

My Personal Column

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By Will Shepherd

THE NEW BONNY OAKS

Last Sunday afternoon I sat beneath the age old oak trees on the spacious lawns of Bonny Oaks and listened with a good deal of interest to the unfolding of a program that was impressive, beautiful and well worth while. During the hour preceding the program I was introduced to a brand new Bonny Oaks, one far different from the Bonny Oaks that I knew what I was growing up on my father's farm, and a Bonny Oaks that I afterwards knew when it was purchased by Hamilton County for the purpose of the establishment of a "reform school." If my memory serves me correctly, that was the original purpose when the county purchased the property now some forty years ago. Bonny Oaks of today, through the efficient leadership on the part of my good friends Dr. and Mrs. Keese and their faithful assistants, and I know every one of them, Bonny Oaks is not a reform school in any sense of the word. There is no evidence of such an institution as the casual visitor walks around the spacious grounds, through the old mansion house and into the dormitories of both the boys and the girls, both white and colored, and sees the happy children at play or at work. It can hardly be classed as a "corrective institution." True, when the children are sent there, they probably can be classed as "under privileged," but once they are there they immediately become "privileged children" rather than under privileged.

I have a peculiar interest in this institution. I remember Bonny Oaks before it became a county institution, and since then I have known it through the years of the changing administrations. Since Dr. and Mrs. Keese have been in charge, it has been my happy privilege upon numerous occasions to visit them in their home, in the school and the other departments. I have watched the progress of the institution, and know that the people of Chattanooga and Hamilton county should appreciate the work that is going on daily at Bonny Oaks.

ONCE HOME OF CAPT. C. S. PEAKE

As I sat there Sunday afternoon I could not keep the pages of my memory from going back to the days when Bonny Oaks was the home of Capt. C. S. Peake, who was a friend of my father and mother; of my visits there when I was in my swaddling clothes. The same old oak trees that were there in those days are there today, just as beautiful. But it is a far different Bonny Oaks now than it was then. The Southern Railroad had a station there called "Jersey," which I think has long been abandoned. My father's farm, on a part of which I now live, was immediately across the railroad tracks from Bonny Oaks. Our old home place, where my brother Quintus now lives, is hardly more than a mile from Bonny Oaks! As a kid I have played "fox and hound" and followed the white paper trail more than a single time all over our farm and the adjacent farm across the railroad to Bonny Oaks. I thought of those early days in my rather ordinary existence and felt somewhat proud of myself to rate an invitation to attend the dedication services Sunday

The place was occupied by the county I think in 1898, and as a youngster I remember the deep interest manifested by the late Dr. J. W. Bachman, J. S. Bell, Maj. C. D. McGuffey, who are now deceased, and by my fine present day friend Esquire L. W. Bates. Sunday noon at a sumptuous dinner served by the girls of Bonny Oaks it was my pleasure to be assigned to a seat next to Esquire Bates and during the course of the dinner he and I enjoyed a visit during which we were able to recall the early days of Bonny Oaks.

Bonny Oaks stands today as an institution almost by itself. There is no other one of its exact character that I have ever visited or read about. The residents of the home—they used to call them "inmates," but not now—are carried through the grammar school grades in a well equipped school on the grounds. The graduates from this grammar school attend the Tyner High School, and it is a remarkable record that the Bonny Oaks boys and girls have made in high school. They every one of them excel in scholastic attainments and in deportment as well. I read with interest in the printed paper handed out Sunday afternoon of the letters that have been received by Dr. and Mrs. Keese from their boys and girls who have gone out from the institution. In this paper likewise was a story written under the title, "Bonny Oaks' Fortieth Anniversary." It was interesting to me, and maybe interesting to others, and I want to include it here:

"Bonny Oaks' Fortieth Anniversary

"The statute authorizing the establishment of institutions like Bonny Oaks was enacted by the General Assembly in 1895. It was modeled after the best laws then found to be in operation. Dr. J. W. Bachman had led in the investigation of laws in other states.

The County Court lost very little time, and in January, 1896, passed resolutions requesting Honorable John A. Moor, then judge of the circuit court, and Chancellor T. M. McConnell to appoint four citizens, as provided by the law, who with the county judge would serve as trustees. Dr. J. W. Bachman, Esquire L. W. Bates, Mr. J. S. Bell, and Mrs. C. D. McGuffey were named.

Mr. J. S. Bell and Esquire Bates, as a committee, investigated a great many locations and finally, upon the insistence of Esquire Bates, decided upon the present site, the Capt. Peake farm. This was in January, 1898. Mr. J. C. Kalleen, the first superintendent, opened the institution in February, 1898. His family occupied the Peake home, the present administration building, which was also used as a dormitory for the boys and housed the school. His daughter, the present Mrs. Claude Sprague, was the first teacher. The farm contained two hundred and fifty acres.

In July, 1899, the late Z. C. Patten purchased from Dr. J. M. Trimble his home and one hundred thirty-five acres of land adjoining Bonny Oaks and deeded it to the county as a home for girls. Some years later, Mr. Patten established a trust fund in which Bonny Oaks shares. The proceeds from this fund are used in assisting outstanding and worthy girls in further educational advantages.

The Trimble home was used as a dormitory for girls until 1913, when the county built the brick dormitory now standing, known as the Z. C. Patten Home for Girls. Similarly, the administration building had been used for boys until the boys' dormitory was built by the county in 1910. The little white chapel, known as the Scott Hyde Memorial.