

Welcome to West Virginia



“How far is it yet, Father?” Anna Benner asked her husband wearily as the train puffed into the Hendricks, West Virginia, station. She looked at the rumpled clothing of the two children, three-year-old James and Baby Rhoda.

“A little over twenty miles to Job, I think,” Rhine Benner replied. “Why?”

“Perhaps I ought to dress the children here so they’ll be clean when we arrive,” Anna suggested. “I

Allegheny Gospel Trails

think I will. Would you bring the suitcase into the station for me?"

Emerging from the restroom a few minutes later, Anna and the children appeared rested, clean, and fresh. They were ready for the last lap of the journey.

The steam engine towing the train belched sooty smoke as it snaked up the narrow, mountain valley. In the tiny fields bordering the tracks, men were cutting hay with scythes, raking it by hand, and stacking it in haycocks in the open fields. The travelers stared in amazement.

"No horses!" Anna marveled in a low voice to her husband.

"And no machinery!" he observed.

Anna spotted another curiosity. "Look!" she exclaimed, "a log house—and a barn!"

"You know, Mother," Rhine said thoughtfully, "I don't believe we knew what we were getting into when we accepted this assignment." He placed a hand on the windowsill and gazed wonderingly at a sparkling freshet tumbling out of a hollow, down over the stones and into the creek.

A grimy sensation caused him to examine his hand. Soot from the windowsill clung to his fingers. The stuff covered everything: the fresh clothes of the children, their faces and hands, even Anna's dress and skin. He checked his own white shirt. It was grimy too.

Anna's glance followed his appraisal. She sighed. "I so wanted the family to look neat," she mourned.

"I know," he said, comforting her, "but it can't be helped, so we won't worry about it."

Welcome to West Virginia

Thus it happened that two sooty, grimy adults and two sooty, grimy children descended the steps of the ancient train at Job, West Virginia, that June afternoon in 1915.

The men from the Home Mission Board at Harrisonburg, Virginia, appraised the new workers dubiously as they stood uncertainly looking about the station. Rhine and Anna were unaware of the doubts their fair skins and slender builds were raising.

“I believe we’d better find an opportunity for a private discussion before we commit the board too deeply,” Abe Good said in a low voice to his companion. “They look too fragile; I doubt they’ll last through the first winter.”

Abe’s companion, Mark Suter, reluctantly agreed.

Both men sprang from the parked surrey, replacing their grave expressions with genuine smiles of welcome. After introductions were made, the men loaded the Benners’ luggage.

“How do you like this country, Brother Benner?” Abe asked lightly.

Rhine surveyed the expanse of tree-covered mountain slopes stretching, it seemed, as far as the eye could see. In nearly every hollow, a clear twinkling stream of water dashed downward to add its volume to the swiftly flowing waters of Dry Fork River just beyond the depot.

“Well,” the slender, fair-skinned “greenhorn” replied, “it’s certainly beautiful, but it’s different from any country we’ve ever seen.”

“I believe you lived in Scottdale, Pennsylvania,” Abe probed.

Allegheny Gospel Trails

“Yes. I was with the Publishing House for some time. They recommended Anna and me for this post when your board wrote to them for suggestions,” Rhine replied.

The conversation stopped as Abe steered the horses through the sticky ruts creasing the dirt road. Warily the Benners watched as the narrow surrey wheels turned through the goey earth. The vehicle tilted unexpectedly as one wheel traversed a submerged stone. Anna clapped a hand over her mouth, suppressing an exclamation.

Mark turned to face Rhine. “I understand that you *do* have experience in mission work,” he said casually.

A slight misgiving gnawed subconsciously in Rhine’s mind. He dismissed it. Mark Suter merely wanted to be friendly with his inquiries into their background.

“Yes, in Altoona, Pennsylvania,” he replied.

“Good!” the Virginia brethren answered heartily. This was one fact in the Benners’ favor. But the Benners, unaware of the problem their appearance created for the men, could not know this.

Abruptly the road dipped into Dry Fork River.

“Mother, there’s no bridge!” three-year-old James squealed excitedly. “The horses are walking right into the water.”

Heavy spring rains had washed stones into the ford, and the carriage pitched violently from side to side as the wheels climbed over them. The Benners clutched the children securely until the horses pulled the dripping buggy safely to the opposite bank.

Tensely they wondered if this might just be a

sample of the “unknowns” still ahead!

“Your first ford, Brother Benner?” Abe grinned, studying the pale faces of his guests.

“Yes,” Rhine acknowledged, smiling wanly at Anna.

“The crossings are always unpredictable this time of year,” Abe explained. “The water is high, due to melting snow in the higher elevations and the spring rains. The water washes large rocks into the fords, and one never knows what to expect.”

“Extreme caution is *always* in order when fording these rivers,” Mark added.

“I’ll remember that,” Rhine stated firmly.

The surrey halted before a small house surrounded by a yard enclosed with an unpainted picket fence. Only forty yards away stood a log cabin with white curtains fluttering from the open, unscreened windows.

“This is the mission house,” Abe announced. “Welcome home!”

Mark swung the door ajar, inviting Anna to enter. She stopped, aghast. Instead of a spotless house ready for occupancy, which she had been expecting, this one needed immediate cleaning.

Not that the previous occupants had left it in an untidy condition—the filth had accumulated through disuse. Dead flies and spiders cluttered the windowsills and corners of the rooms. In the living room, soft gray dust clung to the sofa and littered the potbellied stove and the splint-bottomed chairs. The only other furniture in the room was a small table made resplendent with a brass-bowled kerosene lamp.

“The house has been empty since the Keeners left