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chapter 1

Before the Rock Pile

Sanford Yoder—little Paul’s father—had once been an active and curious little boy just like Paul. Born in Hutchinson, Kansas, on June 17, 1930, Sanford moved with his family to Nowata, Oklahoma, when he was two years old. There the family survived the Depression, and Sanford learned the ways of the West. His teenage dream was to become a cowboy.

Sanford’s family moved to Stuarts Draft, Virginia, when he was fifteen. He knew no other life than that of a hardworking Amish family. When he was sixteen, he was baptized into the Amish church, but he had not been born again.

During those tough years, Sanford rode an unruly horse named Pedro. As Sanford grew older and his ways got more unruly, his friends nicknamed him after his horse. But at eighteen years of age, the Lord got a hold of “Pedro” and he was genuinely converted. He became Sanford again.

Sanford married an Amish girl named Martha, whose family had moved from Delaware to Stuarts Draft when she was eleven. They started doing what most Amish families do for a living: farming. But when Sanford was drafted to serve in the army, things changed. As a conscientious objector, rather than serve in the military, he volunteered for alternative service at Brook Lane Farm, a mental hospital in Maryland. During that time they had their first child, Sanford Timothy.

Home on the Rock Pile

After returning to Stuarts Draft, Sanford and Martha had two more boys—Philip and Mark. During that time, they left the Amish church and joined the Amish Mennonite (Beachy) church. Later they joined a mission outreach in Aroda, Virginia. After they moved to the new area, Sanford was ordained a minister.

While in Aroda, Martha was expecting another child. After three boys, she thought it would be nice if the next baby were a girl. When they announced, “Another boy!” Martha couldn’t help but be a little disappointed. But she would love the little boy just as much as if he had been a little girl. She had no way of knowing that little Paul would turn out to be the child most like her dear, adventurous husband.

Later, while still in Aroda, Martha finally got her little girl. They named her Judy. She and little Paul were inseparable.

Then the Lord of the Harvest prompted the Aroda church to start a mission outreach. They prayed and wondered where they would start it. During that time, Lester Lamb began attending the church. He had lived in Greene County, up in the Blue Ridge Mountains. He suggested that they investigate in the mountains. Sanford and Lester were chosen for the trip.

They drove into the mountains, snaking their way along the curvy dirt roads, stopping at the houses along the way. In the homes they visited, they read the Bible and prayed with the mountain people. When they topped a ridge between Bruce Hollow and Shifflet’s Hollow, the two men noticed a little road turning up toward the mountain’s edge. A little sign pointing up the road read “Saint Anne’s Preventorium.”

“What’s that?” Sanford asked.

“Let’s go see,” Lester answered, swinging the car onto the little road.

They drove up the steep dirt road, wound around several more curves, topped the ridge, and parked in front of a stone building approximately three hundred feet long. Behind the building,

Before the Rock Pile

Loft Mountain jutted into the blue sky. Below them lay the valley, swaddled in noontime haze.



Saint Anne's Preventorium

Approaching the building, they were greeted by Miss Campbell, an Episcopalian deaconess. She wore a long veil, a blue uniform, and a cross around her neck. Smiling, she invited them in and was soon showing them the building and the grounds of Saint Anne's Preventorium, a home for handicapped children. The men were accompanied on the tour by the twenty-four children the facility provided for.

Sanford and Lester were touched when they saw the children, some without arms and others without feet, sitting in their wheelchairs. Little Jarves, who had neither hands nor feet, was pushed around in a wheelchair, his face always beaming. Behind the smile were an intelligent face and eyes that sparkled with life and mischief.

Before her visitors left, Miss Campbell mentioned that her church was planning to sell the place. They needed to move the

Home on the Rock Pile

children closer to Charlottesville so they could be near medical facilities.

After their visit, Lester and Sanford drove down into Shifflet's Hollow, passed the post office, and bumped across the bridge over Ivy Creek. Then they drove past an old water mill perched beside the creek with a barn on the other side of the road. A bushy-haired man leaned against an old board fence by the barn. He waved to Sanford and Lester when they passed, but he did not smile.

They swung around yet another curve and were captivated by a small white church house nestled among some spruce trees. Ivy Creek ran behind the little country church. "Let's check this place out," Lester suggested.

They backed their vehicle up to a house they had just passed. A man named Lester Morris invited them inside, and soon they were talking about the church in Shifflet's Hollow. To Lester and Sanford, Lester Morris's words sounded like those of the Macedonian in the Apostle Paul's vision. "No, no one holds services in dis chapel anymoe. It's a pity. It's such a nice little place called Shady Grove, but we ain't had any preachah for a long time."

"What church group used to own that building?" Sanford asked.

"The Brethren used to come across the mountain to bring the Gospel in dese hollows," Lester Morris explained. "Preachahs with long frock coats would come across on hawsback and preach in de homes. Dat's the way it started. After yeas of preachin', the communities built their own church buildin's, and you can find Brethren church houses in most a dese hollows."

"What happened to them?" Sanford asked.

"Well, it's kinda sad," Lester Morris answered. "The church wanted to consolidate and moved the parishes into de cities. A lot of folks were movin' out anyway. So de churches in de cities got big, and de little chapels in de backcountry got abandoned."

Before the Rock Pile

After Sanford and Lester shared their vision, Lester Morris got excited. "It would be so good to have a preachah 'round here again. And some good ol' Gospel preachin'. The neighbors would listen, so come on up here and preach de Word. If de shoe fits, we'll have to weah it!"

From that day on, Sanford could talk about nothing else. "Think of it, Martha, a community that surely has Christians in it, but no preacher. All we have to do is move there and everything is set. From day one we will have a chapel and a group of people to listen to the Gospel."

The Yoder boys often heard their daddy talk about the mission possibilities in the Virginia mountains. They never doubted his calling.

In August of 1961, the Aroda church started holding Sunday services in the Shady Grove church house. Sanford was chosen to pastor the little church. And just as Lester Morris had predicted, a lot of people came to hear good Gospel preaching.

So now the family needed to move. Shifflet's Hollow snaked its way deep into the mountain range and snuggled up to Skyline Drive. Sanford wasn't looking for a fancy place to live. He wanted to live like the mountain people. So when he found the Rock Pile, he felt it was the perfect place. Few houses were smaller or in poorer condition, and few farms were as overgrown or as neglected. Renting this farm, they would fit right in with the mountain people. The family moved into the little cabin in October.

The whitewashed cabin sat on a knoll surrounded by the towering Blue Ridge Mountains, a few trees, and many, many rocks. When standing at the cabin, you could count at least a hundred. Some were as big as a cow lying down, but most were the size of Martha's washtub.

Beside the cabin was the washhouse, a simple structure with walls of tin. On the other side of the house was an old shed, a