A Place to Grow

By Betty Lou J., Norfolk, Virginia

I was 7 years old when I went to live at Oxford Orphanage, located within walking distance of the small farming town of Oxford, North Carolina.

Being so young, I should have been scared, but I had only a sense of wonderment as I entered the beautiful campus with huge oak trees towering above me.

The year was 1947, and my 5-year-old sister, Dot, and I had been living with our father's sister, Aunt Emma, in Raleigh since our mother's death. Our father had heart trouble and was unable to care for us.

The Masonic orphanage consisted of 109 acres of farmland with a campus in the front. Built before the Civil War, the huge brick main building featured three towers, many windows trimmed in white and wraparound porches.

Smaller brick cottages circled behind and on each side of the Main Building, one side for the boys and the other for the girls. Cottages were assigned by age, but I often spent my time with my sister around the grounds.

The rest of the campus included a school, a church, a hospital and the industrial building where all the clothes were made, mended and cleaned. There was also the dining hall, from which we'd sometimes take hot-dog sandwiches and heat them on the radiator in our cottage.

My favorite place was the farm. It was beautiful with rolling hills of corn in the summer and a winding red-dirt road leading from the

campus to the barn at the very back. We played many a game of hide-and-seek in those cornfields.

A railroad track ran through the middle of the farm, and we could hear the lonely sound of a train whistle at midnight, although we never saw a train go through in the daytime.

The farm produced everything we needed—corn, peas, cabbage and beans. We also raised chickens, pigs and cows. I remember tormenting the bull with a red scarf at the bull pen.

We spent many summer days on the farm, walking the railroad track, catching tadpoles under the creek bridge and stopping at Thousand Dollar Spring for a drink of water.

We even had a swimming pool that was open all summer, and we hated to see Thursdays come; that's when we had to clean the pool.

Lots to Do

Once a month, we received a small allowance. We'd walk into downtown Oxford on Saturday afternoons to buy candy or go to the movies. I saw Gone With the Wind at the local theater in 1954, but we were prohibited from going to see Love Me Tender with Elvis Presley when it came to town in 1956.

In the winter, we all went to school half days and worked the other half. The boys worked the farm, dairy barn and chicken house, took care of the farm animals and worked in the electric, printing and shoe shops on campus. The girls worked in the kitchen, dining hall and hospital and took care of all the clothing and laundry.

Most memorable of all were the holidays. On Halloween night, all of the lights were turned off for the Halloween Carnival—the only time we were allowed to run through the school.

The fall season also brought the excitement of football. I remember riding the bus as a cheerleader for out-of-town games. We girls always enjoyed getting to wait on the football players in the dining hall, and all of us had a crush on Coach Thompson.

The Christmas season began on the Friday after Thanksgiving, when Santa arrived on a fire truck carrying a bag of candy, nuts and oranges.

A Christmas tree was brought to each cottage. Soon to follow were Christmas shopping, going into downtown Oxford to see the holiday lights and the anticipation of presents in the mail.

Other memories: looking for boys in the dining hall or on the main road; borrowing your friends' clothes; starching crinolines in the sun and wearing them under full skirts; wearing sweaters with scarves and scatter pins; yearly checkups and a dose of castor oil at the hospital; peanut butter and molasses sandwiches; rest time on blankets under the front-lawn oaks; and Hurricane Hazel bringing down some of those 100-year-old oaks in 1954.

I left the orphanage in 1958, at the age of 18, but still attend annual reunions. I will always be grateful to the Masons for a wonderful childhood.