

CHAPTER VII

ST. JAMES CHURCH, SOUTH NORFOLK

Duplicate

Rev. Berry had attended the 48th session of the Virginia Annual Conference April 22 to 26, 1914, at Mt. Zion A.M.E. Church in Roanoke. He had received his appointment from Bishop Levi J. Coppin for the St. James Church in South Norfolk. This town was an extended community of Berkley, the eighth ward of the City of Norfolk. The Church was located just at the dividing line between Norfolk and South Norfolk. The line extended along the right-of-way of the Norfolk-Portsmouth Belt Line railroad. The parsonage faced the railroad tracks.

Pop spent two nights and a day at the parsonage with the retiring minister, whose family was in preparation for moving to another Charge. We shall never forget Pop's graphic description that he recited about his dramatic and startling experience during this visit. After he had been asleep for about an hour on the first night there, he heard a sudden loud and jolting noise. He jumped out of the bed in his flannel nightgown and dashed toward the door. The whole house was trembling. The noise was deafening, and lightning-like flashes of light lit up the room. Through Pop's frightened mind ran the thought, "This must be a hurricane!" A tropical storm with overtones of thundering and lightning, or more likely, this was suddenly "Judgment Day" that I have been reading and preaching about so fervently for years!"

The five long frightful minutes seemed like several years to Pop. Finally, the long and short whistle overtones revealed the truth of the maddening experience -- a passing freight train. This could have literally been the setting which had inspired the song entitled, "The Railroad Ran Thru the Middle of the House." Pop vowed he would never move his family into this parsonage.

He met his official board that next night and described his experiences.

He announced that his wife and family were all packed and ready to move, but . . .

"Gentlemen," stated Rev. Berry prophetically, "I have five young and vigorous children, who are so active that I am afraid they could never survive so close to that railroad track."

J. E. Fulford, a mailcarrier and young trustee in the Church, rose and concurred,

"Brethren, some of us have known for a long time that the kind of minister that St. James wants to develop her potentialities probably would not accept ~~gracefully~~ ^{graciously} the parsonage which we now own. You all heard the Rev. Berry preach when he visited our Church a couple of months before the Annual Conference. I headed your committee that waited on Bishop Coppin to ask for him. We like his vigor and progressive spirit. I believe that with his leadership St. James can do anything it wants to do."

This was followed by "Amen" from several members.

"Is it true that the Church owns the old Bray school lot on St. James Street just beyond the park?" Rev. Berry inquired.

"Yes," said Brother Miles Simmons. "It is bought and paid for. We burned the mortgage on that lot four years ago, and the plan is to tear down the unused wooden school building and erect a church there some day."

"The lot is really big enough for a church and a parsonage," chimed in Brother Noah Painter.

The next week the Berry family unloaded their huge packing crates, which had become a standard fixture in the itinerant family of Rev. L. L. Berry, follower of John Wesley and Richard Allen. The new address was Todd Street, South Norfolk, Virginia. Shade trees lined the walk in front of #32 -- a two-story, eight-room house about six blocks from the Church. This was the rented parsonage, where we lived for nine months until we moved into the new parsonage, which had been built on the old Bray school lot.

It was a pretty, two-story, seven-room white house with green trim and outside window blinds called shutters. The living room, dining room, kitchen, and front and rear porches made up the first floor. Three bedrooms, a study, a bathroom, and a rear porch were on the second floor. There was running cold water only, which had to be cut off before the ground level on winter nights to keep it from freezing. The rooms were heated by coal stoves, which Dick and I polished every Saturday afternoon. I remember the convenient scuttle of anthracite coal and small shovel behind the stove because it was the daily chore of the two older boys to keep up the supply of hard fuel from the storage bin outside. Ashes had to be sifted on week-ends, for they were to be used in banking the fires at night.

The new parsonage at #46 St. James Street was two blocks beyond the city limits of Norfolk's eighth ward community known as Berkley and within the township of South Norfolk. Because of this, we had to attend the inferior Waterford Elementary School two miles away rather than the sixteen-room Abraham Lincoln School of the Norfolk system only one-half mile to the north.

South Norfolk was a tough little town in 1914, with streets of cobblestones or tar and gravel. Twenty per cent of the population were Negroes, who lived mostly in the northern end toward Norfolk. Eighty per cent were mostly the type known by Negroes and whites alike as "poor white trash". Consequently, there always seemed to be an abundance of vagrant, loud talking, poorly dressed white men standing or sitting in front of the little business places along the principal street. Their chief occupation, other than drawling chatter which we never stopped long enough to understand, was to whittle bits of wood with long pocket knives and to spit tobacco juice out on the sidewalk.

Here and there along Liberty Street, the main thoroughfare, there were barrooms, as they were called then, with swinging half doors. As these doors swung in or out to admit a customer, one could catch a fleeting glimpse of men standing with one foot on a rail. Sawdust was scattered on the floor, and here and there strate^{gi}cally placed shining brass spittoons were seen attended by a Negro porter. Occasionally, a man would reel out of the barroom, stepping high and uncoordinately, as though he were walking in a darkened room and could not find the door. The most conspicuous evidence of work among these white citizens would be seen when the six o'clock mill whistle blew and several dozens of women and a few men rushed out of the factory door and were homeward bound. The men usually carried dinner pails, and the women workers were unmistakable because of the white lint that littered their brown stringy hair and clung to their thick brown cotton stockings.

One day when Pop had walked half way to school to meet us, he ran into Professor A. J. J. Sykes, Principal of Waterford School.

"Hello, Rev. Berry. If I had known you were going to meet your children today, I would have gone directly to Campestello."

"Good afternoon, Professor Sykes. It is good to see you. I have been meeting the children every day this week. However, getting to school in the mornings seems to be the problem now."

Pop was referring to the fact that we often had to fight our way through the poor white neighborhood to get to the colored school. A favorite pastime of some of the young adult men was to detain the white boys enroute to their school and have them block the sidewalk as the colored children attempted to pass. We could either force ourselves past the blockade and be pounced upon by a platoon of adult exponents of southern chivalry, or we could walk out in the street to the tune of their jeers and shouts of laughter and thus

establish an admission of the so-called "Negro's place."

"We have had trouble, Reverend, off and on during the entire five years that I have been Principal." It used to be that several men and older boys would gang one of our children, tear their clothes and throw their books out into the street, slap their faces, call them 'black niggers', and send them to school crying -- often with a bloody nose or a swollen face. These incidents have been reported to the sheriff's office, but they have steadfastly refused to interfere. Since the beginning of this term the colored children have been meeting before they reach ^{Rodgers'} store on Liberty Street Extended, where they are usually molested. I have only heard of one group free-for-all this year."

"Yes," Rev. Berry concurred, "I know the pattern. Those ruffians rarely attack man for man. It is usually a group assault on one lone boy or girl. It is the same story, many against one, whether it is a school fight in Virginia, a lynching in Mississippi, or a Ku Klux Klan maneuver in Georgia."

"I suppose you have already heard about the colored girl who stabbed the white boy a few days ago?" inquired Principal Sykes.

"Yes," Rev. Berry encouraged him indulgently, "what about that?"

"Well, the girl came dashing into the school all out of breath and almost hysterical, having run a distance of three or four blocks. She showed me a bloodstained half of a four-inch pair of seamstress's scissors. She admitted that she had stabbed the hand of a white boy, who had molested her, and that she had been carrying the instrument in her coatpocket all of the term for protecting herself.

"The victim's father came to the school later with the boy's hand being ~~carried~~ conspicuously bandaged and carried in a sling. The father demanded to see the girl. We produced her, and had the two explain what had

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happened. The girl told her story straight. The boy, however, had obviously gone out of his way to molest the girl and told a confused and inconsistent tale of woe. The father became disgusted with his son, and chastized him then took him home."

A few weeks later Dick and I were pushed off the sidewalk, and our books were scattered on the ground. My prize geography with its colored maps was thus smeared in the mud. Since parents purchased school books in that day, I knew I could not expect to get another one. There was no fight, not because we were preacher's kids. As a matter of fact, we had been known to tackle our weight with reputable fierceness when belligerently molested, but we didn't fight back when the opposition was a platoon of boys and men outnumbering us *stop* whether they were black, white or "yellow". We did, however, report the incident to Pop. We had not at that tender age learned of the courage of our Dad except in a pulpit fight against the devil or in spanking us when we were wrong or seemed to be but we were about to witness the righteous indignation of the Rev. L. L. Berry reaching its boiling point and to foresee what we now review in retrospect as a man of God who never picked a fight but who during fifty-five years of life in the ministry never ran from one.

The next morning bright and early Pop escorted us enroute to school past the white gang in front of Rodgers' store without incident and went directly to the office of the Justice of the Peace.

"Mr. Cuthrell, your Honor, I am Rev. Berry, the minister of St. James Church."

"Yes, Parson. What do you need?"