

[A Happy Family]

76 C

Approximately 4,500 words SOUTH CAROLINA WRITERS' PROJECT

LIFE HISTORY

TITLE: A HAPPY FAMILY (see also [Daring the Devil?])

Date of First Writing January 16, 1939

Name of Person Interviewed Reverend T.A. Snyder (white)

Fictitious Name William Wiley

Street Address Second Avenue

Place West Columbia, S. C.

Occupation Baptist Preacher

Name of Writer [Hattie?] T. Jones

Name of Reviser State Office

The Wiley house, built of hand-pressed brick, is conspicuous in a neighborhood where small frame houses are the rule. A hedge borders the yard, and shrubbery has been planted at the front and sides.

I walked up to the door, painted ivory, as is all the woodwork of the house, and rang the bell. Mr. Wiley answered the bell - a tall, erect, frail-looking man of about fifty years of age

Library of Congress

and with a noticeable limp in his step. His bushy hair, originally brown, was streaked with gray, and his brown eyes lighted as he recognized us.

“Well, I declare, if it isn't Mrs. Stevens. Come right in. How are C C10 - 1/31/41 S.C.

2

you today! It's a lovely day to be gadding around, isn't it? Let me see,” and his thoughts came fast as he pondered just where we should sit. “I know. We'll go to the kitchen.” And Mr. Wiley led the way through the living room, attractive with hardwood floors and tasty furnishings, into the back hall. He talked as he went. “Mrs. Wiley and a bunch of women are having some sort of a meeting in the study where we always sit, and I think the kitchen is still warm. Honestly, you won't mind a bit?”

The kitchen was neatly furnished, a black and white color scheme having been used. The sun came streaming in at the window and heightened its cheerful atmosphere.

“You'll please excuse me for meeting you in my shirt sleeves and without a collar and tie. I was just fixing to shave when the door bell rang,” Mr. Wiley continued, as he informally took his coat from the back of a chair and put it on. He lit his pipe as we were seated about the small stove.

This never-saw-a-stranger sort of fellow soon made you feel at home, and you at once began to wonder if you hadn't been friends for years. Finally, the conversation drifted to a former visit that had been interrupted because of a previous engagement of Mr. Wiley's.

“Well, let me see. Did you find the folks I told you about the other day? And did you get all those stories written already?”

“Yes, we found them all right and got some good stories. But we've come this morning to have you tell us something about yourself. You will, of course.”

Library of Congress

“No, sir-ree. Not me. Get somebody who's done something worth while. There are scores of 'em around in these diggings. Somebody told you I have?”

3

Lawsy mercy, who was it? He ought to be shot for Ananias or Sapphira. What you going to charge me for this anyway? Nothing? Well, then what'll you charge me to let me get out of it?”

A short, plump, teen-age girl, with a lovely complexion, soft brown eyes, and wavy brown hair passed through the hall, holding her books under her left arm, “Daddy, the telephone.”

“Yes, I'm going in about an hour,” we heard this pastor say to the parishioner, “Glad to have you and Mrs. Smith go with me. I'll be by for you about 4 o'clock. Good-bye.”

When he was seated again, he said, “That was Mabel, our second daughter, and she's a whole team. They call her 'Little Willy.' I bet she knows everybody in that school by name and talks to everybody every day. Lord, she's a plum mess. She's in the tenth grade, and recently the principal walked in one morning and asked Miss Johnson, 'What about Mabel Wiley? Is she a pretty good girl?' 'Yes, she's a good student and as clever as she can be.' The girl sitting next to Mabel heard her say, as she threw up her hands, 'Lord, teach her better. My heart was in my throat. I thought she was going to tell him the truth.’”

“Now, Lloyd, that tall, lean, lanky 6-foot something you saw pass with his breeches rolled up above his knee, he has a one-track mind and is concerned with only one thing in this world, and that's riding a bicycle. He's a professional cyclist, I'm telling you. That's all I've ever found he wants to do. Johnny's three years younger, and he's caught up with him in school. It's nip and tuck with 'em now. I've asked his teacher how in the heck she can pass Lloyd in English. The other day he looked out of a window and called to a boy, 'Jim, come on in. I ain't 4 quite ready. I see-ed you soon as you turnt the corner. I knowed it was you

Library of Congress

soon as I see-ed the red bicycle.' Land sakes, I wouldn't give him a zero. But he's lots like his daddy, a regular chip off the old block. I declare.

“Johnny's the baby and his mother's pet. Looks just like her, too, with those big blue eyes and dimples in both cheeks. Doesn't like any petting outside the home, though. Tells his mother the boys will call him a sissy. He's the serious member of the family.

“Lord, woman, you don't want to know nothing about this crowd. You better go find somebody who's worth something. You see we were tarheels. I was born in Rutherfordton, North Carolina, back in 1890. My father owned a 200-acre farm there. He taught school when he wasn't busy with the farm work, taught the three R's, you know. Those were blue-back speller days. He started me off in that good old book we hear so much about, but I didn't get to 'baker'. My mother had only a common school education. Farming in North Carolina was in those days a pretty up-hill sort of business, and making a decent living for eight children wasn't so easy. So my father wasn't making ends meet, and he gave a little mortgage on the farm. Finally he decided he could do better if he moved to a cotton mill and let the farm go, so we moved to Henrietta, North Carolina. That was thirty-five ago.

“I began work in the mill when I was about fourteen years old. I earned 20 cents a day; yes, ma'am, 20 cents. I worked in the card room, ran drawings, and worked in the spinning room for two years. By that time I was making thirty cents and wearing brogans and jeans. My mother wove, spun, and made the cloth, and then she made the pants for us boys. The old loom is in the attic in my sister's home now where my father lives. He is 5 eighty years old. My mother died several years ago at the age of seventy-five.

“But mill folks just won't stay put. We moved down to Lockhart, South Carolina, and I earned sixty cents a day there doffing. I guess I made as much as twelve dollars a week before I left the mill.”

As he stroked his gray hair, which fairly stood on end, he said, “My daughter has just washed my hair. No, you missed the guess, no beauty parlor. Hannah has bad eyes and

Library of Congress

likes to do things like that because they don't require close vision. When she only two years old, she accidentally fell down two flights of stairs. [?], it was awful. Her optic nerve was completely shattered. She has been totally blind several times and has had three hospital experiences. Oh, yes, she finished high school, thanks to Dr. Harden. I declare I can never forget [?]. He was so interested in the case and watched her with so much concern. Saw her regularly every week and assured us if he found study was against her, he'd let us know. She managed to get through, though, and is a grand girl.

“There the ladies go now. They finished their work in a jiffy. I bet their gossip is marked 'to be continued' till the next time, though. Let's move over to the study now; it will be more comfortable, I'm sure.”

This room was cozy in its simple furnishings - a wicker divan, with several rocking chairs to match, a sewing machine, a small table, and built-in book shelves at the left side of the mantelpiece. On the mantel were some black vases, a clock, and some Indian relics. The floor was covered with linoleum of rose-and-blue design. An oval mirror and attractive pictures hung on the walls.

Dr. Wiley presented us to his wife, a rather large woman with soft 6 blue eyes and light brown hair, in a print dress, figured in blue and white. Mrs. Wiley presented us to her mother, massive in size, her snow-white hair bobbed and her complexion like that of a school girl. She wore a soft, knitted jacket over an orchid-colored dress, with a cameo at the neck. She had a wrist watch on her left arm, and a gold bracelet on the right. Mrs. Wiley was making a yo-yo spread and her mother a quilt of log-cabin design.

“I don't do much of this kind of thing, and mother doesn't like it much better than I do, but neither of us is very well to-day, so we hauled the sewing out of the closet,” said Mrs. Wiley. “I'm recuperating from intestinal flu, and mother is suffering more than usual with asthma. Flu is a treacherous thing, and I should go to the hospital for a thorough check.

Library of Congress

But when I'm inclined to go, I'm too sick, and when I get better, I hope I'm all O.K., and put it off. The aching tooth, you know."

"Alice, I'm pulling all the old skeletons out of the closet this afternoon and parading them before Mrs. Stevens," Mr. Wiley said, as he knocked the tobacco out of his pipe for a re-fill.

"Well, so long as you stick to your text and don't tell on me and mother, we have no objections."

Mabel came blustering into the room, and, throwing her books on the table with a bang, stood before the mirror combing her hair and applying lipstick. After an exchange of greetings, she said in a sort of soliloquy: "Boy friends? You should see my latest. He's six foot three inches. We look like Mutt and Jeff. Do I like school? Yeah, crazy 'bout the holidays. What am I going to do when I finish? Nothing, like the rest of the family." And she exchanged understanding glances with her father, who responded in an undertone, "Lord, is there no balm in Gilead?"

"If you want to know about our family tree," Mabel continued, "I can tell you the limbs are all dead. Don't see why you didn't come on a Sundays we're all dressed up that day and look a little better. You want to know if we're struggling. We just are, though. Been struggling indefinitely, and we're about to have to end it all. I've got to go study for those old exams. Gee, but I hate 'em."

Dr. Wiley moved over nearer to the stove; fastening his collar band and putting on a green tie, and resumed his story, "I haven't told you about my job experiences. When I was making the climb to the hill to which we all go sooner or later, I reckon I was about sixteen. One day a bunch of us boys bought a can of dynamite powder and went out in an old field to experiment a little. I was bending over the can when one of the boys lighted a piece of paper and threw it near the keg. Pow! The whole thing blew up, and I got the butt end of it. Great day in the morning. I was sure in a bad fix. All my clothes were burnt off me from my waist up. Only thing saved me was my fleece underwear. I was a mile from any doctor

Library of Congress

and had to walk to him. It was a bitter cold day. The fellows put some of their coats on me, and off I went. Even my finger nails dropped off as I walked along. My hair came off on sheets of skin. The doctor said it was a miracle that I closed my eyes. For six weeks I suffered agony, day and night. The doctor cut holes in a piece of cloth for my eyes, nose, and mouth and applied it to the burnt surface. The next morning he'd pull that piece off and apply another. My mother begged him to let her grease it, but he assured her I'd have scars if she did. There wasn't a single scar, but my skin is still very tender. A friend said about the accident, 'Some men die and go to hell, but I be-dog if you didn't make you a hell without 8 dying.' The doctor charged about \$100, and dad paid it. I didn't have that to worry about, thank goodness.

“Well, about a year later, I was jerking soda in a drug store, and the peanut parcher exploded. It, too, got me in the face. Knocked these four side-front teeth up two inches into my face and cut this gash on my lip. Did it hurt my looks? No, it helped my looks.

“You possibly noticed I'm crippled. When the explosions got over, I decided I'd go to Charleston on an excursion. That night I slept on a chair in the open and, when I waked up, I couldn't tell whether I was black or white. Honestly, I was covered with mosquitoes. I went down with high fever. Doctor called it malarial. I had one convulsion after another. Then I woke one morning and discovered I couldn't move hand or foot. For six months I was more helpless than a baby. Infantile paralysis. Finally I learned to walk on crutches and used them several months. I'd ride wild horses. Tried anything and everything. One day I was 'riding up a storm,' and the horse threw me on the edge of town, causing me to lose my crutches. Oh, my, I've had some experiences.” “Have you tried swimming? Or do you like to swim?”

“Gee, I'd like to swim the Atlantic Ocean, if I dared. Can't swim ten feet for cramps.”

“Well, you have at least one thing in common with a great man. Think I'll write Mr. Roosevelt about your going to [?] Springs.”

Library of Congress

“Dare you to do it. You know one thing, I surely do like our President. That last message of his completely won me over. Did you hear it? I declare, it was great. I see he's coming back to the State. When he was here in October, and I looked into his face, I liked him better than ever.

9

He's taken care of the backwash all right.”

A neighbor dropped into the room, a Mrs. Ford. Mr. Wiley said, “I just call her 'Mrs. V-8' when she works in the ladies' aid to suit me; but when she sorter slows down, I change it to 'Mrs. T Model.’”

“I'm usually a T Model. Don't do much in the church but keep a seat warm. I do stand squarely behind these Wiley's. We all do. We think they are wonderful folks.”

“Mother, we're having such a good time with these folks, I declare, I feel just like we ought to serve a little something. Any coca-cola 'round here?”

“Thank you very much, but we can't stay much longer. And, say, if it's time for you to go on those visits, maybe you'll trust your reputation with your wife.”

“No, sir-ree. Wife'll tell the truth on me. I'm going to stick around here closer than Grant did around Richmond till you leave. I didn't marry till I was twenty-six, and Alice doesn't know quite all the devilment I did, anyway. Yes, ma'am, I did some. Haven't quit it all yet. I've improved on some of it, though. We were married in 1916, while Alice and I were both working in the mill at Lockhart. Anything unusual about the courtship? No. Nothing. I just courted her nine nights out of a week for two years before she'd consent to have me. Honeymoon? Not worth mentioning. We went to the preacher Sunday afternoon and back to work next morning.

Library of Congress

“You see I had stopped school in the ninth grade. Boys do such foolish things, don't they? So I decided the best thing for me to do was to go back to school and graduate from high school, like my wife had done. I got the 10 job as janitor of the school, and they paid me \$40 a month. Alice worked some in the afternoons, and she earned 75 cents for that. Before the two years were over, we had two children and it was tough, I'm telling you, but we lived on that money and made no debt.

“While I was in school, we organized a little dramatic club. We gave plays and raised \$600 with which we bought some paintings for the school. I was always Blackface, Simple Willy, or something like that, the comedian of the crowd. I did some fancy dancing, too. I haven't quit all my foolishness yet. Several years ago, I was in Newberry. And one night about 12 o'clock, I pulled my hair down over my eyes and took off my collar and tie and coat, looking as shabby as I could. Leaning against the side of the house, staring into the plate glass window, gazing at a suit of clothes, I was accosted by a policeman. I drawled out, 'Good evenin', Mr. Poleeshman. Nish night, ain' it? Thash a good-lookin' shuit o'clothes. Ain' it, Mr. Poleeshman?’”

“Yes. Looks all right.”

“You reckon it'll fit me, my friend?”

“Possibly so, but I didn't come here to discuss clothes with you. You're drunk and going to get into trouble, old man. I'll have to arrest you.”

“Arrest me? No, shir, I ain' drunk. You got the wrong man. I ain' even had a drink. I sure ain' drunk, Cap'n.”

“Oh, yes you are drunk and you know it. Consider yourself under arrest,” as he placed his hand on my shoulder.

Library of Congress

“At this moment, the chief stepped from 'round the corner, and, addressing the newly appointed policeman said, 'Jim, the man ain't drunk.

11

He's a Baptist preacher; let him go. This is a frame-up; we're just giving you a try-out.”

“Why, Chief, I'll be darned if he ain't drunk. Yes, sir. He's a drunk man, if ever I saw one. Why, I smell whiskey on his breath. I know he's drunk.”

“I pulled a good one on the Methodist preacher recently. Carroll's a very matter-of-fact sort of fellow, you know. I dialed his number one morning early, and the conversation went like this:

“Is dis Reverent Carroll? Reverent, does you ever marry folks? Marry colored folks?”

“Oh, yes, I very often marry Negroes. Why?”

“Well, Reverent, me and [Lisa?] done decided las' night to get ma'ied in de mornin'; and we'll be 'round dere about 8 o'clock. Yaas, sir, 'bout 8 o'clock, Boss.’

“Now, John, if you want me to marry you, you better be here exactly at eight, for I'm going to take my wife to a meeting about that time.’

“All right, sir, Boss. Us'll be dere 'zactly at 8 o'clock.”

Then Mr. Wiley changed from dialect to his customary speech.

“Oh, say, Carroll, this is Wiley. When is that union meeting going to be?”

“Here, here. Somebody's using this phone. I was talking to a Negro about marrying him.’

“I just have to have some fun every now and then. I can't allow myself to think too seriously about the problems of life. Recreation? Well, now you've got me. No recreation and no

Library of Congress

hobbies. The children and their mother play Chinese Checkers and other games at night and ride bicycles in 12 the afternoon. But there's only one thing I enjoy doing, and that's shooting pool. Oh, I do love it. Sometimes I think I will get me a table, put it in the attic, and when I can't stand the strain any longer, sneak off up there and shoot pool. Gee, I'd love it. Wouldn't be any harm, would it?"

When Mrs. Wiley laughingly reminded him that he has a hobby, his Dodge car, he added, "That's the truth. I'm crazy about my car and do love to drive it. While talking in a group of men recently, one of the fellows said that reminded him that he wanted to be buried in his Austin. I told him he'd better swap it in for a Dodge before he went, for if he happened to find himself where he didn't want to stay, his Austin wouldn't get him out fast enough.

"I think I'm a pretty cooperative sort of fellow. And the fact that I was converted in a Presbyterian Church, under the preaching of a Methodist Evangelist, and became a Baptist preacher proves it. Don't you think so? I had always gone to church in a sort of half-hearted way, and somewhere, deep down in my soul, I had felt that I wanted to preach. So this experience in the Presbyterian Church settled that, and I struck out for the Baptist Seminary at Louisville Kentucky. Left Alice and the children living in a mill house at Lockhart. I stayed there two years and came out owing \$1500. I was sent to Lynchburg, Virginia, to build a church. Took my family with me out there. But after three months, I decided the time wasn't ripe for building. However, I got me a job in the mill out there, and we made expenses. Then a call came for me to go to the Northside Baptist Church in Rock Hill, South Carolina. There had been dissension in the church, and 13 I found eight members on the roll. The only salary I had for three months was the loose collections I received each Sunday, usually \$6 or \$8. Then the deacons fixed my salary at \$1500, and they paid me full salary for the salary increased to \$1,900. After staying there nine years, I moved over to West End, where I stayed for four years at a salary of \$2,200. Our next call came from Columbia, and these folks have already put up with me for ten years."

"And you are responsible for this nice new parsonage, I presume?"

Library of Congress

“Yes, we built it at a cost of \$4,500, and no debt on it. It's got nine rooms.”

“The church building and those temporary Sunday School rooms are awful, but we've already paid \$1,000 for some lots on the corner, and \$7,000 has been collected for a \$30,000 new plant. We're going to begin work on it pretty soon.”

“You don't have any financial worries with a salary of \$2,600 now, I reckon?”

“Well, if I do, it's my fault. As soon as I get my check, we take out a tenth. Been tithing eighteen years. The balance is divided equally between me and my partner over there. We both have [?]. She takes care of the household bills, and I care for insurance premiums, doctors' bills and the things like that. She beats me a little saving. She's pretty thrifty. There are lots of extra demands on a preacher's pocketbook. I'm going this afternoon to take two pounding to two families. She moved in here from Charlotte, North Carolina, without friends, money, or a job. Then there's a poor woman over here dying with a cancer, and she's in dire 14 need of help. Lord, Lord, folks do have such a hard time.

“I'm moderator of the Baptist Association, Red Cross Chairman for the county, President of the Temperance Club, and President of the [?] Club. This is my honor [?]. All these things take money. I have an annuity insurance policy and a retirement insurance, on both of which I'm paying a little more than \$100 a year. I figure [?] a year for car expense, and I think it costs me that.”

A tall, thin, handsome young fellow [?][?] without formally knocking at the door. His brown eyes fairly sparkled as he talked. He was nicely dressed in a dark suit. “This is Billy, Jr., our oldest child,” his father told me.

“Oh, yes, there's a madam. I've been married [?] years. She was Jane Moore. We like married life pretty well. No divorce anticipated yet,” Billy said as he laughed, showing a set of pearly white teeth. “[?][?] she could find would be low finances, and she's been satisfied so far. I think it'll last all right. I wish she had come over with me, but she's working to-day.

Library of Congress

We have an apartment, and she finds it's too taxing to work all day. So she works at the notion counter in the 10 cent store in the afternoons. Given her spending money. She's buying furniture with some of it. I've agreed to give her every dime that comes into my hands, and her bank account will be bigger than mine before very long, I believe. These women somehow know better than we men how to [?][?] of the [?]."

Mrs. Wiley explained that Billy, Jr., had come in to see Mrs. Ford on business, and they went across the hall into the kitchen. She told us that Billy, Jr., graduated from high school and immediately [?][?] with the Jewel Box at a salary of \$25 a week. Billy, Jr., is [?] of 15 the junior department in Sunday School, and both she and Daisy teach in that department.

The Wileys do not keep a servant, and Mrs. Wiley doesn't have time to do as much church work as she would really like to do. In recent years they do not try to have a garden. Fresh vegetables come to the door every day, and are cheaper, perhaps, than can be grown. But Mrs. Wiley tries to give her family a balanced diet, fresh vegetables and fruits, meats, milk and butter. The parsonage is too near the church to keep a cow.

"Judging by the size of mother and me, you'd guess we get enough to eat, wouldn't you? I weigh about 160 pounds.

Her mother, who had sat rather quietly throughout the visit, jokingly said she couldn't 'tend to herself, much less the rest of the family, and so she had said little. "You want to know my age, I guess? How old do I look? The doctor told me to quit having birthdays, but when I did have one, I was 72, and tipped the scales at 200 pounds."

"You seem about as temperamental as your son-in-law," I observed.

"Temperamental? I reckon that's a good substitute for the word. I overdo the temper part of it all right. Lowsy me, I've got a temper. Makes me sick for a week to get mad. Ever fight? Law, child, I've pretty nigh killed a few. But this is graveyard talk. You don't know how I do

Library of Congress

love folks and what I'll do for the very ones that make me so mad. I just lose my temper every now and then.”

Realizing the hour for his appointment was past due, I thanked Mr. Wiley for a pleasant visit. “Before you go I must show you our Indian pottery water jug. You see it has two handles, which makes it very easy to handle. Yes, we, too, think it's beautiful. When I was a pastor at Rock Hill, I ran out twice a month to the Catawba Indian Reservation to preach to those folks. The city nurse and I did some social service work with those people.

“There was a big, burly Indian living 'way out almost beyond the border of civilization. He had a very sick baby once, and we went out there and saved its life by taking it to the hospital. Pretty soon he had some serious trouble with his shoulder. We heard about that and brought him in to Rock Hill to the hospital. When we were taking him home over the cross-country road, we passed a farmer on the right of the road. The nurse and patient sat on the front seat, and both Miss McCowan and I observed that the Indian Chief raised his arm and turned completely 'round as we passed the man.

“Why did you change your position just now?” the nurse asked him. “Does your shoulder hurt worse?”

In his broken English, he explained that the countryman was very provoked when they put the road on his land and every now and again took a notion to shoot up somebody. He waited for us to be his targets that day, and when the Indian friend saw his pistol, he turned to shield Miss McCowan from the blow and to receive it himself. The nurse was very much touched by this act of appreciation. The [jug?] is his expression of thanks to me.”