

BEHIND THE HIGH BOARD FENCE

Chapter 1 – The Sharps earn their way

WINSTON, N.C., 1910—No going without your shoes until the first of May. That was the rule at the Sharps' house. However, nine-year-old Helen thought the idea of walking home from school on this hot April afternoon with long stockings and high-top shoes made no sense at all. She was lagging behind some of their friends hoping to find a time and place to take them off.

Only Libby, her sister, walked along with her. Libby was in her first year at school and was two years younger than Helen. Since the pace was slow, Libby did not have to run to keep up as she usually did.

"We can't be late today!" Cal shouted back over his shoulder as he and Alan ran past them down the middle of the road. Alan was cautious while Cal was high-spirited, mischievous at home and at school. He won at marbles and would have had a huge collection if Mother had let him play for keeps. Sometimes he walked with Helen and Libby, bringing along the friends and excitement that accompanied him wherever he went. But today he and Alan were off without their younger sisters.

Helen and Libby continued on the small dirt road that cut through a wooded area where there were no houses. Horses and wagons seldom passed this way, so it was a perfect place for Helen to hide behind a tree while she unbuttoned her stockings from her shirtwaist, rolled them down to her ankles and unhooked the tops of her shoes.

Libby tagged along with Helen who skipped down the road in her new freedom, blonde curls bouncing and shoe tops flapping like birds rising from the ground. They

paid no attention to Cal's reminder to hurry.

On Holly Street, Helen spotted and sat on steps to a neighbor's yard. Hiding behind Libby's dress, she rolled up her stockings and struggled with the buttons on her shoes.

Never mind that she was a mess. Now she would have to hurry before both Mother and Cal were angry with her.

When the girls came through the gate to the high board fence, they faced Cal sitting astride the railing of the porch, kicking his feet in disgust and beating an impatient rhythm on the rails. Helen longed to escape to her secret tree.

"Hurry up, Helen. I've been waiting on you!" he shouted. What took you so long? You knew I had something special planned for today."

Helen was hurt about being kept out of his plans. She could see that now she would be left to clean the dinner dishes alone, so she grumbled at him. "Libby and I had something to do on our way home from school."

Cal looked at her. "I was going to help, but, now you'll be by yourself."

Cal's buddy, Joe, whistled from the corner, and Cal bounded off the porch, his newspaper delivery bag flying behind him.

Usually Helen and Cal shared the job of washing the dishes left by the boarders who ate their noon meal at the Sharps' house. Since their house on Spruce Street was only three blocks from town, it was within easy walking distance from some of the businesses and was an ideal location for a boarding house. Taking a few extra people for dinner helped to supplement what Papa earned at his new grocery business and Mother made as a tailor.

Harry and Mabel, their grown brother and sister, ate with the boarders. Harry worked at the

YMCA downtown, and Mabel, at a department store. The Early sisters came with her. Both worked in town as secretaries. The Sharp children sometimes called them the "Early Birds," since they seemed to chirp and cluck as they talked.

As Helen stood on the porch, Mother tapped on the inside of the window with her thimble and beckoned her into the sitting room. Libby and Moddy, a younger sister, were already inside playing with a box of buttons. Mother was hand stitching the collar onto a new dress while little Jack sat on the floor under the Singer sewing machine. He pushed and pulled on the treadle that turned the wheel high on the machine, making a click each time the needle went up and down.

"Helen," Mother said to her, "Get Jack away from the machine and set him here, closer to me. And, then, tell me why that big frown is on your face."

Helen answered reluctantly, "Cal has gone with Joe and left me here to wash the dishes by myself." Now she frowned more than she had before.

"He knows that his chore is to help you before he leaves to do anything else. Did he tell

you where he was going?" Mom asked.

"They are planning to go to the train station tomorrow." Not wanting to get Cal in trouble, Helen said no more and headed for the kitchen.

The fire was low in the big cook stove. She added a stick or two

of wood to it and then ran water from the spigot on the wall into a kettle. Placing it on the stove, she turned to face the dishes that were stacked on the table in the center of the room. Helen worked with two dishpans, washing in one, rinsing in the other and making neat towels of wet and dripping dishes and

glasses on the table.

Eventually Mother came in to help. She asked, "Did you say that Cal is planning something for tomorrow?"

"Yes, he and Joe are going to talk about it while they sell Joe's newspapers this afternoon," Helen answered.

"Maybe," said Mother, "If they are going to see the Saturday train come in, he'll take you with them. Then you won't feel as bad about being left with his work today."

Mother didn't know that Cal's plans would make trouble for him and Joe.

Next chapter — Cal and Joe sell newspapers

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Winston and Salem become 'twin city' and open schools

Winston, founded in 1849, takes its name from Joseph Winston, a local hero of the Revolutionary War and first cousin of Virginia statesman and governor, Patrick Henry. Shortly after its founding, Winston and Salem, its "twin city," were incorporated into Forsyth County which was carved from the southern part of Stokes County. Winston became the county seat, and, because leaders expected the merger of the two cities, the courthouse was located near Salem. The hyphenated name, Winston-Salem, became official in 1913.

In 1884, Winston established its first public school, West End Graded School (illustration above), the first such school in North Carolina. Its founder Calvin Wiley became superintendent of schools for the state of North Carolina.

Public schools in North Carolina were segregated at the time. The first public school for black students, Depot Street School, opened in 1887. Simon Green Atkins, its principal, would later found Slater Industrial Academy for blacks. Slater is now Winston-Salem State University.

NEWSPAPER ACTIVITY:

Consult the newspaper and select ways that the Sharp family members might earn their way, if they lived today.

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