

'WHY TOM FRANK, HE'S SOMEONE'S BOY'

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One of things I remember most about Mama Hill (Sarah Lucy Hill) was what seemed to a city kid like me, the paradox of the woman. She had such soft lovely hands and when she wrapped you in her arms you felt as if you were to be loved for a lifetime. She was tender and kind with her grown children and farm animals alike, but she was at once firm and dealt in the reality of life that was the lot of a farm woman of the 40s and 50s. I remember yet watching her walk softly up to an unsuspecting red hen and, with a quick twist, take the first steps toward a fried chicken supper. As I have considered that moment through the years, it became clear to me why everyone, including her grown children, addressed her as “ma’am.”

Mama Hill had soft twinkly brown eyes and always wore a smile. She laughed softly and often – she delighted in her 21 grandchildren. We traveled each summer, when the GM plants closed for vacation, to Middle Tennessee to see our beloved relatives. Each time we went to her home, we were given to understand that she could hardly contain her excitement at the thought of our visit, and that we were, in deed, the most favorite of all her favorites!

She was born in 1876, when our nation was but 100 years old, and married Papa at 20 years of age. She was the mother of nine children and her days were spent doing all the things that a farm wife of the time did. She cooked, sewed, canned, saw that her daughters learned to do all those things, and set a sumptuous table on Sunday for the preacher and any visitors who might come to the Stiversville Church of Christ. (When purchasing their farm property, a portion of the land was set aside for the building of the church house.)

Stiversville was (and probably still is) a close-knit farming community outside of Columbia, TN, where the people there were known to call one another “cousin.” I grew up thinking they were all truly my relatives – and many were! Papa was a farmer, but he also ran his own general store, taught school, served as a county magistrate, was a member of the local school board, and an elder in the church – most of these at the same time! Being one of the youngest of their grandchildren, I did not know Papa until his eye-sight had failed to the extent that he was forced to use a magnifying glass as he sat on the front porch in the afternoons to read the Bible or the Gospel Advocate.

Mama Hill understood the value of children feeling they were contributing, adding value to the general welfare of the family, and allowed me to work beside her in the kitchen, the garden, and the orchard. I am sure her days must have been full and busy and I probably was more hindrance than help, but she always seemed to have time to answer my questions about farm life, biscuit making, sewing (which she called “handwork”) and other things that a “city girl” would have know no other way.

She got up early each morning to fix breakfast for Papa, but she let me sleep late, then help roll and cut out the biscuits for my own breakfast. I suspect she did not dwell on the word “self esteem” much, but she knew how to make me feel fulfilled and competent when a job was well done. They both were absolute Bible scholars, knowing and reciting many scriptures from memory. They believed it was the greatest guide for how to conduct their lives and made every attempt to follow its precepts.

Mama Hill was truly a “helpmeet” for Papa – she helped with the farming, and assisted in every undertaking which he found necessary. At any given time, there were a few tenant families living on the farm who earned their livelihood by taking care of Papa’s crops, etc. In return, each one got a garden plot, a house, and a small piece of ground on which to farm for themselves. It was not part of the deal, nor was it always customary, but Mama and Papa Hill took care of them life family. Mama helped with the births of their children, took care of them when they were sick, and she and Papa made sure that their needs were met.

Mama Hill was also busy in her own house, often doing two or three chores at the same time (like making tea cakes for supper as she cleared the breakfast dishes while soaking peaches or tomatoes in pots of hot water in order to make them easier to peel for canning – or a cobbler!).

She felt that every person with whom she came in contact was worthy of her care and compassion. But above all else, Sarah Lucy Hill personified kindness. During the Great Depression, many homeless people – some would call tramps – traveled along US Highway 31 and would put a rock on the fence of those who had shown them a kindness or given them a meal as a sign to others passing that way. Mama Hill made daily trips to her “spring house” that was cooled by the very cold water of the creek which flowed along Route 31.

She often placed food in the spring house for the taking and, if no rock was visible on the fence, she would place on there. Frequently, Papa Hill would come home to find that she had offered their hospitality to a passing stranger – even to the extent of giving away Papa’s clothes or shoes to a man far from home and in need.

Being concerned for her safety, he would sometime chastise her about the wisdom of taking in strangers.

All of his concern would be brushed away with a warm, brown-eyed smile and a gentle comment, “Why Tom Frank, he’s someone’s boy.”

When Mama Hill passed from this earth, I was not at all surprised to see that there was not enough room in the Stiversville Church of Christ to hold all of those who came to show their love and respect for her.

Like Dorcas of Acts 9:36 – 42, many of the mourners had stories to tell of her kindness and generosity toward them. As Doctor Paul Southern of Michigan Christian College

used to say, “She was a P31”. A woman like the virtuous woman of Proverbs 31- full of kindness.

*Read more ‘Writer’s Corner’ at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>