

The Bonny Oaks Housemother Who Came Home Again

Mrs. Martha Sherlin is now raising 12 teen-age girls in the same white house at the Bonny Oaks school where she lived more than 25 years ago

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by PATTI BENTON STEPHENSON

Martha Humphreys Sherlin first came to live at the Bonny Oaks School in 1947. She was 11 years old, her mother was dead and her father unable to care for her and her two sisters and three brothers. For seven years she lived in the "Big Girls" house under the watchful eye of her housemother, Mrs. Turner. But at 17, a confused, restless Martha ran away and vowed never to go back.

Today, 25 years later, Martha Sherlin has come home again as the congenial, big-hearted housemother for 12 teen-age girls at Bonny Oaks School. They live together in Patten Hall, the same sprawling white house where Martha herself grew up.

"This is one story you're going to hear that has a happy ending," she smiles. Although she's only been a housemother since February, "I feel real close to all my girls," Martha says. "They're like the daughters I never had."

In the 25 years she was away, Martha married, adopted a son, and then was divorced four years ago. Although she'd never held a job before, she went to work at Stainless Metal Products. "I was glad to make a living, but it was heavy, physical labor that got harder and harder for me to do," she recalls.

Martha remembers coming home one night after a

rough day. "My back and legs were just aching from all the lifting I'd done and I prayed over my kitchen sink, 'Lord, if you could send something else my way, I'd sure appreciate it,'" she tells. "Just then the phone rang and it was a friend of mine, Mrs. Barnes, from Bonny Oaks. She said, 'Martha, we need a new housemother for the older girls and I think you ought to do it.'"

Soon after that the superintendent for the school, Malcolm Adamson, called to urge her to consider the job. "I was so flabbergasted, I told them I'd have to think it over," Mrs. Sherlin says. "Mrs. Barnes was so anxious for me to come that she called six times a day to say, 'Martha, have you decided yet?' Pretty soon I got the idea that this was something the Lord meant for me to do."

Her first day as housemother found Martha face-to-face with 12 slightly cool and curious teen-age girls. "I remember looking around and thinking, 'Now which one of these girls is going to try to whip me and run me off?'" she smiles. "I was just scared to death, but I knew what it was like to be in their shoes."

For the first few weeks, "we all treated each other real politely, like you would your company," Martha notes. But gradually, both

she and the girls have relaxed and "learned each other's ways." And Martha has settled into the daily routine of caring for her dozen charges.

"I'm usually up by 5 a.m. to wake the cook and get the girls going," she relates. "We have breakfast at 6:30 and then they straighten their rooms and clean up the kitchen before they leave for school at 8:00." During the day, Mrs. Sherlin orders supplies, does the laundry and works on special projects. "Right now, we're painting all the girls' rooms a real pretty baby blue," she shares. "And I'm making bedspreads and curtains to match."

By 3:30 p.m. the girls are home from school. Most attend Tyner Junior or Senior High, or the Occupational Training Center. Homework is done during the study hall hour and then supper is served at 5. "Lights out" arrives by 10:30 most nights. Though there's always plenty to do, Martha finds that caring for 12 girls is "rest" compared to the demands of her previous job.

The housemother is quick to point out that "these are good kids, but they're not perfect. We have our normal scraps like all mothers and daughters. You have to remember that these girls have been through more than most other girls their age. Sometimes it takes a

lot of patience and love to understand them." Some of the girls come to Martha's room to watch TV or just talk about what's bothering them. Others are more secretive. "It takes a while to build up their trust," Martha explains. "They know I'm here if they need me."

On Thursday, her day off, Martha returns to her own home to visit with her son, now 20. But she finds that she misses the girls and is "pretty anxious" to get back the next day. The feeling is mutual, according to Mr. Adamson. "There's been a significant change in the girls' attitudes since Martha came to us," he says.

Near Patten Hall is a huge tree whose spreading limbs shade the road. "That's the kissing tree," Martha reveals with a grin. "When I was little, I could hide behind it and watch all the older girls courting with their boyfriends." Times haven't changed all that much, she adds. "I still find that boys are the main thing on their minds. Right now they're after me to get permission for them to go on dates with their boyfriends, but I've told them we'd have to see."

Martha feels strongly that her role is not to policeman of the girls. "They don't like to feel they're being watched, and I don't like to feel like I have to," she explains. "But they can tell a difference when you're just showing loving concern."