternoons, Cal and I were concerned because of signs that Simmons was not a happy place. Adult supervision seemed largely absent, with some children screaming and crying, and some of the older boys beating up the younger ones.

Interestingly, Ted’s memories of his three years at Simmons were much more positive than our perceptions. He recalled that Wallace Maultsby, two years his senior, was especially attentive and supportive. While agreeing that Miss Ballard seemed to have little control, he remembered the dietitian, Thelma Mellons, with great fondness. He also emphasized that the younger children understood that two boys in their mid-teens, Joe Phelps and Edgar Green, had considerable authority, and they went to Joe and Edgar with their problems and questions. In fact, Joe and Edgar had been assigned to assist Miss Ballard, and they lived at Simmons. Looking back decades later, Ted assumed that Joe and Edgar saw Miss Ballard as being swamped by her responsibilities, and they were smart and effective in maintaining order and were genuinely caring in their attitude toward the younger children. He remembered that they took the initiative in helping him adjust to his new home and assured him that everything would work out well. A few years later, Edgar Green moved to Chowan and became one of my roommates. He was in the Navy when the United States entered World War II in December 1941. He became the first Mills Home alumnus to die in the war when a German
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A submarine sank his ship in February 1942. Joe Phelps eventually became the CEO of North Carolina’s largest commercial printing company, Edwards and Broughton, in Raleigh.

We referred to the large bedrooms in the cottages as dormitories. The largest held ten or twelve beds. Calvin and I regarded ourselves as lucky because we were assigned to the smallest dormitory at Chowan, one that held only six boys and had the additional attraction of being on the ground floor. We were the youngest boys in the room. Cal moved to one of the larger upstairs rooms after about a year. I lived in the first-floor room for five-and-a-half years before transferring to Watson Cottage. Living on the ground floor meant that boys could sneak out the windows on hot summer evenings and engage in various adventures, such as taunting the night watchman, Mr. Harmon.

I went out only once, coaxed by Benny Thomas into joining him in throwing rotten duck eggs at a gang of boys as they sneaked back from seeing a movie uptown at the Palace Theatre. We hid behind a hedge and carefully laid out our noxious ammunition, which we carried in oatmeal boxes. Our ambush worked perfectly. We began our attack just as the boys passed under a streetlight, cutting loose with a volley that left them angry as hornets and smelling awful. Although the boys could not see their attackers, they began cursing Benny by name. They were familiar with his antics and knew that as a worker at the poultry farm he had access to rotten eggs. Benny was big enough that he had nothing to fear from the victims of the attack. I was terrified as I scrambled through the window and jumped into bed fully clothed, shoes and all. For days, I worried that somehow word would get out that I was Benny’s accomplice. Benny Thomas, the fun-loving prankster, became a Marine. He died in combat on Iwo Jima in March 1945.

Such factors as athletic prowess, school performance, and girlfriends were the primary determinants of status among older boys. Fighting among them was virtually unheard of. Among boys from about nine through thirteen, there was a pecking order based primarily upon the results of fights. One’s reputation as a fighter was very important, even though there was much more talk about fighting than real fighting. When a new boy entered the picture, there was immediate speculation about where the newcomer should be located within the pecking order, which determined the sequence in which boys would help themselves at meals, in what order they dove off the diving board at the swimming pool, who would bat early in ball games, and the like. Often there was an implicit understanding that a fight would have to settle the question when there was uncertainty about where a newcomer would fit into the pecking order. Sometimes the speculation would go on for months or even years before enough pressure built to force a fight. There was a legendary fight between Howard (Piggy) Day and Grady Thomas, following long anticipation. Most of us assumed that Piggy would win. But Grady proved to be tough as a leech as Piggy wore himself out pummeling Grady. Howard Day was one of the most interesting boys at Mills Home. Fighting did not represent his native disposition. He was an excellent football player, a gifted student, a talented musician who later graduated from a music conservatory, and a physicist following military service.

The older boys grouped me with Aaron Spaul and Howard Brown and decided that one or more fights might be required to settle the exact rank order. Aaron was muscular and quick, and I had no doubt about who would win any fight between us. Aaron and I had a few quiet talks that revealed that he was no more eager than I to fight. We became friends and simply agreed that we were not going to fight. Howard Brown and I also were disinclined to fight, and we avoided one another. Then one day someone provoked a phony incident that pushed us into a fight. We were going at it half-heartedly when Mrs. Scarborough came upon the scene. As was her practice, she made us finish the fight while she stood by as referee. It had been raining, and the ground where we were fighting was a muddy mess. It was obvious that Mrs. Scarborough was not happy that we had chosen as our battleground a plot where she grew flowers. We fought to an exhausted draw. Mrs. Scarborough gave each of us a girl’s dress to wear after we had taken a shower, made us eat dinner together in isolation from the other boys, and told us that for the next thirty days we would wash dishes for the forty diners of Chowan Cottage. We became pacifists.

A few years after our fight, Howard Brown went on a growth spurt that eventually resulted in a young man who weighed about 230 pounds and stood at 6 feet 4 inches. He became a star football player in college, following service in the Navy during World War II. Howard sent me a photograph that showed him towering over the soldiers...
and sailors massed on his ship just as it was landing on a beach in Sicily during the invasion of Italy in 1943. After a few years as a classroom teacher, Howard earned his Ph.D. at Duke and became superintendent of schools in Gastonia, North Carolina. He invited me to address the students and faculty of Gastonia High School. I began my remarks by explaining that Howard and I had not always been on friendly terms.

Long after she had retired from Mills Home, and while I was a graduate student at Duke, I had dinner with Mrs. Scarborough. After we laughed together about the fight and the punishment, she said that she came to regret her policy of making boys finish their fights. I doubt that her policy resulted in any long-term psychic injury, and it almost certainly curbed fighting.
LIFE AT MILLS HOME revolved around four large components: school, work, religion, and athletics. Each is considered below, as are the ways in which the school’s staff dealt with discipline and provided health care.

SCHOOL

School was serious business at Mills Home. The school day extended into the evening, when all of us gathered in the living rooms of our cottages for supervised study. On five evenings a week, the older girls and boys studied for two hours, and the younger ones studied for an hour or an hour and a half. Usually the cottage matron supervised the study hall, but teachers also took turns.

Saturday evenings brought no relief from study hall. We worked on our Sunday school lessons so that we would be prepared to discuss the assigned topic on Sunday morning. No one went to bed without reciting to the satisfaction of the study hall supervisor a short passage from the Bible, the memory verse.

The orphanage admitted only children who demonstrated the ability to progress normally in school. Orphanage officials were careful to praise outstanding academic performance. During my first year in high school, I was recognized at a formal school assembly and in newspaper articles for having the highest grades in the Thomasville schools. On that occasion, the American Legion presented me a Parker fountain pen with a lifetime guarantee. Academic performance later on resulted in invitations to join the local Rotarians for lunch. Mills Home taught us that education was the great equalizer and that our best chance for success later lay in academic achievement.

All of our teachers were dedicated, and some of them were truly excellent. Lydia Beavers in the sixth grade was memorable. I stayed in touch with her throughout her life. William B. Lord and Myra Olive, whom I encountered first at grade seven, taught us to take writing seriously and how to do it well. Mr. Lord was also a music teacher. Fan Bost, a high school social studies teacher, had us discuss the injustice of racial segregation in an era when one seldom heard such views in classrooms in the South. Miss Bost, by then Mrs. Brooks, was our honored guest when my class celebrated its fiftieth reunion in 1991. Beatrice Council was the librarian, and she supervised dramatic productions. When I was silly and disruptive about holding a girl’s hand in a play scene, Miss Council stopped the rehearsal and took me aside for a brief but frank discussion. Her words rang in my ears for many years: “Johnny Chandler, you could grow up to be someone important, or you could grow up to be not worth a hoot. It is up to you to decide which it will be.”

There was considerable intellectual stimulation at Mills Home and an informed awareness of what was going on in the larger world. The institutional ethos was that of a school. We were immersed in a learning environment with many dimensions. Mrs. Scarborough was knowledgeable in many fields, as we learned from going to her for help on school assignments. Most of our teachers were unmarried women. They lived on the campus. They took their meals in the dining halls with the children. Many staff members, in addition to the teachers, were college graduates, including the two top managers of the Mills Home farm. C.C. McKoin, the farm superintendent, was a graduate of Guilford College, and Van Richardson, head of truck gardening, had a degree in agronomy from North Carolina State College (later North Carolina State University). Dr. Greer’s executive assistant, Sallie McCracken, had been a schoolteacher. As superintendent of the Sunday school, she demonstrated her talents as an educator. It was from Miss Sallie at a Sunday school opening assembly that I first heard about Williams College when she told the story of the Haystack Prayer Meeting in 1806 that launched the American Protestant foreign missions movement.

The level of education and cultural sophistication of the Mills Home staff explained the interesting symbiosis between the Mills Home community and the leading families of Thomasville. Perhaps this point can be illustrated by reference to the family that was, arguably, most prominent in the economic, civic, and political life of the town.

Thomasville’s economy depended primarily upon the manufacture of furniture and the allied textile industry that provided fabrics for upholstered furniture. The Lambeth family had pioneered both industries, beginning at the end of the nineteenth century. During most of my stay at Mills Home, the U.S. congressional representative from that district was J. Walter Lambeth, who had earlier been mayor of Thomasville, and whose father had been a founder and the first CEO of the Standard Chair Co., the first mass producer of chairs in Thomasville and eventually the manufacturer of many other types of furniture. Mary Johnson, whose father, Archibald Johnson, was editor of the orphanage journal, Charity and Children, was married to Charles F. Lambeth, the chief financial officer.
of Standard Chair. James Erwin Lambeth Jr., whose father was CEO of Standard Chair during the time I lived at Mills Home, married Katharine Covington, daughter of Richard Covington, the treasurers of Mills Home. The Covingtons lived in a modest house on the orphanage campus. Katharine entered college about the time my brothers and I went to Mills Home. Her brother Furman was then in medical school. I remember how exciting it was when Furman gave a talk at Vacation Bible School in the summer of 1936. He brought along his stethoscope and demonstrated how it worked. I do not recall what Furman talked about, but the message we took away was, “You can be what you want to be.”

Following completion of college and after her marriage, Katharine and her husband decided to establish a new company—Erwin-Lambeth. The new company would specialize in producing high-end hand-finished upholstered furniture. In a revolutionary move for a male-dominated industry, Katharine became the founding CEO of Erwin-Lambeth. She hired a group of exciting and venturesome furniture designers. She was a hands-on, walk-around boss who knew all her employees and made certain they understood that what they did was indispensable to the company's success. She ran a high-morale operation. Now known as Tomlinson/Erwin-Lambeth, the company continues to prosper. Katharine, whose colleagues and employees came to call her “Mama K,” was still active in the company’s operations into her seventies.

As members of the larger population of children of Mills Home staff members, Mary Johnson and Katharine Covington were more typical than exceptional. Many of them became physicians, journalists, lawyers, and members of other professions. It was not unusual for them to marry into the more prominent families in Thomasville and the surrounding area that included such cities as Greensboro and Winston-Salem. As they grew up, the children of staff members mixed and mingled with the orphanage children, and some of them went to the Mills Home School. Lois Johnson, Mary’s sister, was dean of women and professor of French at Wake Forest while I was a student there and later when I joined the faculty. Lois often talked of growing up and attending school on the orphanage campus. My classmate Lois Edinger was the daughter of a foreman on the orphanage farm, Paul Edinger. Lois graduated from Meredith College, earned her Ph.D. at UNC-Chapel Hill, and spent most of her career as a professor of education at UNC-Greensboro. Frances Edinger, Lois’ younger sister, married my brother Ted. Gordon Early, another classmate for several years before he transferred to Thomasville High School, was the son of H.G. Early, who supervised the poultry farm. Gordon graduated from UNC–Chapel Hill and received his medical degree from the Wake Forest University School of Medicine.

In short, we who lived at Mill Home were surrounded by cultural and educational influences and opportunities that were far superior to what we had known earlier or had any prospect of experiencing. It was not surprising that the college-going rate among us was much higher than that of the general population at that time.

Music was important at Mills Home, and we celebrated outstanding musical achievement. My classmate Eloise Stancil had a beautiful soprano voice that won statewide competitions. All the boys fell in love with her when she sang. As noted earlier, Eloise and identical twins Ruth and Ruby Lyons formed a musical trio that represented Mills Home in many churches and in association meetings throughout the state. Ruby and Ruth became social workers after earning master’s degrees at Boston University. Milton Bliss and John Brinegar Stalls were accomplished vocalists, and both became professional musicians and composers. Pat Preston, whose basso profundo voice set the younger children to giggling, entertained us with his recital performances. His musical career never reached the heights of his athletic fame. He became an All-American football player at Duke and played for the Chicago Bears after recovering from wounds suffered on Okinawa, where he was a Marine officer.

Music was not one of my strengths. Miss Julia Quattlebaum tutored me in her studio after school so that a poor showing in music would not keep me off the honor roll. After trying in vain to teach me to read music, she would arrange some small triumph by accompanying me on the piano as I sang “The Spanish Cavalier,” “Danny Boy,” or “America the Beautiful.” I told Mr. Lord that I would like to learn to play a musical instrument. After an hour or so of fruitless demonstrations and instructions as he watched me try to coax a musical sound out of a cornet, Mr. Lord did not urge me to return for another lesson. My brother Calvin fared better as an aspiring musician. He played the snare drums for the marching band and the glee club orchestra.
Many features of Mills Home besides the school contributed to our intellectual life. The library was excellent, and it remained open and busy throughout the year. National Geographic, along with the mystifying Kotex ads in some of the magazines, provided some of my early sex education. The librarian, Beatrice Council, sponsored summertime reading contests. My library shelves still contain an illustrated translation of Victor Hugo’s Les Misérables, the prize for reading the most books during one Depression-era summer. Boy’s Life and the High Point Enterprise, a daily newspaper, came to our residential cottages. Radios brought us news of the trial of Bruno Hauptmann, who was convicted of kidnapping and murdering the Lindberghs’ infant son.

We also listened to boxing matches featuring Max Baer, Buddy Baer, Max Schmeling, and especially the “Brown Bomber,” Joe Louis. In the South and elsewhere in the United States, Max Schmeling was touted as the “Great White Hope” after his victory over Joe Louis. We boys cheered on Louis when he destroyed Schmeling in a little over two minutes in the rematch. The same radio brought us snippets of the maniacal ranting of Adolf Hitler as he addressed mass rallies in Germany. We were happy when Joe Louis dispatched Schmeling as the symbol of Nazi Germany.

That announcement brought me profound melancholy and sadness. I was four days shy of my sixteenth birthday. Somehow, I knew that the world was in for a long ordeal that would profoundly affect my generation. In addition to Edgar Green and Benny Thomas, Wilbur Spaul of the Army would be on the list of my Chowan roommates who died in the war. Seven other Mills Home boys of my era died in the war.

WORK

Because work was a large and economically necessary component of the Mills Home experience, the school day was divided into two sessions. We lived by bells, and the first bell of the day sounded at six in the morning. By seven-thirty, half of us were in school and the other half at our work posts. The afternoon was the mirror image of the morning schedule.

Not all of the work assignments were intellectually rewarding. Some of the farm jobs consisted of hard and tedious manual labor. Still, those jobs usually provided enjoyable social dimensions, along with important lessons in the organization and interdependence required in producing results on which the whole community depended.

Up until children reached their early teens, work assignments usually changed twice a year. A large crew of girls worked as seamstresses and made clothes for the 550 children. The laundry required another crew. The infirmary employed girls to assist the nurse. Many boys and girls worked as housekeepers and kitchen aides. The farm employed a large number of boys.

Some of the skills took years to learn, and those job assignments usually lasted until graduation. The plumbers, electricians, dairy farm workers, print shop crews, shoe shop workers, truck and tractor drivers, nurse assistants, sewing room workers—all those positions required enough skills that the holders usually stayed in place until graduation. Although most children did not continue afterwards in the lines of work they learned at Mills Home, those who learned the more complicated skills sometimes did make careers out of that training. Eugene Rollins became an electrical and plumbing contractor. Many orphanage graduates went into the printing business, as illustrated by the previously mentioned example of Joe Phelps.

For half of one year, shortly after arriving at Mills Home, I worked as the houseboy for the McMillan family. John Arch McMillan was the recently appointed editor of
the Mills Home journal, Charity and Children, a widely circulated and influential weekly newspaper that became an important opinion journal under the forty-year editorship of Archibald Johnson, McMillan’s cousin and predecessor. Earlier, McMillan had been director of alumni relations and fundraising at Wake Forest College. He was also a confidant and adviser to President William Louis Poteat, a biologist who successfully led the effort to keep North Carolina from following the lead of Tennessee in banning the teaching of evolution. Poteat took progressive stands on other issues as well, and McMillan shared those views, as his editorials indicated.

My duties at the McMillan household were undemanding, consisting largely of keeping coal scuttles filled and stoves clean. I spent most of the time talking with Mrs. McMillan and her invalid daughter, Louise—a well-known essayist—and reading books from their large library. Louise and I talked about the books that interested me. She recommended books and lent me some from the McMillan family collection. I had some acquaintance with Betty and Mary McMillan, both then away at college, and I was aware of Elbert, a medical school student in Philadelphia.

For two summers I helped Coach Kearns maintain athletic fields. While I was in the sixth grade I worked as an office boy for the school principal, Romulus Skaggs. A seventh grade girl, Beatrice, decided that she liked me, and she found excuses to visit the principal’s office. I was not ready for Beatrice’s attention.

The print shop, where I worked for five years, afforded a wonderfully stimulating and enjoyable environment. The shop did a large volume of commercial printing, which meant that those of us who worked there interacted constantly with the outside world of business and commerce. Salespersons came to solicit orders for paper, ink, presses, and the other necessities of the printing business. Representatives of businesses would come in to place orders and look at proofs and designs. In time, I became responsible for dealing with some customers.

During my first couple of years there, I learned to set hand type, operate small hand-fed presses, and participate in the numerous cleanup chores entailed in the messy business of printing. I was delighted at be chosen to learn how to operate the Linotype, which was regarded as the most desirable job in the shop. The Linotype, patented by Ottmar Mergenthaler in 1884 was a wonderfully versatile machine. First-time observers of the Linotype in action usually reacted with a combination of surprise and amusement. The amusement came from noting some of the Rube Goldberg-type design features that contributed to the machine’s versatility. Although it became obsolete as new technology took over in the 1970s, the Linotype revolutionized typesetting. The Linotype produced a solid line of type on a metal slug formed out of an alloy of lead, tin, and zinc. The machine included an electric melting pot that reduced an ingot to molten metal. The molten metal was forced into the matrices that formed the molds for the lines of type. The matrices, in turn, came out of storage magazines in response to instructions from a keyboard, and were recirculated back into the magazines. Occasionally, the matrices would become misaligned when they were clamped together in the mold, resulting in molten metal escaping from the mold and landing on the left leg of the operator. To protect against “squirts,” it was wise for Linotype operators to wear long trousers and sturdy shoes and socks.

My instruction in operating the Linotype came partly from Ted Hethcock, who supervised the composition operations at the print shop, and in part from Woodrow Baldwin, an older boy. Woody Baldwin demonstrated his unusual mechanical intelligence when he grew impatient with the tardiness of the Mergenthaler Company representative who was supposed to assemble the parts of a new Linotype. Woody uncrated the parts and put the machine together himself. A few years later, he would be flying a Mustang P-51 fighter in combat in Europe. As a salute to his old home, Woody created excitement in Thomasville when he flew his screaming P-51 low over the Mills Home campus shortly before leaving for Europe.

The new Linotype that Woody Baldwin assembled was the Model 32 (Blue Streak), the Cadillac of Linotypes. I loved that machine almost worshipfully. Using my key to the shop, I would go in on Saturdays and Sunday afternoons to work for the sheer pleasure of operating the machine. The design of the keyboard of the Linotype, unlike that of the typewriter, maximized speed. The letters that occurred most frequently in combinations were located in close proximity to one another. For example, one vertical row of letters consisted of “etanoin” and an adjacent row consisted of “shrdlu.” A gentle touch of the keys was sufficient, and the operator used all ten digits of the hands. I developed a reputation as the fastest
Linotype operator in the shop, fast enough that I had to wait for the machine to catch up with me. I also made more typographical errors than most of the operators, the price for the speed.

The editor of Charity and Children, John Arch McMillan, had an office at the printing plant. In fact, he did most of his writing at home. Journals cluttered his office, and the office was always open. I spent a lot of time reading those journals, many of which were religious publications. I concluded that The Christian Century and some other journals featured better writing and better reasoning than the journals that proclaimed the fundamentalist credo.

As I set type for Charity and Children, Mr. McMillan’s barely decipherable handwriting was a challenge for me, and I felt complimented when he would let stand my rendition of his manuscripts rather than insist literally on the text he had intended. Eventually he let me choose some of the articles that appeared in the journal. Deciding which articles to choose and which to exclude provided good lessons in critical thinking. Mr. McMillan was another surrogate father who contributed importantly to my growth. My friendship with the McMillan family continued through the years. When I was president of Williams, I cherished a visit by Mary and her husband, an Episcopal priest in Connecticut.

My Linotype skills later helped pay my way through college when I set type for the Henderson Daily Dispatch during two summers. My brother Cal also became a Linotype operator, and he set type for a newspaper in Mt. Olive during the summer before he entered college.

The superintendent of the printing plant, Cyrus M. Howell, was an alumnus of Mills Home. His wife, Mae Ammons Howell, also grew up there. Mrs. Howell also came from Madison County, and she claimed that we were related. The Howells lived in town, not on the campus, and I was in their home often to help with simple chores, have good conversation, and enjoy desserts. The Howells had two daughters, Annie and Alice, both away at college. Their twin sons, Charles and Julius, were in medical school at the University of Pennsylvania. The Howells commended me for winning academic awards and constantly stressed how important it was to be a good student.

Cy Howell was the orphanage’s principal link with its alumni. He wrote an alumni column for Charity and Children. He organized homecomings and began the tradition of holding those events on the first weekend in August every year. No matter how busy or how distant I was, during most years for more than half a century the August pilgrimage to Mills Home was a highlight of my year. As the pitcher for the Williams College faculty softball team, for a long stretch of years I was in good enough shape to take the mound for the Mills Home alumni team that played a team of orphanage youngsters. My wife, Florence, went with me to a couple of Mills Home homecomings soon after we were married. Thereafter she sent me on my way alone to enjoy the company of my hundreds of orphanage brothers and sisters. She sensed the powerful bonds among those who shared the orphanage experience. Like most spouses who did not share that experience, she felt welcomed but also benignly and inevitably excluded.

RELIGION

Religion figured far more prominently at Mills Home than what I had experienced earlier. I recall no religious rituals or observances in our home on Holland Creek. There was one book in our home. I surmise, from memories of its vivid illustrations, that it was a Bible, and that the Book of Revelation inspired the illustrations. Occasionally, I went to the Bethel Baptist Church with my father. There was no Sunday school or other special provision for children at Bethel Church. Sometimes, at Bethel, someone would “get religion” and manifest the presence of the Holy Spirit by shouting, speaking in tongues, and racing wildly around the sanctuary. The Rices regularly attended services at Bethel Church, but they practiced no home-based religious rituals. Rachel Rice, about three years older than I, cautioned that under no circumstances was I to “get religion.” The spectacle of someone “getting religion” was slightly scary but even more entertaining.

In Black Mountain, life was too chaotic for anyone to see that we children got to Sunday school or church. A visitor from the local Episcopal church came to urge that the older children among us attend their Sunday school, but nothing came from that initiative. Aunt Gus went to revival meetings alone occasionally. The stories she brought home indicated that she went in part because of the entertainment they afforded. After one revival meeting she told us that “Shorty,” the barber who cut our hair, had answered the altar call and made a full confession of his sinful ways. Shorty’s disclosures so outraged his wife that she assaulted him in front of the congregation, using her handbag as a weapon. Aunt Gus’ balanced perspective on religion helped prepare the way for my later encounters.
with religious skepticism in college courses. Aunt Gus was wonderfully charitable and nonjudgmental in her views of people. Marrying her widowed childhood sweetheart after the death of her first husband, and living to the age of ninety-nine, Aunt Gus for many years was a devoted volunteer at a home in Asheville for unmarried mothers of new babies.

In contrast with Aunt Gus, my mother came under the influence of a Pentecostal church in Black Mountain. My youngest brother, Baxter, attended with her as a small child. By the age of about twelve, he began to feel embarrassed by his association with the church and concluded that its influence on our mother’s emotional health was harmful. For several years, he and I talked about those concerns. I encouraged him to obey his own instincts regarding religious matters. Having never attended my mother’s church, I was not ready to conclude that her religion complicated her deeply rooted emotional problems. Perhaps her religion was a source of comfort and that the company of her fellow believers was a positive force in her life. By this point in her life, she had a menial job in a laundry and dry cleaning establishment. She greatly enjoyed the camaraderie of her fellow workers. She was animated when talking about workplace events. While she almost never talked about her beliefs and religious practices, she obviously enjoyed the picnics and other social occasions sponsored by her church.

At Mills Home, religion was a central component of our experience, as every day of the week demonstrated. When going to bed at Chowan Cottage on my very first day there, I noticed that some of the boys knelt at their bedsides before climbing into bed. I felt hypocritical about following their example, but I persisted in the habit until I outgrew it, about the time I started wearing long trousers.

The minister of the orphanage church was John A. Neilson, a cheerful and outgoing immigrant from Scotland whose parents had been missionaries in Sicily. He was well educated and urbane. His sermons were well prepared, and the messages they carried were almost invariably optimistic and hope inspiring. He emphasized the principal Christian themes—forgiveness, repentance, love, Christ’s sacrifice for the sins of humanity, the resurrection. We heard little of hell, and he did not try to frighten us into conformity with the Ten Commandments and related codes of behavior. The Bible was central, but his emphasis was upon the primary Biblical themes, not upon the Bible as an infallible and literally true source of divine instruction.

At about the age of eleven or twelve, we took special instruction in the meaning of the Christian faith and church membership and marked that passage with the Baptist ritual of total immersion. I remember no talk about being born again. My first attempt to join the church failed when, following the required instruction, I demonstrated enough theological confusion that Mr. Neilson decided I should try again next year. Following a new round of instruction and a more satisfactory result on the oral examination, I was ready for baptism. As I waited for my turn, a freshly immersed boy shivered his way past the line, muttering that the water was “too damned cold.”

After joining the church, we became members of the Baptist Training Union (BTU) for a couple of years. Mr. Neilson was the leader of the boys’ BTU. Held in the game room at the parsonage, those meetings were part social occasions and part serious instructional sessions in which we gave reports and held discussions. I was the secretary of the boys’ BTU, and my minutes provided entertaining accounts of the meetings. Mr. Neilson laughed loudest when I read the minutes of the previous meeting. His cheerfulness was an effective antidote against any incipient religious fanaticism. In one memorable meeting, Mr. Neilson talked about masturbation. He characterized it as an unsavory habit. Still, it was a great relief to hear him say that masturbation did not lead to dreadful diseases or damnation.

When I was about fourteen, I decided I wanted to be a minister. I went to see Mr. Neilson to tell him about my aspiration and to seek his advice. It was a considerable surprise when he replied immediately that he did not see me as a minister. He went on to say that he thought a...
much better career for me would be teaching, journalism, or law. About three years following my conversation with Mr. Nelson, I entered a school-sponsored contest that carried a modest cash prize for the best essay on plans for one’s future career. Undeterred by Mr. Neilson’s doubts, I wrote about entering the ministry. I was disappointed not to win the prize. Fan Bost, my social studies teacher, pulled me aside and told me that the committee, of which she was a member, thought that my essay was the best. They awarded the prize to someone else, however, because they doubted my sincerity.

That hurt, because I was serious and sincere. Still, the experience was instructive. The gentle irony with which I viewed religion, as revealed by the minutes I wrote for the meetings of the BTU, amused Mr. Neilson. He was wise enough, however, to recognize that such irony coming from the pulpit and expressed in other relationships with parishioners would not make for success in the ministry. The teasing irony deepened into respectful skepticism as I encountered the thinking of such philosophers as David Hume, Benedict Spinoza, and Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche in college and graduate school.

Mr. Neilson was right. My Mills Home classmates, who playfully referred to me as “the professor,” would have agreed with him. Bernice Mangum, my classmate and girlfriend, drew the assignment of writing the class prophecy for our yearbook. Bernice told me that she did not feel confident about what to say about what the boys in the class would be doing ten years hence, in 1951, and asked me to ghostwrite that section. When I came to the decision about what to say about myself, I wrote that in 1951 I would be on the faculty of Wake Forest College. When 1951 arrived, I was an instructor in philosophy at Wake Forest. That was the only prophecy I got right and one that Mr. Neilson and my classmates would have viewed as credible.

ATHLETICS

By the time I arrived, athletics were an important part of the Mills Home experience. Founder John Mills had boasted that the children at his Baptist orphanage did not waste time on athletic activities. Archibald Johnson, longtime editor of Charity and Children, poked fun at the pretense that athletics had something to do with education. M.L. Kesler, by contrast, saw athletics as a wholesome component of the experience of Mills Home students. Johnny Allen, a pitcher with the New York Yankees during the era of Babe Ruth, and then with the Cleveland Indians, played on the orphanage high school team during Kesler’s administration. At about the same time, coaches of college teams began to look toward Mills Home for outstanding athletic talent, especially in football.

Informal athletic activity was incessant among the boys. When we were at leisure, we gravitated spontaneously to the playing fields, track, gymnasium, swimming pool, and tennis courts that were a short distance from the residential cottages. Athletic facilities included four tennis courts, two for boys and two for girls. My lifelong love of tennis began on those courts. Generally, we played singles. Whoever won the match held on to the court and took on challengers until he lost.

We played a great deal of baseball and some softball, which we regarded as a slightly sissy game. There was a softball diamond on the girls’ side of the campus. Basketball was popular among the girls, and their varsity team did well in competing against other schools. At about the age of fourteen or fifteen, most boys came under pressure to join interscholastic athletic teams. Still, there were exceptions. Milton Bliss and John Brinegar Stalls were talented musicians, and both became college music professors. They showed no interest in sports, and no one pressured them to participate. Years later, John’s Mills Home contemporaries were amused when one of his sons became a lineman for the New Orleans Saints of the National Football League.

We boys invested a lot of time in inventing games that could use any number of players. One, that seemed to be an amalgam of American football and rugby, we called “bringing-in.” It was a rough and dangerous game, and the authorities probably should have banned it. “Roller-bat,” a modified form of baseball, was a great game, and one of my favorites. We played roller-bat on a baseball diamond with standard baseball equipment. Players were not divided into opposing teams. Instead, there was a batter, a pitcher, and a catcher. An indeterminate number of boys, often numbering in the dozens, filled the infield and outfield areas. If a fielder caught a batted ball on the fly, the fielder replaced the batter at bat. When the batter hit a ground ball, he put the bat on the ground parallel to the fielders, and the fielder who had retrieved the ball rolled it in an attempt to hit the bat. Success meant that he succeeded the batter at the plate.
“Muffin,” another modification of baseball, was also popular, and it too was designed to accommodate any number of boys. The manufacture of the ball used in muffin entailed removing the cover of a baseball, stuffing it with cotton or rags, and then re-sewing the cover. The base paths were the same as for softball. The naked hand was the bat, and the batter pitched to himself just as a tennis player tosses to serve. This meant that the batter could place the ball with great accuracy. Some batters could hit the ball for considerable distances, and there were some home runs. The game rewarded speed. The batter’s objective was to avoid being put out while circling the bases. The runner was out if a fielder caught the ball on the fly, tagged the base runner, or hit the base runner with the ball. The fielder who scored the out then became the batter. The game’s chief inventor was Cleveland Wilkie, who was extremely fast and who often circled the bases even on short hits as the fielders frantically tried to tag him or put him out by hitting him with the ball. Because he was in perpetual disciplinary trouble, Cleve’s decision to study for the ministry surprised many. His juvenile mischief served him well in later life, when he drew upon that record for sermons and a syndicated newspaper column.

Organized athletic activity was under the direction of Coach Charlie Kearns. The boys had interscholastic teams in football, baseball, and basketball. The girls had a basketball team coached by Alice Dent. Coach Kearns was really a football man, but he coached all the boys’ teams and also offered instruction in track and tennis. There was considerable pressure on the boys to go out for football. The football team prided itself on a schedule that included teams from some of the biggest high schools in the state. The principal rivalry was with Children’s Home, a Methodist orphanage in Winston-Salem.

Cal was only sixteen and still growing when he finished high school, and thus not ready for varsity sports. Ted became a football halfback. He claimed that his most memorable moment on the gridiron came when the play called for him to punt the ball. An onrushing opponent intent on blocking the punt jammed the blocking back into the path of Ted’s kicking foot, which missed the football and landed on the rear end of the blocking back. At 6 feet tall and 135 pounds, I did not have the build or stamina for football. As I ended the first day of practice with several laps around the track, I headed off to the shower vowing that I would not return for a second day. Coach Kearns saw me as a baseball player. When I was in the seventh grade, Coach Kearns saw me throwing a baseball and watched for a while. I was not yet in high school and thus technically was not eligible to play. Nevertheless, he outfitted me with a uniform and soon had me throwing batting practice. I could throw the ball hard and with great accuracy. He himself loved to bat against me.

Baseball was almost as important as football. As mentioned, Johnny Allen, a pitcher for the New York Yankees, grew up at the Baptist orphanage. Johnny had the best won-lost record in the American League in 1932, his first year with the Yankees. His American League record for most consecutive wins—set during the 1936 and 1937 seasons while he pitched for the Cleveland Indians—stood for sixty-two years until Roger Clemens of the Yankees broke it in 1999. I noticed Johnny Allen’s extremely long fingers as he gripped the podium when he spoke at a school assembly.

Kearns’ Spartan training regimen for athletics was not unusual for that era—we were lucky that his prohibition of water during practice did not result in physical collapses.

Kearns’ Spartan training regimen for athletes was not unusual for that era—no water during practice, a tremendous amount of running, and strong admonition to avoid desserts at meals. He believed that if an athlete’s legs and lungs were in good shape, the rest of the body would take care of itself. Particularly in view of the hot climate of Piedmont, North Carolina, and of baseball players wearing woolen uniforms, we were lucky that his prohibition of water during practice did not result in physical collapses.

Once I became a varsity pitcher, Coach Kearns did all he could to help and encourage me. The majors had scouted Carl Watson, three years ahead of me. Lefty Glover had signed a contract, although he never got out of the minor leagues. The temptation to dream about playing professional baseball soon encountered some practical realities. Alex Templeton, a pitcher for Children’s Home, threw the ball with blazing speed. Those of us who batted against him were certain that he would be a star in the major leagues. Instead, the minor league professional...
players he faced waited him out instead of swinging wildly as we did and made him appear to be throwing for batting practice.

Speed and control are wonderful assets for a pitcher, but I also needed at least forty-five additional pounds (which came about the time I finished college) to go with my height. I also needed training and coaching that would take better account of my strengths and weaknesses. When I warmed up before starting a game, Coach Kearns insisted that I throw long and hard. This meant I would start the game with the equivalent of several innings of pitching already behind me. For about four innings, my speed and control usually served me well. Shortly thereafter, I had lost enough speed that some of the batters were getting to me. On my own, I developed a knuckleball change-up to mix in with the fastballs. Coach Kearns did not fully approve, but the change prolonged my stay on the mound.

DISCIPLINE

There was regimentation at Mills Home. There had to be. The suggestion, however, that the rules and regulations under which we lived stifled spontaneity and creativity is far wide of the mark. The discipline and order in our communal life was a valuable component of our development. At the same time, especially as we grew older, we had an increasing amount of freedom. True, the girls were less free than the boys to go to town or roam around the farmlands and forests that were part of or adjacent to the larger campus. Still, we went to school and church together, performed together in musical groups and plays, and mingled socially. The older girls and boys frequently dined together on Sundays. The differences at Mills Home between the experiences of the girls and those of the boys had to do almost entirely with the general norms and conventions of that era.

Those who ran the institution were wise enough to give us a reasonable amount of slack while making sure that we kept to the schedule that governed schooling, work, religious life, athletic activities, and the like. Still, with 550 boys and girls, naturally there were some discipline problems. Most of the disciplinary issues had to do with minor mischief, much of it more laughable than serious. Staff members used corporal punishment occasionally, but it was rare. I was typical in that I never experienced corporal punishment, and it never occurred to me that I would. When Dr. Greer became the general superintendent, the understanding was that Coach Kearns would administer corporal punishment to boys where it was warranted. One of Greer’s earliest actions was to notify Kearns that corporal punishment was to be a last resort and rarely used. Still, whippings were a part of the culture of that era and that region, and occasionally a senior member of the staff would resort to it. I witnessed only one whipping when an exasperated Cyrus Howell applied a leather strap to Sam Dotson’s backside. Cy was a chain smoker, and the whipping was much harder on him than on Sam. Sam did some convincing yelling, but as soon as Cy was out of earshot, Sam was laughing with the rest of us.

The most dreaded punishment was dishwashing. It was often the sentence for boys caught sneaking off to movies. Jim Clayton was a sophisticated movie fan, and the movies that interested him appeared on weekday evenings, not on Saturday afternoons. Jim would steal out at night. I do not recall that he was ever caught, despite the booby traps that Benny Thomas set for him. Sometimes, Benny would balance a croquet set on top of the door that led into the bedroom that he, Jim, I, and three other boys shared. As the croquet paraphernalia came crashing down on his head, the challenge for Jim was to get into bed before Mrs. Scarborough appeared and cut on the lights. Years later, Mrs. Scarborough told me that she was well aware of Jim’s nocturnal visits to the Palace Theatre. On one occasion, Benny put a dummy in Jim’s bed and made enough noise to ensure that Mrs. Scarborough would appear. She turned on the lights and bawled us out, dummy and all.

For the boys at least, Saturdays and Sundays afforded considerable freedom. We were free to roam around the orphanage farmlands, where we sometimes stole tomatoes and melons. While orphanage officials expected some pilferage from the Mills Home-owned fields, the matter became more serious when neighboring farmers complained about raids on their fields. Some of the more venturesome boys would go into the deeper woods to build campfires and feast on their stolen bounty of tomatoes, roasted corn on the cob, coffee, and other delights.

It was easy for older boys to get permission to go uptown—a walk of about a mile to the business center of Thomasville, a small city of 10,000. We were supposed to get permission from our matrons to go to movies on Saturday afternoons. They granted permission so routinely that many of us did not bother to ask. Mills Home boys
packed the Palace Theatre balcony and cheered on Tom Mix, enjoyed the singing of Gene Autry, and waited in suspense to see how the Green Hornet would extricate himself from his latest peril. Some Mills Home boys met town girls and got in some necking in the balcony of the Palace Theatre. My brother Ted, years after he became a physician and medical school professor, was surprised to receive a call from one of his old balcony dates. She wanted some medical advice.

We reveled in the summer months, when the absence of school provided more time for recreation and socializing. The swimming pool was busy throughout the day and into the evening. All of us looked forward to “Valley Night,” which came on Monday and Friday evenings. The Valley was a large expanse of green that lay between the girls’ and boys’ residential campuses. On Valley Night, when all the children and many staff members went there, it was the scene of innumerable sports events, casual play, and quiet conversation between older girls and boys.

The rules forbade us to own pet dogs and cats. In view of the crowded conditions in the living cottages, the rule against domestic pets made sense. A few boys had hunting dogs, which they kept in pens near the barns. Some boys captured flying squirrels and chipmunks and tried to make pets of them. No one interfered with those efforts. Although I never tried to raise a wild flying squirrel, I did enjoy trying to capture those fascinating animals. Capturing a flying squirrel required a well-organized band of boys who would chase the squirrel from tree to tree until the exhausted animal glided to the ground rather than landing in its targeted tree.

Although the authorities forbade us to own pets or even bicycles, we could own guns—and many of us did. I owned air rifles. Once I borrowed another boy’s .22-caliber rifle and went hunting with Howard Day. As I aimed at a bird, I remembered my father’s teaching that birds were beautiful creatures and should not be harmed. I felt guilty after firing the shot. I did not see the bird fly off. On the other hand, we looked thoroughly for the bird’s carcass and found nothing. I hoped it escaped.

I saw George Thomas (G.T.) Jones about half an hour before he killed himself with a rifle in the spring of 1939. I was surprised to see G.T. with a gun only because it was Sunday, and I kidded him about hunting on Sunday, which orphanage authorities disapproved. Even after the suicide, no one questioned the wisdom of gun ownership and use by the orphanage boys. Following the suicide, it was widely reported that G.T. had been involved in a homosexual relationship with a younger boy and that the boy had openly talked about the relationship. As G.T. and I talked on that fateful day, he looked in the direction of Green Cottage, where the boy lived, and asked if I had seen him. Had he encountered the boy that day, the tragedy might have involved a murder as well as a suicide. G.T. was well known and highly regarded at Mills Home. He was a talented athlete and participated in musical organizations. Efforts to locate relatives following his death were fruitless.

Because Mills Home provided virtually everything we needed—clothes, toothpaste, soap, razors, etc.—we required little money. The older children received allowances. For many of the older children, there were also opportunities to make money by working overtime. We learned to give generously to the church. Many children tithed, but it was not required. The print shop provided more moneymaking opportunities than most jobs. Boys used their money to buy extra clothes, presents for girlfriends, guns, and even hunting dogs.

I used some of my money to run a candy business. A box of twenty-four bars from a wholesale grocer cost only 75 cents. Selling the candy for 5 cents a bar yielded a profit of 45 cents per box—enough to allow the seller to eat a few bars. The candy business and other such capitalist ventures were against the rules. We assumed that the relevant authorities were aware of our clandestine activities and that the consequences of discovery would not be serious.

HEALTHCARE

Growing children with changing bodies naturally have questions and anxieties. Although the children at Mills Home often took their problems and worries to one another for advice, we also knew that we could go to the head nurse, the minister, the physician, the matron, a trusted teacher, or a work supervisor for counsel. Where we went usually depended upon relationships that were already in place. I am sure that some children suffered silently with worries that other children took immediately to someone who could help. Children who had siblings generally found comfort and reassurance more readily than those who were not so fortunate.
Our medical care was at least as good as, and probably superior to, what a typical middle class family had at that time. Dr. Paul M. Sherrill, a local pediatrician, served as the orphanage physician. He charged nothing for his services, and he was generous with his infirmary office hours. A full-time nurse ran the infirmary with the help of a staff of older girls, including many who became professional nurses. Our diet conformed to the dietary science of the times. The orphanage farms produced most of our food, and we were well fed. Additional food (watermelons, apples, canned fruits and vegetables, salted hams, etc.) arrived by truckloads from churches throughout the state.

Before the development of antibiotics, illness in children was a greater worry than it is now. During my seven-and-a-half years at Mills Home there were about five deaths among the children. Antibiotics appeared at just about the time I left the orphanage in 1941. Some of the deaths probably would not have occurred if various medical advances had come a decade earlier.

It was the medical fashion then to remove the tonsils of all children. For several years, the verdict was that my tonsils were too small to remove. Then the time came for the surgery, which Dr. Sherrill performed at the infirmary. Some of the bigger boys served as orderlies during tonsillectomies. Pat Preston held me in place while Dr. Sherrill and the nurse put me to sleep. It was a traumatic experience. The ether that covered the gauze mask over my face induced the sensation of suffocation. I was certain I was dying. I heard Pat ask Dr. Sherrill if I was asleep yet, and I was horrified when he answered, “Yes.” The bountiful servings of ice cream that soothed my wounded throat after the surgery provided some consolation but never erased the horrific memory.

Sallie McCracken, executive assistant to the general superintendent and the first person who ever mentioned Williams College to me, in connection with the Haystack Prayer meeting.

The sewing room—an important part of the orphanage’s operation (c 1950)
THE DIRECTOR OF SOCIAL SERVICES, Hattie Edwards, figured prominently in the lives of Mills Home children and young people at the beginning and at the conclusion of their stay, but they saw little of her in between. In late 1933, she had decided that the three oldest Chandler boys would enter Mills Home. Now it was 1940, and I needed to start planning for post-orphanage life. It was time to become re-acquainted with Miss Edwards.

As I observed the departures of graduating seniors over the years, I saw myself as a member of the ranks of those who entered college. Wake Forest was a popular destination, as was Meredith College, a Baptist college for women. Many Mills Home graduates attended one of the Baptist junior colleges—especially Mars Hill. Smaller numbers went to Campbell, Gardner-Webb, Wingate, and Chowan. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Dr. Greer’s alma mater, was a popular choice, as was the Woman’s College of the University of North Carolina, which later became UNC-Greensboro. North Carolina State College, later North Carolina State University, was the choice of some. Methodist-founded Duke attracted many graduates of the Methodist Children’s Home in Winston-Salem, especially its talented athletes. If Mills Home was the Athens of the community of North Carolina orphanages, Children’s Home was the Sparta. Duke received so many talented athletes from Children’s Home that it hired Bill Murray, the Children’s Home coach and athletic director, as its head football coach.

Although prime athletic talent from Mills Home tended to end up at Wake Forest, occasionally a graduate of Mills Home, or the smaller Kennedy Home, went to Duke. A few Mills Home graduates attended college outside of North Carolina. Well after my time, Eric Hoyle went to Harvard, did well there, and became a prominent business and civic leader in Winston-Salem. My classmate and close friend Dick Perdue graduated from Southern Methodist University and chose to remain in Texas, where he became a businessman and rancher.

Miss Edwards drove me to Wake Forest for a campus tour and interview. I found the experience exhilarating, and I readily saw myself as a Demon Deacon. Eventually, I would enter Wake Forest but only after transferring there following two years at Mars Hill College, then a junior college.

I was puzzled and somewhat troubled when signs began to appear that I would go to Mars Hill, along with other members of my class. That Miss Edwards was herself a graduate of Mars Hill probably inclined her to look upon it more often as a favorable college choice. I do not recall that we discussed at any depth my views on where I wanted to go to college. It is likely—and reasonable—that she saw Mars Hill as a good choice for me because it was just a few miles from my birthplace. I had many relatives in and around the little town of Mars Hill. My mother and my youngest brother, Baxter, in Black Mountain, were only some thirty miles distant from Mars Hill. Wake Forest, then located in the little town of Wake Forest, just outside Raleigh, was about 240 miles from Black Mountain—a full day’s trip by bus, car, or train before the building of the Interstate highway system.

Most of us who grew up at Mills Home were essentially homeless once we finished high school. At the end of my stay there, I had not lived with my mother for nine years. Hattie Edwards undoubtedly was looking ahead and asking such practical questions as what the college-bound graduates of Mills Home would do during college holidays and in the summer months. Because the print shop needed me as a Linotype operator, I stayed on at Mills Home following my graduation until my college classes began. Orphanage officials made certain by the time we graduated that specific arrangements were in place regarding where we would live, attend college, or work.

As I soon learned, invitations from college friends, male and female, enabled me to enjoy holidays and vacation periods in family settings. I sometimes went home with Fran Stockard, whom I dated, and I especially enjoyed time with her and her family at Virginia Beach. Augusta Reece and her parents also welcomed me in their home.

It was no surprise when my brother Calvin followed me to Mars Hill. He was only sixteen when he entered college. Although he did well at Mars Hill, it was probably the wrong college for him. He was strong in mathematics and the sciences. He also had artistic talents that he expressed later as a wood sculptor. I agreed with him when, years later, he mused that his college experience should have pointed him toward a career in civil engineering or architecture. Still, his record as a hospital administrator left little for him to regret concerning his professional career. At the end of his first year of college,
with the United States now at war, he volunteered for the Navy. Because of his age, our mother had to give her consent. Following the war, during which he served as a radio operator on an aircraft carrier, he began a career in the Veterans Administration hospital system, starting in a low-level clerical position. Despite his lack of a college degree, he advanced rapidly through the administrative ranks and became the director, or administrative head, of a succession of VA hospitals in various parts of the nation, including some affiliated with prominent medical schools. His peers in comparable posts usually possessed the MBA or other graduate degrees. He gained recognition as an unusually creative leader who instituted many cost-effective measures that were widely adopted throughout the VA system of hospitals. Eventually he went to Washington to provide administrative oversight to all VA hospitals in the northeastern region of the United States. Cal died in 2010 at the age of eighty-four.

Ted graduated from the Mills Home High School in 1945 shortly before the war ended. He too entered Mars Hill College. After a semester, he dropped out to join the Navy. In the Navy, he became a medical laboratory technician, first at the Sampson Naval Base on Seneca Lake in New York, and then at the far larger Coronado base in San Diego. That experience inspired him to enroll at Wake Forest as a pre-medical student following his Navy stint. After graduating from Wake Forest with Phi Beta Kappa honors, he earned a medical degree at UNC-Chapel Hill, with all expenses paid by the Morehead Scholarship that UNC awarded him.

When I entered college in 1941, my brother Baxter was ten. I was able to see him and my mother more often. Mills Home allowed older children to visit relatives for a week during the summer months. While I was at Mars Hill, my pattern during vacation periods was to go to Black Mountain for brief visits and then stay with the family of a college friend. The economic situation for my mother and Aunt Gus had improved considerably through the generosity of their younger brother, Sherman McIntosh, a successful business entrepreneur. When Baxter was in high school, Sherman bought a house for them in Santa Ana, California, near his own home. The adjustment to life in Orange County was too difficult for them, and they returned to Black Mountain.

Cal, Ted, and I yearned for Baxter to have opportunities comparable to what Mills Home provided us. During the Korean War, he joined the Marine Corps, although he did not go to Korea. After his military service was over, he developed a profitable business in which he bought and sold surplus military equipment, especially vehicles. With our strong urging, he enrolled in Asheville-Biltmore College, later renamed UNCA-Asheville. He regularly made the honor roll during the two years that he completed. In the midst of this busy and fulfilling life, including marriage and the birth of a daughter, he developed some physical symptoms that concerned him. Ted had just completed his medical training and was establishing a practice in Hickory when Baxter went to see him. Baxter showed him some lumps on his neck. Ted knew almost immediately that the lumps pointed to advanced cancer that had metastasized. Laboratory tests confirmed that Baxter had an aggressive form of carcinoma. He died nine months later in 1958 at age twenty-seven. The light of our mother’s life was gone. As we remembered her during that period, we doubted that she ever laughed or smiled again. She died four years later at age sixty-four.

My classmates and I (in the center front) just back from church (1941)
HAVING LIVED ON A CAMPUS and in dormitories for seven-and-a-half years, I was well prepared for many aspects of college life. As valedictorian of my high school class, I was confident that I could handle the academic work, although I assumed that many or most of my fellow students would be at least equally well prepared for the academic challenges.

The Mars Hill faculty member who struck the greatest terror in the hearts of students was Ramon DeShazo of the English department. DeShazo had a reputation as an exceptionally demanding teacher and a tough grader. In the very first semester, I encountered him in a required American literature course. The syllabus announced that a long paper was due about midway through the semester. I chose to write on “The Treatment of the American Indian in the Writings of Philip Freneau.” Freneau was a somewhat obscure poet, essayist, and journalist during the period of the American Revolution. When the day arrived for DeShazo to return the marked papers, he first spoke at length about how mediocre and disappointing they were, reciting the most common flaws in their arguments and the most frequent writing errors in their construction. He ended those remarks by saying that there was only one outstanding paper, and that it received the only “A” grade he awarded. I sat there fearing the worst and half hating the guts of whoever had received the “A.” After he handed back my paper at the door and I dared to look at it, I saw the “A” and his comments. That experience brought a strong sense of validation and confidence that I was well prepared for college. Four years later, I would graduate second in my class at Wake Forest, magna cum laude, with Phi Beta Kappa honors. A grade of “C” in Inorganic Chemistry, my lowest grade in college, kept me from graduating summa cum laude.

I lost track of DeShazo, who entered the Army and did not return to Mars Hill. Years later, I was on a panel of educators who were asked to talk about memorable teachers who had influenced them most profoundly. I chose to talk about DeShazo, although I knew nothing about his subsequent career or even whether he was living. Soon I was surprised but very pleased to receive a telephone call from him. He had read an article about the panel and my remarks. We remained in close touch for the rest of his life.

With the exception of two required courses in Bible, my courses at Mars Hill were rigorous and well taught. The Bible courses were shallow. I would not know about modern textual criticism as an approach to understanding the Bible until I got to Wake Forest. It did seem reasonable, however, that the two courses I took should have included some critical examination of the claims for the historical accuracy and literal veracity of biblical texts that the instructor took for granted.

Interestingly, my self-help job during my sophomore year was to work for the professor from whom I took the Bible courses. Having worked outdoors as a member of a buildings and grounds crew during my first year, I was pleased to have a job that was better aligned with my academic work and one that did not leave me physically exhausted.

During the first semester, while he was offering the Old Testament course, Professor K told me that he had to be out of town and that he wanted me to conduct the class, using his class notes, and being careful not to stray from the notes. The reading assignment for the session was the book of Joshua. When we got to the account of how the Israelites, under the command of Joshua, conquered the city of Jericho, a student raised his hand and asked what I thought really happened. The biblical text seemed clear enough about how the walls came tumbling down. Joshua’s troops obeyed God’s orders about marching around Jericho outside the walls, preceded by priests carrying the ark of the covenant and blowing rams’ horns. Thereupon God performed the miracle that brought down the walls, thus enabling the Israelites to conquer and occupy the city.

The student questioner obviously assumed that there was more to the event than what the biblical account provided. All of nineteen, I forgot about Professor K’s admonition to stick with his notes. Instead, I suggested that perhaps memories of a big earthquake that knocked down the city walls were passed along as embellished stories that eventually were recorded in a literary form. Without knowing it, I was suggesting an explanation consistent with the Form criticism that German biblical scholars had developed. One student in the class was an ordained Baptist minister in his early thirties. He knew heresy when he heard it, and he blasted me for denying God’s miracle and questioning the authority of the Bible.
In no time, the class was alive with a vigorous debate between those who sided with the Baptist minister and those who thought I was on the right track.

While I found the discussion exhilarating and sensed that most of the students did as well, I had an uneasy feeling about how Professor K would react to how the class had gone. I decided to say nothing to him about the incident. Within a couple of days after his return he called me in to say that he had heard about what had happened, and he expressed his displeasure. He emphasized that if I were unwilling or unable to follow his instructions he would have to make other arrangements for a substitute teacher when he had to be away.

Meanwhile, I continued to grade papers for the course and do other work as assigned by Professor K. One student in the course was persistently inquisitive about her grades on papers and tests. I rather enjoyed those encounters with Betty. She was vivacious and good-looking, and her teasingly flirtatious manner was made to order for the male ego. One day when I was in Professor K’s office grading a set of tests, there was a knock on the door. When I opened it, I was terrified to see Betty standing there, wearing one of her tighter sweaters and an attractive skirt. She asked if I had graded her test. With frightening thoughts about what could happen to me if Professor K should appear, I told Betty to leave immediately. She didn’t budge and calmly said, “OK, let’s grade my test.” So I sat down and began desperately racing through Betty’s test while she stood over me, with a shapely hip resting against my shoulder and her right arm draped around the back of my neck. Vastly relieved to be through grading the test without Professor K appearing, I was certain Betty would not come to the office again. Henceforth, I would grade her work immediately and communicate the results to her promptly, and she would get the benefit of all doubts.

The Southern Baptist organization principally responsible for the spiritual well-being of Baptist college students was the Baptist Student Union. The BSU played an important role at Mars Hill, and the most prestigious student office on campus was the presidency of the BSU. The great majority of students participated in one or more of the many programs sponsored by the BSU. Pre-ministerial students dominated the organization, and there was relatively little faculty participation or oversight. The minister of the on-campus Mars Hill Baptist Church, William Lynch, was also the college chaplain. He was theologically more moderate than the majority of the pre-theological students. Faculty, staff, and townspeople who attended his church had high regard for him. Relatively few of the pre-theological students looked to him for professional advice or personal counsel. Many of the student religious leaders were seasoned preachers, even in their late teens. They were well versed in the preaching techniques of the more notable evangelical Baptist preachers, such as George W. Truett. The most prominent member of the group of young campus preachers showed me his sermon manuscripts, which included appendices that listed dates and places where he had delivered the sermons, and the number of conversions resulting from each rendition of the various sermons. He was exceptionally well organized, and he was a master rhetorician. While I never warmed to his style or his messages, they clearly were effective with many audiences. He became a well-known and widely influential minister. Like many other conservative pre-theological students, he completed his baccalaureate work at Baylor University and graduated from the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth. Members of this group generally regarded Wake Forest as far too liberal.

One program under the auspices of the BSU, the Master’s Minority, sponsored prayer sessions early in the morning and again in the evening. The goal of the Master’s Minority was the achievement of Christian sanctification, which was a step above salvation. Sanctification meant perfection. Its achievement entailed a rebirth, a dramatic moment of enlightenment. The concept was a part of the general religious culture of Southern Baptists, but I have no memory of it as a theme in my religious instruction at Mills Home. Thinking that perhaps I had missed something important, for a brief period during my first semester, I attended the morning and evening prayers, heard talks, and read much of the literature in the room set aside for the Master’s Minority movement.

One of the primary emphases of the movement was the necessity of witness as a mark of and means toward achieving sanctification. The members of the movement teamed up in pairs and went out into the surrounding hills and hollows to take the gospel message to families living there. A companion and I went on one such mission. We knocked on the door of a modest house and introduced ourselves to a middle-aged couple. We read them passages from the Bible and commented on the meaning and messages conveyed by the scriptures.
Then my companion led us in prayer. During the prayer, I opened my eyes. They fixed on the husband, who was sitting bolt upright with his eyes wide open. It was obvious that he was not buying what we were trying to sell. Mars Hill students had a laudable history of engagement with the needs of the people of the region. There were undoubtedly helpful contributions my partner and I might have made, such as chopping firewood for the winter or tutoring young children. Suddenly, however, it was clear to me that what my companion and I were doing was more self-serving than useful. That marked the end of my evangelical career and my flirtation with the Master's Minority. I wasn’t cut out for perfection, and I now saw the whole idea as a goal that could become a neurotic and narcissistic obsession.

Music was an important part of Mills Home life (c 1950).

A typical scene during study time in the well stocked library (c 1940).
I FINISHED MY SOPHOMORE year and assumed that military orders would soon follow. Like thousands of other college students, I took the War Department’s test (based on the Stanford-Binet IQ test). A score of 120 qualified one for campus-based Army and Navy programs that provided specialized training, followed by active military duty. Most of my friends signed up for the Navy V-12 program, designed to produce junior officers. I checked the box for the Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP).

While at Mills Home, I had come to know Dr. Milton Braun, a physics professor at Catawba College, in Salisbury, and his wife, Mary. The Brauns were members of an adult study group at the First Baptist Church of Salisbury that had “adopted” me. There were numerous such relationships between church groups and orphanage children. Those of us assigned to such benefactors usually referred to them as our “clothing people.” A men’s group at the Myers Park Baptist Church in Charlotte had similarly adopted my brother Calvin. Ted was the beneficiary of the special interest and provisions of a men’s group from the First Baptist Church in High Point. One member of the High Point group was the owner of a well-known ice cream manufacturing company. He wanted Ted to join the business and proposed paying his way through North Carolina State University in preparation. Ted, however, was already keen on pursuing a medical career.

I visited my benefactors in Salisbury on a few occasions, and they supplied me with a nice wardrobe as I looked ahead to starting college. Knowing that I was slated to enter the ASTP program, Dr. Braun was concerned that my science background was thin and suggested that I might receive a more desirable ASTP assignment if I took his summer school course in optical physics. When I took the test in 1942, the language describing the kinds of training one might receive in the ASTP was not precise. It was clear enough, however, to indicate that the emphasis would be on producing specialists in engineering, science, personnel psychology, and medicine. As it turned out, the ASTP became the royal road to the infantry as the Army built the combat forces that would invade Western Europe and expand operations against Japan. The Army closed most campus-based ASTP programs, and those enrolled in them went into the ground forces, primarily infantry and artillery units.

My course in optical physics was barely under way when, in July 1943, I received orders to report to Fort Bragg for the medical examination that was preliminary to induction into the Army and basic training. I understood that I would complete thirteen weeks of basic training and then receive assignment to a campus-based ASTP unit. To my great surprise, the medical examination resulted in rejection because of extremely high arches, for which the medical term was “severe pes cavus.” I knew that I had a foot problem, although I was also an active athlete. Thus, I thought that my reclassification to 4-F (physically unqualified for military duty) might be a fluke. Because I was eager to serve, I told my draft board in Thomasville that, notwithstanding my 4-F classification, I wished to volunteer for the Army. The draft board obligingly sent me back to Fort Bragg in October 1943. The verdict of the examining physicians remained unchanged from the outcome in July: 4-F classification—physically unfit for military service. The chief medical examiner at Fort Bragg explained that it was highly unlikely I could make it through basic training and that the effort might leave me permanently crippled because of the marching, running, and crawling with a rifle in my hands and a heavy pack on my back.

With my military status settled, and having missed the fall academic quarter, I prepared to enter Wake Forest right after Christmas. During the 1943 Christmas vacation period, I spent several days at the home of my Mars Hill classmate Bill Roberson, in Candler, a small town near Asheville. At one party, the center of attention was our friend and former classmate Howard Pinner, also from Candler. Howard was part of the huge and ongoing exodus of college students who left the campus to volunteer for military duty without waiting for the draft. He joined the Army Air Corps and was now a bomber pilot, flying the B-17 or Flying Fortress. He was home on furlough after surviving numerous bombing missions in Europe. Those of us who had known Howard as our easy-going and amiable friend saw in him changes that surprised and concerned us. He was noticeably jumpy and irritable. He seemed distant and distracted. Howard survived the war but only after being shot down twice. The first time, with his bomber on fire, he put the plane into a steep dive in an effort to put out the flames and crashed into the North Sea, resulting in the deaths of three crew members. In the second instance, his severely damaged plane crashed
as he tried to land it at a Russian air base in Poland. This time, all ten crew members survived without injury. War Department oral history accounts of the episode credited Howard’s piloting skills as responsible for that outcome. With friends departing almost daily for military duty, and a steady flow of reports back to the campuses concerning deaths and injuries among them, it was difficult for us to remain focused on our studies let alone commit to a deep seriousness about our student obligations. I felt guilty about not being in uniform. When I would mention this fact to friends in the military, their virtually unanimous response was that I should count my blessings. Some of them eventually talked about the brutality and the dehumanizing effects of war, but most never broke their silence.

Against my Mills Home background, there were regressive aspects of my Mars Hill experience. My Wake Forest experience, in contrast, consistently stretched and challenged me. Wake Forest provided an exhilarating and liberating ethos. I jumped at the opportunity when Professor Albert Clayton Reid, chair of the philosophy department, urged me to spend an expense-free extra year at Wake Forest, where I would take additional work in philosophy and serve as his assistant. Despite my questions about whether Mars Hill was the best place for me, I have enormous respect for its history of serving the educational needs of the people of the Southern Appalachian region. During the last quarter of the twentieth century, the Mars Hill trustees and a succession of presidents showed great courage and wisdom in the face of widespread efforts by fundamentalist denominational leaders to apply stern creedal tests to faculty appointments and curriculum content in Baptist-affiliated seminaries, colleges, and universities. Although the decision led to the loss of significant denominational financial support, the trustees acted to amend the charter and bylaws so that the board became a self-perpetuating body, and the North Carolina Baptist State Convention would no longer appoint its members. The mission statement and the identity statement adopted by the trustees, combined with their action in converting the board to a self-perpetuating body, brilliantly accomplished the goal of defining Mars Hill as a college with a Baptist heritage, a broadly Christian character that stressed inclusiveness, and an academic institution that respected and supported freedom of inquiry and proclamation.
CRITICISMS OF ORPHANAGE LIFE that appear in published accounts usually focus on two themes: one, that it is emotionally stultifying; and two, that its regimentation discourages spontaneity and creativity.

I vividly recall a conversation I had with Ted Hethcock, my print shop supervisor, after one of my fellow students died. Hethcock, himself an alumnus of the orphanage, was an exceptionally intelligent—even brilliant—man. I sensed in him a quiet bitterness that he had not done something different with his life. I was surprised—indeed shocked—by his response to my comments about the boy's death. He said, in effect, that orphanage children did not know how to grieve, that we did not really feel the loss of a member of the orphanage family. For the first time, I encountered the kind of thinking that would lead eventually to the conclusion that almost any home environment, no matter how flawed, is preferable to any institutional environment, no matter how good. That kind of thinking contributed to the demise of orphanages.

At the time of Ted Hethcock's comments, there was relatively little literature that supported his views. Although there were some studies in the first third of the twentieth century that concluded that childcare institutions did not provide desirable environments for the emotional development of children, the literature on the subject became much more voluminous and influential during and soon after World War II. There was considerable attention to the experiences of the thousands of English children from bomb-besieged cities who found shelter and safety in "residential nurseries" in rural areas. Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham concluded from their study of those children that, despite the adequate provision for their material needs, they incurred long-term damage from separation from their mothers. Various studies of particular samples of orphanage children claim that the emotional damage resulting from separation from the mother manifests itself in such ways as high rates of psychotic illness, diminished ability to enter the labor force, and inadequate social and parenting skills.

Such conclusions add up to a powerful indictment of orphanages, and that indictment won widespread acceptance in childcare policy circles in the second half of the twentieth century. More recently, however, the studies that contributed to that indictment have received new scrutiny that raises doubts about their conclusions. There are now questions about the small size of the studied populations, the failure to take into account the experiences of the observed group before they entered the orphanages, and also the failure to distinguish between damage resulting from the mother's absence and that stemming from simple neglect.

The negative portrayal of orphanage life in much of the scholarly and popular literature on the subject was so much at odds with our experience that Mills Home alumni often discussed these matters at reunions and other occasions. Our frustration with the dominant views in child policy circles led most of us, whatever our political views, to welcome the debate that Newt Gingrich provoked in 1994 when he suggested that orphanages be reconsidered. We also welcomed a survey of orphanage alumni (although Mills Home alumni were not included in the survey) that resulted from the debate.

Richard McKenzie, a professor of economics in the Graduate School of Management at the University of California–Irvine, grew up in the 1950s in the Barium Springs Children's Home, a Presbyterian orphanage near Statesville, North Carolina, that was similar to Mills Home during my era. McKenzie conducted a survey of alumni of nine orphanages in the South and Midwest, eight of them operated by religious groups and one a state-sponsored institution. His study enabled him to compare the survey results from orphanage alumni with data from their counterparts in the general population contained in U.S. census reports and other sources. There were 1,806 returned questionnaires (of approximately 4,500 sent). McKenzie based his report on the 1,589 respondents who left their orphanages before 1967, by which time the institutions had ceased to exist or had changed their missions to serve severely troubled and/or delinquent children. The returned questionnaires revealed that the orphanage alumni had an average stay of nine years in their institutions, with the mean age of arrival just under eight and the mean age of departure seventeen. The orphanage alumni reported high school graduation rate of 88 percent and a college graduation rate of 25 percent. By contrast, 75 percent of their counterparts in the general population completed high school and 18 percent graduated from college. The orphanage alumni reported
a median household income of $55,000 in 1994 while their counterparts reported $50,019. In the 1992 presidential election, 88 percent of the orphanage alumni voted, compared with 72 percent of their counterparts.

Responses to questions designed to reveal attitudes toward their orphanage experience showed that 76 percent of the alumni viewed their experience as “very favorable” and 8 percent as “somewhat favorable.” While 13 percent chose the “mixed rating” response, only 2.1 percent marked the “somewhat unfavorable” and “very unfavorable” ratings. Eighty-six percent of the respondents indicated that they “never” or “rarely” wanted to be adopted, and only 3 percent indicated that they “frequently” or “constantly” preferred adoption over remaining at the orphanage. The alumni preferred their orphanages to foster care by a margin of 89 percent to 2 percent, with 8 percent uncertain. By a margin of 72 percent to 16 percent (with 9 percent uncertain), they preferred staying at the orphanage rather than living with family members. The collective profile of orphanage alumni of that era—my era—conforms to what I know about contemporaries with whom I grew up at Mills Home.

Still, grateful as we were for what Mills Home did for us, those of us who lived there recognize that it did not provide a “normal” home environment. The affective environment varied to some extent from cottage to cottage, teacher to teacher, workplace to workplace, depending largely upon the skills and attitudes of particular staff members. Some staff members who worked with the youngest children expressed affection routinely by hugging the children and saying tender and loving things to them. Most staff members, however, were more preoccupied, necessarily, with treating children fairly and equitably. My two brothers and I have no memories of being hugged at Mills Home. My classmate Helen Varnum Hoffman provided the same report regarding her experience. Helen observed also that the children at Mills Home who had siblings were happier than the other children. Helen herself felt keenly the absence of her two brothers and two sisters who were adopted when she entered Mills Home.

Max Clayton, who was two years old when he entered Mills Home, remembered being held and carried around by the older orphanage girls who helped look after the youngest children. He also recalled that the girls were afraid of Miss Bannister, the matron at Myles Durham Nursery, and they would put down the little children when they saw her approaching. He recalled the affectionate attention of his two older sisters and two older brothers. He remembered the humiliation he felt when Miss Ballard, the matron at Simmons Cottage, berated him for wetting the bed. By contrast, the matron at the Green Cottage, Mrs. Frazier, quietly assured him that wetting the bed was nothing to worry about and that, working together, they would handle the matter. He remembered also that Mrs. Frazier went out of her way to comfort two boys who were distraught at the funeral service for G.T. Jones. Darrel Everett died by drowning, and Mrs. Frazier was again conspicuous in her attention to Darrel’s relatives and others whose grief was acute.

Mary Cook, the matron at Fleming Nursery, showered affection upon the pre-school girls who were under her care. Her death in 1934 was the occasion for much grief, especially among the girls who had lived in her cottage. Decades later, they continued to talk about her.

While I was a student at Wake Forest I went several times to Kennedy Home, a branch of the Baptist orphanage, to speak at the campus church. During those visits, I stayed at the home of Weston and Millie Reed. Mr. Reed was the superintendent of Kennedy Home and later became head of the Baptist orphanage system. The Reeds were remarkably warm people who personally knew all the children. Mrs. Reed was a mother figure to virtually all of them. One day, while she was working in her flower garden, a miserable-looking little boy came by and said, “I’m gonna run away.” Mrs. Reed replied, “I feel like running away myself. Help me finish up my work here, and maybe we can run away together.” After completion of the work, they went into her kitchen, where she gave him some milk and cookies. She learned that he was unhappy because he had not heard from his father in a long time. Even after the milk and cookies and the consoling conversation, the boy still wanted to see his father. Millie Reed knew that the father was a problem drinker. Still, she kept her promise as they “ran away” together in her car to see the father. With the visit concluded, the boy returned happily to his real home, Kennedy Home.

These brief accounts indicate that the experiences of children varied according to where they lived and with whom they interacted. Mary Cook was clearly exceptional in her ability to demonstrate affection routinely to all the children under her care at Fleming Cottage. Most of the girls were much older than the little girls at Fleming, and the staff members who looked after them faced a variety
of highly individualized needs and problems. Although most of us who were older did not routinely receive reassuring hugs and comforting words, we did live in a humane and supportive environment. It is also well to remember that there are great cultural differences in manifestations of love. I was once with a Japanese friend when he bade his daughter good-bye for what would be a long separation. They shook hands. Under the same circumstances, my three daughters and my son would have expected—and received—long embraces. Hugging was not nearly as much in fashion in the hard years of the Great Depression as it is now. In addition, taciturn Southern highlanders were not much into hugging. This is simply to say that my brothers and I would probably have liked some hugging at Mills Home, but we did not feel deprived by its absence.

Through the years I have had reminders that others viewed me as something of a sad sack, at least until I got into my teens. On a visit to Mills Home while I was in college, I went by to see the McMillan family. During our conversation, Louise suddenly said, “You’ve learned to laugh. How wonderful!” A few years later I read one of her essays that dealt, in part, with an orphanage boy whom she identified as “sad-faced little Johnny.” I knew that she was writing about me. During my sad sack phase, I was walking one day along the main campus road when Van Richardson, the supervisor of the orphanage truck farm, drove by in his pick-up truck. Slowing down and leaning out the window, Van shouted, with a big grin, “Smile, Johnny! Smile!” That was worth at least as much as a hug. In addition to being sad-faced, I was also skinny, enough so that Mrs. Scarborough decided that I needed a daily spoonful of cod liver oil. The stuff tasted awful. Still, I enjoyed the ritual of going to her table at dinnertime for my daily dose. Somehow, it made me feel special, and I even enjoyed the teasing from the other boys. Love takes many forms.

Anecdotal evidence and widespread observation suggest that those who grew up at Mills Home generally developed strong interpersonal skills rooted in the daily experience of negotiating innumerable human relationships with those with whom they lived in close and intimate circumstances. Informal observation suggests that the products of Mills Home enjoyed stable marriages and became good parents. As citizens and employees, they were dependable and steady. Extensive inquiry has revealed only one case of a Mills Home product from my era with a criminal record.

Although occasionally a child at Mills Home would “run away” in an effort to return to relatives, most of us did not wish to be anywhere else. In a few instances, couples adopted children, but we did not sit around fantasizing about a Daddy Warbucks who would come and take us away to a life of luxury. We liked the life that we had. We were curious when a childless couple adopted a boy and made him the heir of a large estate. We felt no envy because of his good fortune. During my era at Mills Home, I recall no instances of girls being adopted. I knew three boys who were adopted—all when they in their late teens. John Brinegar was an especially bright and attractive boy. He became my apprentice when he was learning to become a Linotype instructor. He had graduated from the Mills Home High School and was enrolled at UNC-Chapel Hill when a couple adopted him, and he became John Brinegar Stalls. All three adoptees were loyal Mills Home alumni and returned regularly for reunions.
ALTHOUGH MILLS HOME now houses a fluctuating population of only a few dozen children—almost all for stays of less than a year—it remains the administrative center of the Baptist Children’s Homes of North Carolina, with more than twenty branches throughout North Carolina and one in Guatemala.

The character of Mills Home now differs in important ways from that of the institution that was my home. For many years, the institution has served a population of troubled older children and young people by providing emergency short-term care. Almost 90 percent of the children are admitted on referral by public social service agencies. State and federal funds provide much more of the operating budget than do churches. Care of teenage single mothers and their infant children is an important component of the overall mission of the Baptist Children’s Homes of North Carolina. There are also services for elderly adults and for developmentally impaired adults.

The principal mission of the organization, however, continues to be ministering to the needs of dependent children. Very few of those children are orphans or half-orphans. They are, however, victims of neglect, abuse, and abandonment. Their plight reflects the widespread disintegration of the two-parent family and social pathologies rooted in excessive dependence on alcohol and addictive illegal drugs. Some of the children and young people arrive after encounters with the juvenile criminal justice system. Some of the residential buildings on the Thomasville campus serve as temporary homes for troubled families who receive support and counseling. The Mills Home campus is also the headquarters and administrative center of the Baptist Children’s Homes of North Carolina Inc., which includes twenty-four units in twenty locations throughout the state. The Broyhill Home, in Clyde, is illustrative of the differences between what I experienced and what today’s residents of the BCH’s residential units experience. Broyhill has approximately forty youngsters who live in five residential cottages under the supervision of ten adult couples. The average stay of a child or young person at Broyhill is nine months. After the end of the stay, the resident either returns to a more viable home situation or goes to a foster home as arranged by the BCH management. The other BCH units also operate on the assumption that the stay will be remedial and brief.

By contrast, the goal at Mills Home during my era was that every child would stay until graduation from high school. Some children, for a variety of reasons, did not reach that goal, but they were the exceptions. Some of my classmates had lived at Mills Home from the age of two, or for fifteen or sixteen years. I was somewhat exceptional in that I lived there only seven-and-a-half years. My brothers were closer to the average.

The contemporary BCH leadership, staff, and trustees have shown great imagination and initiative in the design of programs that make fruitful use of the relatively brief custody they have of the children and young people who come under their care. By design, religion serves as a transformative influence in the lives of many of the children. Most of the units have few enough children that they attend a local Baptist church rather than look to an on-campus pastor. This arrangement generally results in close bonds between the congregation and the BCH kids. Differences such as class and race that too often divide and lead to bigotry and stereotyping have a way of melting away when the abstract “other” becomes a real human being, especially a dependent and deprived child.

To illustrate the valuable life lessons that various residential units are designed to teach, I shall mention two examples. One fosters cooperative and collaborative attitudes by having the children and young people help operate a horse farm. Another unit features a wilderness survival camping experience, where teamwork is essential. In Camp Duncan for Girls and Cameron Boys Camp, each group of ten children lives with three supervisors, called “Chiefs.” The goal, according to the BCH, is for the campers to “learn discipline, positive behavior patterns, and self-worth” so as to “build positive, healthy relationships where deep hurts are healed and bad attitudes are changed.” The BCH claim is that those who participate in the wilderness program experience dramatic improvement in their academic achievement.

Many Mills Home alumni, I among them, would like to encourage greater attention to John H. Mills’ original vision of long-term care with a strong emphasis on education. The Mills Home campus, in Thomasville, is large, attractive, modern, and underutilized. In a complex of twenty-four separate satellite campuses, each with a distinctive emphasis, would it not be reasonable to designate one or two that adhere more closely to the founding model?
One need not look only to the founding vision of John H. Mills. There are instructive contemporary models. The Crossnore School, near Boone, was founded in 1913 as a boarding school to meet the educational needs of the children of an isolated region that lacked schools, health services, and modern transportation. The founder of the school, assisted by her husband, was Dr. Mary Martin Sloop, a physician. She aspired to be a Presbyterian foreign medical missionary but was rejected because of her gender. She and her physician husband, Dr. Eustace Sloop, established a medical clinic and a small hospital adjacent to the school. More than a century later, Crossnore School has approximately eighty boarding students and a small population of day students. Virtually all Crossnore graduates attend college.

The Milton Hershey School in Hershey, Pennsylvania, has a population of more than 2,000 disadvantaged children and continues to expand its capacity. With an endowment of more than $12 billion provided by profits from the Hershey Chocolate Co., the immense wealth of the school enables it to pay for all educational expenses for its students, including advanced graduate and professional study. In recent years, self-serving and self-enriching decisions by the school's governing board has sullied the school's reputation. Furthermore, the membership of the board includes no educators. Those developments and the serious deviation from the clear intention of Milton Hershey have attracted the attention of the Pennsylvania Attorney General, the Philadelphia Inquirer, The Chronicle of Philanthropy, and alumni of the school. Notwithstanding those issues and obstacles, one may point optimistically to an overall history that has seen gradual expansion of the school's geographical enrollment base from three Pennsylvania counties to the entire United States and beyond. With inspired vision and creative use of its immense financial resources, one might envision a nationwide chain of Milton Hershey Schools.

There is sporadic and undulating national interest in promoting and supporting children's homes that provide long-term care and emphasize education. More than 400,000 American children live in foster homes. Many of them bring with them problems that overwhelm even conscientious foster parents. Other foster parents are motivated by the income they receive, which has led to a sizeable industry of foster care in which children are tossed back and forth among foster homes and between foster homes and neglectful relatives. Overall, a declining number of families are willing to accept foster children. The laws and regulations that govern childcare put strong pressure on judges to rule in favor of biological parents, even in the face of steady histories of abuse and neglect of their children. It is common for children to have brief stays in numerous different foster homes when conditions at home become intolerable. Under such conditions, it is difficult for children to sustain educational progress and build relationships that bring order and stability to their lives. Many tout adoption as an alternative to foster homes. In fact, adoption is such a costly and cumbersome process that many couples take the far easier route of adopting children from abroad. To be sure, some group homes designed to respond to the needs of orphaned children tolerated neglect and abuse of children. They often suffered from poor management, and the magnitude of their challenges relative to their resources sometimes defeated even their best efforts and aims.

The more imperative message in the United States at this moment in our history is that the case for group homes rests on a strong foundation of evidence that they could and should play a major role in the formation of national childcare policy.

JOHN W. CHANDLER
Williamstown, Massachusetts
Clockwise from upper left:
Johnny Allen, a star pitcher for the New York Yankees and other teams, graduated from Mills Home in 1922 and often returned to campus (1932).

Pat Preston (#31) became an All-America tackle at Duke and later played for the Chicago Bears, despite having been badly wounded at the Battle of Okinawa (c 1938).

1936 Mills Home baseball team, with me in the front right, as official scorekeeper
Scouting was popular though I never participated (c 1950).

The print shop, where I learned the printing business, with the Linotype machines in the back left (c 1940)

Boys take their turn in the pool (1952).

John Arch McMillan, editor of Charity & Children, the Mills Home journal, which had wide circulation and took stands on public issues, sometimes controversially. I grew close to him and his family.

Homecoming 1951: Dr. Greer (by then retired); I; Joe Hawkins; Woody Baldwin; who taught me how to use the Linotype; and his wife
Dr. Isaac Garfield Greer, general superintendent
1932 to 1947

Glee club and orchestra (c 1938)

The Clayton brothers—Jim, Max, and my classmate Tom. Max and Tom were badly wounded in World War II.

Getting ready for the state and county fairs (1940)
1938 May Day exercises.
1935 basketball team.
1956 softball team
1912 Honor Rolls—Biggs House Girls
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND NOTES ON SOURCES

IN 1991, THE FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY of my graduation from Mills Home High School, I helped organize a special reunion of my class as a part of the annual Homecoming of Mills Home. The 1991 reunion was the seed that grew into this memoir.

At about the same time, I began to reflect upon and inquire into the southern Appalachian heritage that had shaped me before I entered Mills Home. This search for roots took an unexpected turn when I received a letter from a Washington, D.C. lawyer, Joseph Chandler Burton. Burton told me that we shared ancestors, and invited me to meet with him. I knew next to nothing about my family history, and was not especially curious. As Burton told of his genealogical research that pointed to paternal ancestors stretching back to Jamestown, Virginia in the first decade of the seventeenth century, I became intensely interested. At the same time, I was still professionally active enough that I had limited time to devote to this interest. My brother Calvin (1925–2010), a retired hospital administrator, took up the “roots” quest as he examined census data and inspected public records in court houses in Virginia, South Carolina, and North Carolina. He also joined a DNA project organized by Burton and others who had reason to believe they were descended from the John Chandler who was a member of the Jamestown colony. The evidence produced by Cal’s inquiries strongly supported the notion of descent from the putative Jamestown ancestor.

I left Mills Home more than 75 years ago. Most of my classmates and contemporaries are gone, and the institution itself has undergone many changes. For some 60 years, a strong homing instinct took me back to Mills Home every August. Thousands of Homecoming conversations and other communications have informed the narrative that I present here.

The history of the Baptist orphanage movement in North Carolina is well documented. First published in 1932 and re-issued most recently in 2013, Bernard Washington Spilman’s The Mills Home: A History of the Baptist Orphanage Movement in North Carolina provides the most authoritative account of the first 50 years.

Weston C. Reed’s Love In Action: The Story of the Baptist Children’s Homes of North Carolina (1973) summarizes the account provided by Spilman and brings the story up to 1970. The full text is available on the Internet.

My Mills Home contemporary C. Franklin Bailey, on behalf of the Mills Home Alumni Association, assembled and published a three-volume pictorial history of the Baptist orphanage that covered the years 1885–1960. The photographs used in my publication come largely from the Bailey volumes.

To mark the centennial of the Baptist orphanage movement in North Carolina, Professor Alan Keith-Lucas of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill wrote A Hundred Years of Caring: The Story of the Baptist Children’s Homes (1985). By then retired from UNC, Keith-Lucas, a professor of social work, had been a long-time consultant at BCH. His publication is the most comprehensive account of the history and evolution of BCH yet produced, although it naturally does not cover developments of the past 30 years. In 2002, Michael C. Blackwell, president of BCH, published A Place for Miracles: Baptist Children’s Homes of North Carolina. That account comes closest to describing the contemporary character of BCH.

For critical analysis of studies purporting to reveal the deleterious effects on children who grew up in orphanages, and arguments proposing a revival of group homes for children that feature some aspects of orphanages, I have relied especially upon Richard B. McKenzie (editor), Rethinking Orphanages for the 21st Century (1999). McKenzie’s The Home: A Memoir of Growing Up in an Orphanage recounts his years at Barium Springs Children’s Home, a Presbyterian orphanage in Statesville, North Carolina that was similar to Mills Home.

Two persons currently affiliated with the Baptist Children’s Homes of North Carolina were generous and indispensable in my quest for the information necessary for this publication. Jim Edmiston is the editor of Charity & Children, the official journal of the orphanage since 1887, and a key member of the BCH staff. Because Elizabeth
Smathers Johnson is an alumna of Mills Home (Class of 1967) and for many years has written the alumni column for C&C. Jim delegated to her the task of identifying photographs and other materials pertinent to the story that I wanted to tell. I am especially indebted to Lib, who spent many hours and went to great lengths to provide what I needed. Wallace Maultsby, Class of 1943 at Mills Home, has read a draft of my manuscript and offered valuable suggestions and information. My brother E. T. (Ted) Chandler, M.D. and I have spent innumerable hours through the decades comparing notes on our Mills Home experience. As a former BCH trustee and board chair, and having served two terms as president of the Mills Home Alumni Association, his front-row seat has afforded him a perspective on which I have relied heavily.

As a Senior Fellow of the Oakley Center for the Humanities and Social Sciences at Williams College for ten years, I benefited greatly from the critiques and encouragement offered by two different classes of Fellows during their Oakley Center appointments.

My wife Joyce Lazarus, with her remarkable command of IT, made certain that my computer was always ready to perform when I was in the mood to research and write.

Williams President Adam Falk provided the funding needed to produce this piece. Jim Kolesar, Williams Class of 72 and the college’s assistant to the president for community and government affairs, pushed me to overcome ambivalence about this project and provided the indispensable assistance to get it finished. His colleague Rob White added his own editorial skill. Nicole Barbuto, designer extraordinaire, joined them in this effort. I have almost certainly overlooked others who contributed importantly to my work. I ask their forbearance. Finally, I assume personal responsibility for the conclusions and factual details of the story I have told.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JOHN W. CHANDLER, the twelfth president of Williams College (1973–1985), is a native of North Carolina. After graduating from Wake Forest College with *magna cum laude* and Phi Beta Kappa honors, he received his Ph.D degree from Duke University in philosophy of religion. After teaching briefly in the department of philosophy at Wake Forest, he joined the department of religion at Williams in 1955 as an assistant professor. During the next decade, he achieved tenure, became chair of his department, established a major in religion, and chaired the ad hoc committee whose proposals resulted in a new curriculum that included Winter Study. In 1965 President Sawyer established the office of dean of faculty and named Chandler to the post. Chandler left Williams to become president of Hamilton College in 1968. He returned to Williams as president in 1973. Upon retiring in 1985, he became president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (1985–1990). Among the various boards of trustees on which he served was that of Duke University, where he became chair. From 1990 to 2001, he assisted more than forty colleges and universities with presidential searches.