

[Always Flowers]

No. 1

Approximately 2,600 words

71 C. Revises By Author SOUTH CAROLINA WRITERS' PROJECT

LIFE HISTORY

TITLE: ALWAYS FLOWERS

Date of First Writing January 7, 1939

Name of Person Interviewed Charles L. Sligh (white)

Fictitious Name Jason C. Noye

Street Address 1707 Heyward Street

Place Columbia, S. C.

Occupation Florist

Name of Writer S. M. Scruggs

Name of Reviser State Office

“My wife jokes me about my wearing a fresh red carnation on the lapel of my coat every day, by saying I do so to show my customers that I practice what I preach. But she knows it's my love of flowers that accounts for my habit.” And Charles L. Sligh smiled and looked at his bouquet.

“Oh, well, why not a life story?” mused Mr. Sligh. “But mine has been the life of a plodder. It is not in any sense a spectacular career to date, nor yet one with sinister climaxes. My relations have been exceedingly friendly with sheriffs and policemen, which is equal to saying that mine is the life of a country boy who came to town and lifted himself into a little business by tugging at his own bootstraps.

“I was born on my father's plantation in Newberry County, South Carolina, on May 17, 1884. There I spent my childhood and early youth. In The autumn and winter I attended the old field public school, and in the spring and summer I worked on the farm, hoeing corn, chopping cotton, setting out yellow yam sweet potato plants, and, in short, all such tasks as arise on a country plantation. Father and the entire Sligh family was industrious, and our farm was a good one, but crops were just as uncertain as any business I know about. Beginning in 1888, there were several lean years on our farm.

“Sometimes our cotton was cut short by lack of rain just when the plants needed moisture. And in other years there was too much rain, and the plant would bush, but bear few bolls. Cotton was our chief money crop, and if it failed, we were pressed about paying taxes, or buying clothes and shoes. And other crops such as corn and potatoes failed because of weather conditions. One example may illustrate the point. The summer before we quit the farm, a great wind and hail storm came along when our corn was just beginning to tassel. After the storm passed, father and I went to see how the crop had stood it. The sight sickened us. Much of the corn had been broken, and the rest, though still rooted and whole, was as flat as a pancake.

“Sorrowfully we viewed the ruins of a crop which had looked so vigorous 3 and promising the night before. Nothing could be done about it so late in the season. Toil, money for fertilizer, and hopes were gone with the wind and the hail. The Irish potatoes, too, were short, due to lady bugs on the vines. In fact, that year, every crop was cut by drought, rain at the wrong time, or storm. We were a blue family as winter began to approach. Debts

Library of Congress

began to press us for payment, and we had nothing to sell to raise the amounts we so badly needed. The old joke about letting the other fellow do the worrying is not funny to the man who wishes to treat his fellow man in the same spirit as he would have the other fellow treat him.

“The situation I am describing was our experience in 1898, and similar lean years had been pretty common to farmers in Newberry County. Weather conditions are one of the gambles the farmer has to deal with any year. The disaster of 1898, though, is typical of average seasons.

“That winter I heard my parents seriously discuss the subject of quitting the farm. One night, as we were seated before a rousing wood fire, Father said, 'Mama, I have been thinking of leaving the farm and engaging in something that is less uncertain about making a living.'

“Mama replied, without stopping her knitting, 'But, Papa, there is a hazard to most everything. I'm reminded of it by an experience I had when I was a little girl. We had a water mill, and ground corn and wheat for the neighborhood. We could hear the water falling over the embankment from the house. One day, after a long rainy spell, my mother told me to run down to the mill under the hill and see if everything was all right. I did. The mill was not there, and I was so excited I ran all the way home and shouted: “Mother, it's all gone but the dam!”’

“After the laughter subsided, following Mother's story, Father rejoined:

4

'But, Mother, I'm not aiming to engage in the mill business. Instead of that, I think a well-conducted grocery store in a populous community ought to support our family. I think I know a locality in Columbia where the trade ought to be brisk. If I were running it, my plan

Library of Congress

would be to trust in God, but all others should pay cash, or the goods would remain on the shelf.'

"That plan sounds safe,' said Mother, 'but I wonder if we can sell the farm for enough cash to pay our debts and still have sufficient money to get properly settled in business at the capital city.'

"The Sligh farm was up for sale the next day. That satisfactory counsel around the old home fire had convinced every one of us that change of base was a proper economic step. As soon as our crude 'For-Sale' sign was up, a buyer came to see us. There was at that time a man in the community who owned vast forests of timber and great acreage, and he always appeared to have money. He said he heard the [Sligh?] farm was for sale and he decided to ride over and take dinner and discuss the sale, adding, 'I hear you're quitting the farm to practice law.'

"Father replied he would sell the best farm in Newberry County for a fair price, but he saw no reason to put in the comedy about him quitting the farm to practice law. Dinner interrupted the bargaining, and afterward the investor and Father sat and smoked and dickered until nightfall. Meantime, the visitor's horse had twice been fed. Supper was served, and soon the visitor put up a sum of money, to be forfeited if he failed to close the deal at the court house in Lexington next day. The price Father received for the farm was, perhaps, less than it would bring today, but it was considered a pretty good price then.

"Soon afterward, the Sligh family was busy packing and loading the household goods, and in selling hogs, horses, and cattle. In the month of January, 1899, we were in Columbia, searching for a house to live in and a building to open a grocery store in. I think we remained at a boarding house only two weeks, before we began the game of living in a big town and doing business where competition in all commercial lines was keen and brisk.

Library of Congress

“Father was pretty long-headed, and he was also determined to succeed. He never failed to tell a customer that he was not financially able to extend credit and that his safety required that he either keep his goods or pocket the cash. Operated on this sound principle, the store began to prosper. The Sligh family lived, to a great extent, on foods from our store. And the cash sales were usually sufficient to pay for our goods and to assure a surplus for clothing and other necessary needs. [??]

“The three big, over-sized [Sligh?] Noye boys and their two sisters had plenty of good, wholesome food, but we had practically no spending money, like most of our boy and girl acquaintances had.

“We boys helped father at the store and picked up small change at other tasks elsewhere when we got a chance. The grocery store, with plenty of competition, just wouldn't support the family in any sort of luxury. And I, for one, was not prone to complain to Father about my lack of spending money. The struggles we had on the plantation, and later in Columbia, may have been blessings in disguise. Anyhow, when we began to scratch for our own living, we knew the importance of money, and none of us wasted it.

“My two brothers are now doing pretty well. Toole is manager of the Studebaker Automobile Agency in Columbia. Our kid brother, J. E. [Sligh?], is an engineer of the South Carolina Highway Department. My two sisters are both happily married. They are Mrs. H. C. Tate, of Hendersonville, North 6 Carolina, and Mrs. P. A. Hodges, of Columbia.

“My business brings in an income of about \$2,500 a year. Only the other day my oldest brother, Toole, was reminding me about how I acted when I began my first job at the Stork greenhouses in Columbia, in 1904. I began work for fifty cents a day. The duties of the job included keeping the heat at a certain temperature in the winter and giving the proper amount of moisture to certain expensive flowers. All told, I think I earned my fifty cents a day.

Library of Congress

“It takes years of physical and mental labor to gain sufficient knowledge of flowers to make any sort of success in the florist business. The flower is a characteristic feature of the highest group of the plant kingdom. Flowers of commerce are produced from flower buds, just as leaf shoots arise from leaf buds. These two kinds of buds have a resemblance to each other as regards the arrangements and the development of their parts. Flower buds, like leaf buds, are produced in the axial leaves, which are called bracts. This is what I mean by the statement that it is no easy job to acquire proficient knowledge of the florist business. For eight years I studied, experimented, and worked at the Stork greenhouses. Even then, I knew little about flower culture. The constant bending of one's back in this work, however, makes one feel at night like he had put in a day's work. My wages increased at Stork's as my efficiency progressed, but I never did get as much as probably one would today. I was proud of my three dollars that I had earned the first week at Stork's. Over the years there, I carried away on several Saturday nights more than three dollars, but I never got the same thrill from them. The fact that a youngster can earn money is always thrilling to him at the 7 start; at least, that was my experience.

“In 1911, the idea came to me that, to succeed, a man should own his own business, even if it were nothing but a peanut stand. So I quit at Stork's and began to look around for something I could make a living at. I had heard Father say many times that 'a shoemaker should stick to his last.' I had given eight years of my life to flower culture, and I decided to follow the old rule about 'sticking to the last' by beginning a florist business in a small way. I had no ready cash to speak of. I was fond of the girls and a great deal of my wages had already faded along that trail.

“One day I explained matters to a friend. He loaned me \$20 to aid me in the starting. And I began business in a cubbyhole space in Thomas' Drug Store, for which I paid him three dollars a week rental. The Thomas Drug Store was in the 1600 block of Main Street in 1912. The success I had at the start pleased me. I soon paid my friend his \$20, and sales were so good and regular that I lived and increased my business. The cubbyhole

Library of Congress

space was now too small for me, and I rented a six -dollar space at Miot's Drug Store at 1430 Main Street. In a year or two the space again became too small, and I leased these quarters in the Imperial Hotel, where I am doing business now.

“Orders for flowers arrive regularly from hotels, hospitals, funerals, and weddings. These are frequently very expensive designs. In addition to these sales, there are orders from many private social gatherings and banquets. This normal demand increased tremendously in 1917, soon after troops began to mobilize at Camp Jackson for training. By the spring of 1918, when there were between 40,000 and 50,000 men and officers at Camp Jackson, the influenza epidemic was taking a heavy death toll. The demand for flowers frequently was so great that all the florists in this community exhausted their supply 8 daily. Prices of everything were very high then, and I made money rapidly.

“This florist business is one of the few industries that goes right along, I might say, regardless of economic conditions. The reason is that deaths, marriages, and hospitals function right along whether business is dull or brisk. Many floral designs are ordered by patients at three hospitals here in Columbia. Also couples who get married don't count the cost; and when death knocks at the door, even if the family is a humble one, flowers are in demand. The florists kaleidoscope discloses a regularity of sales unknown in some other business channels.

“Married? Yes. But not until late in life, 1925. It took me a long time to learn a trade, and a longer time to win a wife. Between the ages of 18 and 40, I often fell in love with a pair of pretty eyes, a classy form, or a charming manner. But I never pressed a case to a climax, until I met Miss Eva Greishaber, a pretty girl of German parentage. She captivated me completely. And what a courtship we had for some years! I thought I knew a good deal about women, but I didn't. I guess I don't know enough about them yet to hurt me.

“Miss Greishaber and I fought it out for many years before she surrendered. She and I would attend theatres and dine together. We would attend church, or picnics, but she

Library of Congress

appeared always ready to let it go at that. One January day, Eva came to my flower store, where we joked and talked for sometime. As she got ready to go, she said she had come to buy half a dozen rosebuds. I always told her she could pick her choice here without pay.

“I went ahead and fixed up a beautiful and costly bouquet and presented it to her with my most courtly bow. She took it, smiled sweetly, and departed. Shortly afterwards, I was busy at the desk and discovered a \$10-bill. I told her about it and she laughed. Then she said: 'You are so careless I wonder why you don't go broke.' The money obviously was hers, but she wouldn't take it. She knew the value of resebuds in January as well as I did. It was in late summer that year that I fully made up my mind to either win Eva as a wife or lose her altogether.

“I thought of several plans but finally discarded them all but the sympathy route. So I dolled up in a new suit, with a very fresh red carnation on the coat lapel, and skipped around to Eva's home. She greeted me enthusiastically, as usual. After we were seated in the parlor, I began to tell her what a dismal failure I was. Among other things I said: 'I'm ashamed of myself, and I'm going out to Texas and carve a fortune there. If I fail there, as here, I can still walk to a bridge and jump, saying as I fall, “Here goes nothing!”’

“Eva had listened with sympathetic eyes and a sardonic smile. As I finished my foolish talk, she said: 'Charles, you are ill, I'm afraid. What sort of a fortune do you expect to gain in Texas by talking like a parrot and acting like a monkey? For years I have passed up chances of marriage with other young men and have stuck to you alone. Now you threaten to walk out on me. You know you are the only man I have ever loved and so what—'

“The scene that followed has been hazy to me since, but I'm told I grabbed Eva in my arms and poured out my heart to her in love. The very next day, August 17, 1925, we were married. We bought a pretty home at 1707 Heyward Street, Columbia, and we reside there now. We have continued to be pals, just like we were in the days before our marriage.

Library of Congress

"I am a member of the National Florists Association, and through this organization the business code is ironed out so that we serve each other about 10 as efficiently as the international postal system does. For example, some one in London, England, or Winnepeg, Canada, or Seattle, Washington, wishes to send a floral design to some one in Columbia. They notify me in code, and I fill the order.

"Knowing the greater expense of producing flowers, I have preferred to purchase them. I buy from the Shandon Greenhouse, a local wholesale florist concern. It furnishes me most of my supply. But in case I desire a special design that the local dealer doesn't have in stock, I get it from similar dealers in Florida, New York, or Montreal, Canada. Express service generally answers, but if greater speed is needed, the package comes by airplane.

"For many years I have been a member of the Elks lodge (B.P.O.E.) in Columbia. I am also a member of Richland Lodge No. 59 (A.F.M.) and Scottish Rite bodies in Columbia, and of Omar Shrine Temple at Charleston. My wife and I are members of Ebenezer Lutheran Church.

"So my life has run through more than half a century, with plenty of struggle, but with more [?] satisfaction of knowing that I have merited [?] the good will and respect of my neighbors and business associates as I passed along."

MCB