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## The Library

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# The Library

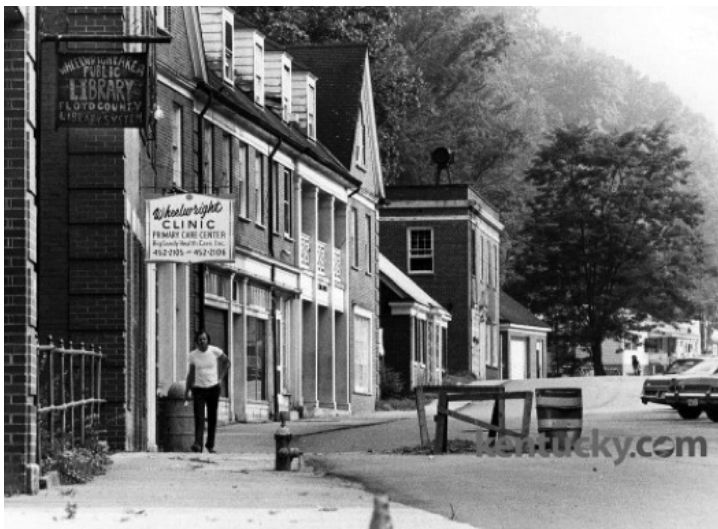
by Timothy Caldwell

It was a hot, humid, summer day in 1953, as our dad drove us along the narrow, crooked roads that led from Allen to Wheelwright. Dad was a Southern Baptist preacher who loved starting new churches in the hills of Kentucky, and Wheelwright was the latest stop on his pastoral migration.

It was moving day. Dad and Mother sat in the front seat of the car while my two sisters and I were in the backseat surrounded by smaller household items that did not fit into the stuffed trunk. Two rusty pickup trucks followed us with our furniture wedged into their flatbeds, covered by stained, musty gray tarps.

I was eight years old and unhappy. The church parsonage in Allen was a small

tumbledown hotel with eight rooms on the second floor, only three of which my family occupied. I had made it a private theme park, complete with roller-skating, for my buddy Tommy and me. Wheelwright was only a few miles from Allen, but I felt like I was being taken to the other side of the world from my playmate.



The small convoy eventually crossed a

bridge straddling a shallow creek and entered the hollow where Wheelwright lay. When it stopped in front of a tiny house in a row of tiny houses, I felt my stomach sink. I didn't even want to get out of the car, but moping was not allowed when there was work to be done.

I didn't mope long because, within a couple of days, I was exploring the hill that abutted the back of our house. I also wandered into what I called the "downtown" of Wheelwright where I found a grocery store, drugstore, movie theater, small hotel, and the elementary school that I would attend in the fall.

There were some offices mixed in among the stores, but most of them did not have signs. One day, I noticed an office that looked different because there were some books sitting on the windowsill and a sign with the word "Read" taped onto the window. It was a sunny day, so I put my face up to the window and cupped my hands around my eyes. The room was full of books. There was a lady sitting at a

desk that faced the window. She looked up and waved at me. A day earlier, a lady in another office had scowled and waved for me to go away, but this lady seemed to be motioning me to go inside.

When I opened the door, the first thing I noticed was the cool air on my shirtless skin. There was a small sign on the door: "Air Conditioned." I had never been in air-conditioning before. It felt really good compared to our house, which Mother said was like an oven.

The lady was old, like my mother, but very pretty. She had short, dark hair and smiled at me as she stood up. I was ready to run out the door, but something about her manner let me know she was as nice as her smile.

"Hello," she said. "I'm Mrs. Pace. What's your name?"

"Timmy," I said, putting my hands in the pockets of my short pants.

"Nice to meet you, Timmy. Are you new to town?"

"My daddy is a preacher. We came from Allen. Is this a bookstore?"

"No. This is a library."

"What's a liberry?"

She told me I didn't have to buy any books, but I could take some home for a week for free. Then she asked if I would like to have a library card.

"What's that for?" I asked.

"When you take a book home, I need to know who has it in case someone else wants to borrow it."

"I don't have any money for a card," I said.

"The library card is free," she said. She went to her desk and pulled out a little piece of paper with lines on it. She asked for my name and wrote "Timmy Caldwell" as I looked over her shoulder. She smelled nice, like my mother smelled nice when she went to church on Sunday morning.

"What's your address?" she asked.

"It's the blue house, five houses from the church. The first time I came downtown I forgot which house it was 'cause all the houses look alike, but then I remembered it was blue and I heard my mother singing and went in."

"Okay," she said after a pause. "Which church?"

"The Southern Baptist church, down there," I said as I pointed in the direction of the church. "My grandfather said I'm part Indian, so I always know where I am 'cause Indians have to know where they are so they don't get lost in the forest. Indians can walk on dry leaves and not make any noise. I'm not very good at that, but I'm working on it."

She said I should look at the number on the house, write it down, and bring it back to her sometime. Then, she took me to a section marked "Children."

"All the books in this section are for children," she said. She pointed out a low

stool for me to sit on if I got tired of standing. She told me I could stay as long as I wanted, and I could take a book home if I wished.

I don't remember how long I stayed that first day, but I was enthralled. The books had a sweet, musty smell that I liked, and I enjoyed the feel of them. It wasn't long before I was wandering around the library, looking at all the other books.

The book I chose was not from the children's section. I wasn't a baby; I wanted to read real books with only a few pictures. Mrs. Pace said it might be hard for me to read, but it had a neat picture on the cover: It was a knight on a horse and a short, fat guy riding beside him on a donkey. The title was *Don Quixote* (pronounced "Don Quick-soti" in my head). That was the first book I ever checked out of a library. Sure enough, I struggled through a few pages and didn't understand any of it.

I took it back the next day and told her it was a pretty good book, but I wanted to give it back. She showed me a magazine: *Boy's Life*. I didn't tell her, but it looked a lot easier to read than the Quick-soti book and more like the magazines Mother bought. I was hooked.

That was the summer I fell in love with reading. Even though I eventually made some friends that summer, the library was the place I liked to go the most because of all the books and, of course, I could talk to Mrs. Pace. Two years later, my time with her and the small library came to an end when we moved to Sarasota, Florida.

\* \* \*

I visited Wheelwright decades later when I met with Lisa Perry, the director of the Wheelwright Historical Society. The corporation that owned Wheelwright sold the entire town in 1965. Many families left to find new jobs, but there were families who had generational ties to Wheelwright, so they stayed. However, the new owners of the town (a mining corporation) provided few services and allowed the infrastructure to collapse, so the town and the remaining inhabitants sank into poverty.

Lisa, along with a few local folk, was attempting to save what remained of the devastated town through rebuilding and education. Part of her plan was the creation of a new library. She had contacted a number of former residents, including me, and I had come to make a donation of several dozens of books I owned and to see what had happened to the town.

We visited the room that housed the original library, and as I gazed through grimy windows into the empty room, I told Lisa about my experience there and how much Mrs. Pace affected my intellectual life by making the library a welcoming place for a kid.

"I loved being in this room, surrounded by books, and talking to Mrs. Pace," I told her. "Even now, I walk into a library and feel like I've come home," I said. "I wish I could tell her that, but she probably died years ago."

"No," Lisa said, "she's very much alive. She and Minor, her husband, are in their nineties, and both are still mentally sharp. They contacted me when they found out about the Historical Society, and I speak with them about once a month."

"I'd like to thank her," I said.

"I'll ask her to contact you," she replied.

When I returned to my home, I wrote a short account of my first encounter with Mrs. Pace and sent it to Lisa. She included it in one of the Society's newsletters.

\* \* \*

Mrs. Pace called me at my home in November. She had read my story and liked it, she said. She didn't remember the visit I wrote about, but she remembered me as a little boy and some of our time together.

I told her what my visits with her meant to me and thanked her for spending so much time with a talkative kid. I did this with only a couple of catches in my voice.

"I not only love reading books," I said, "I wrote one. It's about my experiences when I was in the Army in Vietnam. I'd like to send you a copy."

"Yes, please do," she said.

"I'll warn you, the language gets pretty rough."

"I've spent most of my life around miners and engineers," she said, "so I've probably heard all the rough words that might be in your book."

My eyes were tearing when I hung up the phone. Rarely had I been able to say thank you to people who influenced my life in small but incalculable ways, and I was grateful she had called me.

\* \* \*

A handwritten letter from her appeared in the mail the week after Christmas. She wrote that my book had arrived, but rather than opening it, she wrapped it for Christmas and put it under her tree. On Christmas day, when her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren were at her home, she made sure that the box that held my book was the last present opened.

She wrote that she held the book when she told them the story of my first visit as I described it in the newsletter.

"That little boy who liked to read books grew up and wrote his own book, this book," she told them. "After I've read it, I'll put it in a special place on my bookshelf. That way, when I see it sitting there, I'll think about that little boy and be glad he remembers me with kindness."

She thanked me for the book, then wrote, "When you get to be as old as I am, it is easy to get depressed and feel like nobody outside of the family remembers you. You begin wondering if your life made any difference to anyone. Thank you for remembering me."

She added a P.S. "Did you really think I was pretty?"

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