

PIONEER WOMEN OF HICKMAN COUNTY

“Beth Slater Whitson and Alice Whitson Norton”

(a five-part series by Frances M. Meeker)

PART ONE

Perhaps a no more interesting story has come out of Hickman County than that of Beth Slater Whitson and Alice Whitson Norton, a sister writing team.

Beth Slater Whitson gained world-wide recognition as the author of two ballads, “Let Me Call You Sweetheart” and “Meet Me Tonight in Dreamland.” Both songs show promise of going down as American classics. Alice Whitson Norton, the co-author of “Let Me Call You Sweetheart,” has won an eminent place for herself in the literary world.

Theirs is truly a story of pioneering. From their home in rural Hickman County they reached out into a world that in Chicago, to editors in Philadelphia and New York. They reached out into a world that was far removed from them and into a profession in which they had no formal training.

Had they been able to look ahead to the disappointments and disillusionments that lay in their path to fame, they would probably have not had the courage to follow it the length they did.

Many people have claimed the authorship of their best known song, “Let Me Call You Sweetheart.” One man while visiting in Memphis a few years ago let the secret out that he found the inspiration for this delightful love song while dining one night in an obscure restaurant and wrote the lyric on the stiff white cuff of his shirt sleeve. This interesting bit of information brought a story in the city’s leading newspaper, which unfortunately for the would-be author, was read by a friend of the real author. The friend immediately called the editor and demanded a retraction.

The editor wrote a letter of inquiry to Mrs. Norton and when she verified the friend’s statement, another story in which the true authorship as revealed followed the first. This was only one of the many instances when another person claimed to have written this song.

Only one person, as far as Mrs. Norton knows, has claimed the authorship of “Meet Me Tonight In Dreamland” but he went after it in a big way, claiming both the lyric and the composition. He got away with it to such an extent that he brought it out in its entirety in competition to the lawful publisher and was only stopped from selling it by the courts.

Royalties from Beth Slater Whitson’s songs brought prosperity to her family. Later, when their sale dropped off and the family was living comfortably from her other literary sales, she sold the copyrights to most of them.

The songs were later revived and the new owners of the copyrights received a comfortable income from them. When the Whitson’s suffered a financial setback about this time, it was heartbreaking for them to see the author of the songs in such adverse circumstances while a fortune was being made on them, a fortune for someone else.

It was not until after Beth Slater's death that the copyrights on many of her songs were renewed, and the family received long overdue royalties.

The one bleeding wound in Alice Whitson Norton's soul today is that her sister did not live to enjoy the heritage from her songs in their second copyright edition; and that Alice, Beth Slater's little shadow, had during the long lean 12 years of no royalty income from the two world famous songs formed an alliance for herself with some 15 publishers in the juvenile and religious world.

The Whitson family were pioneers in Hickman county. Samuel Whitson lived in Shipp's Bend in 1830 and was a prosperous farmer there. He was the father of the Rev. William E. Whitson.

Jane, a daughter of Samuel Whitson, was the mother of Thetus W. Sims, who for many years was a representative to Congress from the congressional district of which Hickman county was a part of at that time.

The Whitsons of Hickman county are related to the celebrated Vance family of the Carolinas and the Thomas Thompson family of Revolutionary War fame of South Carolina. The name of Whitson as a soldier dates back in to the wars of early American history and some one of the name has served his country down to the present day.

A powder horn from the Mexican War is a proud possession of Alice Whitson Norton.

John Humble Whitson, the father of Beth Slater and Alice held a great aversion to war and discussed with his family as little as possible anything connected with it.

Dr. Asa Whitson, farther of John Humble, was a doctor in Savannah during the Civil War and was shot in the back after administering to an ill soldier returning North after the war.

Anne Eliza Slarter, the wife of John Humble Whitson, came south in company with her parents, the Frederick Slaters from Minnesota, where the Slaters were engaged in the milling business. Mr. Slater was a quiet, unassuming man, known for his much learning. He was a writer of considerable weight.

John Humble Whitson began a teacher's career at the age of 16 and was a serious student all his life. He was a pioneer in the Hickman county lumber business and editor for years of the county paper. He was a constant contributor of articles and editorials to the Southern Lumber magazine.

With this background it isn't strange that the Whitson sisters took up literary work as their profession.

Alice Whitson Norton's own story of how she and her sister Beth Slater Whitson pioneered in the literary world will begin in this column next week.

from: The Hickman County Times
Thursday – June 21, 1956

PART TWO

(as told by Alice Whitson Norton)

At the time “Meet Me Tonight In Dreamland” and “Let Me Call You Sweetheart” were written, the author of the lyrics lived on a small farm near Goodrich.

Goodrich was a furnace town, chief out-put of which was pig-iron, and Beth Slater Whitson’s father, a pioneer lumberman of Tennessee, operated the mill that furnished the company needed in their business.

Aside from this source of income, we lived on the product the farm yielded, and our mother having learned the value of strict economy through the lean years prevailing in the old South after the war between the States, never allowed anything to go to waste; what we didn’t eat in the summer from the farm, we ate in the winter.

Being descendents of a thrifty New Englander on our mother’s side, whose parents had come south in the days of reconstruction, and a goodly measure of southern aristocracy flowing in our veins from our father’s side of the house, we might have been an exceedingly queer brook – but we weren’t.

Naturally we were poor, so far as money was concerned, but ours was a combine that knew not the meaning of wealth in terms of money. We grew up on the principle that mentality was our birthright – a substance which rightfully made us the equal of anybody, and we were living simply and happily in the home of our parents when Beth Slater, second in line of a family of five – broke into prominence.

Beth Slater Whitson was one of those rare persons who seemingly are born educated. At the age of four she was reading from a fifth grade reader and reciting pages of poetry. At the age of eight she had a bulky scrapbook of her own verses.

*The hills today are bright with nature’s gold;
And stained with all the sunsets of the year,
And low of voice, the winds go singing by;
A silver stream sings through the grassy mere.
But like a traitor does the hear of mine
Go hungering among the plenty here.*

BSW

These verses as well as many others were published as they were or furnished the base for numbers of beautiful poems that appeared in prominent magazines later on in here life.

During our childhood our father, along with his lumber business, edited a country newspaper and through this medium some of Beth Slater’s early verses come to light. Nobody, however, paid any particular notice to her work until her verses began to appear in the eastern magazines around 1900.

As is the case so often, genius is rarely coupled with any degree of business ability, and in this instance Beth Slater differed not from other geniuses.

Perhaps it might be interesting, since I, who from my earliest recollections was called “Beth’s little shadow,” to state that it was during a long convalescence spell from a serious injury incurred from a run-away horse, the Beth began writing verses seriously, and I – the little “shadow” – without any knowledge of any professional technique, slipped the little efforts from beneath her pillow and mailed them to such prominent magazines as Munsey and Metropolitan. They, to my unspeakable delight, found them worthy and sent checks instead of rejections slips.

These little acceptances had far more influence in the matter of recovery for the patient than all the splints and powders the doctor had administered during the weeks of her suffering.

The summer Beth Slater was 18 and I was 12, she paid a visit to a friend living in Nashville, and city she later made her home, and it was during this visit that she received her first glimpse of the state and her first inspiration to write songs.

The introduction happened to be Al G. Field’s great minstrel in the height-day of its popularity; the songs and the beautiful choruses sung by the minstrel quartette set by sister thinking seriously and she came home determined to write a lyric for Field’s great minstrel singers.

A series of efforts followed this decision on the part of the young author, with the backing of the entire family, but this somehow, even with the master pieces we thought she turned out, was not quite enough to put her over with Fields.

The next venture was a couple of numbers under personal sponsorship, which only proved to be sink-holes for a couple of hundred dollars which the family readily sacrificed for the venture. However, by the time the second song published at the author’s expense went down like the Titanic, we held a family council and definitely decided though on the right trail, we were on the wrong track, and that our ignorance in the song business must be eliminated before we made any more ventures, and until this could be accomplished it would be better for the family purse that she continue her writing career through the magazine channels instead for the song publishing routes.

A period of about four years followed this decision and the quality of her verses improved to such an extent that it was an infrequent thing to see her name appearing the three or four outstanding magazines at a time. But the urge to write songs kept biting her soul – biting so persistently that she filled dozens of scratch-paper tablets with ballads and tucked them away in a little secret cubby hole where she alone knew where they were.

The discovery of a group of these tablets the summer I was 16 brought to my mind the keen realization of my sister’s lack of business ability. From a source I do not pretend to account for, I realize also that these beautiful things I had found in her scratch-pads would never be heard of without getting them before the public.

I don’t know what it was that so suddenly aroused me from a state of being into a bundle of dynamic energy, but whatever it was, it had happened, and I found myself silently pledging to get behind this genius that God had dropped into our midst and state there until I had shoved her into the place she so rightly deserved to fill. Over night – nay, I should say – in the twinkling of an eye the six years that had heretofore existed between us were literally wiped out, and I secretly began investigating the music publishing business on my own behalf in her name. The fact that I could neither spell, paragraph, or punctuate correctly carried not the slightest weight against the venture. What I had to offer I givues would offset any lack of efficiency I possessed.

Through the effort the McKinley Music Publishing company of Chicago was located, and from Mr. William McKinley himself we learned there was a market for lyrics, and his house used many.

Out came the scratch tablets, and after house of comparison between the lyrics already written and from the well stocked catalog the family knew about we decided to send four numbers. Four pages of 8 x 11, carrying four lyrics and one extra page for a letter, we learned, could make the journey each was for two cents, and that was SOMETHING to consider, we realized, if correspondence was to enter our business world very heavily.

From that first group of number, Mr. McKinley (God bless him) accepted three lyrics, paying the magnificent sum (and I say this not in jest) of \$25 each, and the letter accompanying this acceptance was one that sent our spirits soaring right out over the tall sweet locust in our yard to the soft blue skies kissing the hilltops overlooking Happy Valley, the name of our Hickman County home.

We had been taught from infancy that people of any prominence in the old South had a name for their home, and we begin a rising generation, went the tradition of our ancestors one better by calling the place we occupied, regardless of the location, by a name even though we had no prominence to back us.

Now with affluence, wealth, power, popularity – all the attributes that go to make up the category of success – staring us in the face, Happy Valley took on a prestige, and our joy was boundless.

from: The Hickman County Times
Thursday – June 28, 1956

PART THREE

(as told by Alice Whitson Norton – continued from last week)

I have often wondered, could we have looked forward that one blissful day and glimpsed the obstacles, the heart-aches and the disillusionments that were to follow in the track of success, would we have made the venture. Considering our timid natures, our limited education, our lack of qualifications – I dare say the wonderful career of Beth Slater Whitson and the lesser career of “the little shadow” who followed in her steps, would have closed with McKinley’s acceptance of those first three lyrics.

But we were young and hopeful – full of life and enthusiasm. Ambition was calling, and one great man had recognized genius – and the name of Whitson – an honorable name in the South – through Beth’s pen we resolved should attain new heights, and life became unexplainably interesting.

The untimely death of Beth’s first sweetheart in the early stage of her creative career left a bruise in her young heart that time was long in healing, and was responsible no doubt for the many heart-throbbing lyrics that she penned.

One poem that created much notice and comment particularly, I quote:

PREMATURE

Winter came early –
God, I scarcely knelt,
Plucking spring flowers
“Ere its chill I felt.
Then came the snowflakes
Blinding – think and fine –
Winter came early
In this heart be mine.

BSW

Those heart-throbbing efforts had a place in that decade. Top magazine editors liked her poetry, and Leo Friedman, a young Jewish composer in Chicago, was called in to write the melodies.

Shortly after finishing the composition to her third lyric for the McKinley Publishing company, Friedman requested by letter, that the author send him a lyric to work out individually and thus have something to offer either publishers or popular music.

With a request like that to a mere beginner, we figured nothing ordinary would do – nothing even in the stuffed scratch tablets would do – this must be something entirely new and a perfect rhythm.

For days we talked in song titles, but everything seemed common-place – ordinary – nothing Beth suggested carried any weight, and everything I, the little shadow, suggested sounded trite.

And then one beautiful spring morning while we were taking out the family laundry in a new-fangled tub that not only eliminated labor but seemed to have a way of turning dingy water into white sea-foam, and paid for from one of McKinley’s generous checks – the title of “Meet Me Tonight In Dreamland” was born. Of course, it wasn’t just that – just then – but the idea of a

dream song came and persisted in lingering with us; even the soft breeze that, like the mechanical tub, seemed to create rhythm, it lingered.

As was our custom at that time when the first round of morning chores were done, Beth went to her little make-shift desk on the second floor of our home, and I continued with the household duties. With the laundry off my hands, I had only to prepare the noon-day meal, and I went about it cheerfully. Menial tasks, with such a bright future staring me in the face, were as nothing, and I went singing about the small kitchen hilariously.

Just how long we had been separated I do not recall, but I remember pausing in the task of bread kneading to gaze upon Beth Slater standing in the kitchen doorway with a sheet of paper in her hand and a look of triumph on her face.

“I’ve got it, little sister—“ she exclaimed happily – “I’ve got it!”

Slowly, sweetly and distinctly she read the verse and chorus through, and then playfully asked me to guess at the title.

“It couldn’t be anything,” I

FROM HERE THE READER IS DIRECTED TO PAGE FIVE, HOWEVER, IN THE MICROFILMED VERSIONS OF THE HICKMAN COUNTY TIMES, PAGE FIVE WAS OMITTED. IF ANYONE HAS A SOURCE FOR AN ORIGINAL OR COPY OF THIS EDITION OF THE HICKMAN COUNTY TIMES, PLEASE CONTACT THE US.

from: The Hickman County Times
Thursday – July 5, 1956

PART FOUR

(as told by Alice Whitson Norton – continued from last week)

Of course Beth Slater wrote the verses to “Let Me Call You Sweetheart” without insulting or consulting me, but the finished result was perfectly satisfactory to us both and I felt far more proud of that brain child than she did.

After a few days we received a most flattering letter from Mr. Friedman in which he painted a picture of the successful future he saw in store for so talented a writer, but he did not mention again the possibility of her coming to Chicago.

A note from Mr. McKinley, complimenting her on the popularity of “Dreamland”, caused us to ponder a bit on recent communications from Friedman, and finally after weeks passed and no remuneration came to us from the sale of song that we understood was sweeping Chicago by storm, Beth Slater decided she had better make a trip to that far-off city whose very name frightened us, and see for herself what was going on with her first popular brain child.

Things had been more than usually hard that year; and old account assumed by my father for one of the name came to light and practically drained the slim family purse, and along with the small savings went the remainder of the unspent money that we had received from McKinley, so there were no funds to speak of. All the more reason Beth suddenly advocated that she should go to Chicago and look after her interest in the song business.

For several days we concentrated on the matter of raising funds for the trip, and then Beth went to a very substantial as well as loyal friend to the family and timidly voiced her suspicions and desire. When she came home there was money in the back to cover the expense of a trip to Chicago, but the questions of proper clothes she had forgotten to mention.

We know the women of Chicago didn't dress as we did, and we knew the ordinary clothes my sister possessed would appear terribly out-of-state and that it would require a lot of courage to undertake the venture, but much was at stake, and no human being ever loved a family as Beth Slater Whitson loved hers. It was for their sake, not the glory for herself, that finally induced her to put on the simple ill-fashioned clothes she possessed and head for the city that was ringing with her song.

This trip was a revelation to her; she discovered shortly after her arrival that Friedman had sold “Dreamland” outright to Will Rossiter, the music publisher of Chicago, for the sum of 75 hundred dollars, and had not kept his agreement of a 50-50 split with her; in fact, he had not even mentioned disposing of the number, so of course, she was a bit more than surprised when she made the discovery of its sale. But its popularity was even more astounding to the little country girl, and at least furnished her sufficient courage to undertake meeting the publisher.

Meeting Will Rossiter was a job in those days. From morning until night he was besieged with lyric writers, composers, singers and public entertainers, but the country girl that had traveled all the way from the Tennessee back woods to Chicago to find out something about popular songs would not be defeated in meeting the publisher of her own effort.

For three weeks she lived in a cheap rooming house overlooking Lake Michigan and existed chiefly on cream cheese crackers and sweet milk. She made a daily pilgrimage to the publishing house, vainly trying to get an interview with Mr. Rossiter, but to no avail. But being one of keen

perceptive, she discovered one certain gentleman came down a bit earlier mornings than the majority of the working force, so she timed her next visit early in the morning, hoping through this gentleman to find access to Rossiter's private office.

Imagine her surprise when she timidly introduced herself as the author of "Dreamland", and learned the man was none other than the publisher himself. With a great human heart, despite the unbecoming clothes she wore, Will Rossiter recognized genius and greeted her with sufficient enthusiasm to allay any self-consciousness that might have bothered her on account of her cheap clothing. In the same manner her drew her into his office introduced her to the singers who were popularizing her song, and from that day until the end of her life she was a privileged character in the publishing house of Will Rossiter.

In Mr. Rossiter she also found another friend as staunch and true and reliable as William McKinley, and to him she sobbed out the story of her co-worker's fallacy. Learning the truth about the song that was making him a fortune, Mr. Rossiter added Beth Slater's name to the monthly payroll at what we thought was a staggering salary, and asked for the refusal of her lyrics.

The composer to Mr. Rossiter, because of his failure to play fair, never had the honor of another composition in the House.

With the assurance of a certain amount of money coming monthly into our hands, renovating the little house in Happy Valley was our first breathtaking adventure.

The old rag carpets, woven by the same hands that penned "Meet Me Tonight In Dreamland" were lifted from the floors; the faded paper torn from the walls, the cracked dishes discarded, the broken furniture carted out – not destroyed – there were many families in our community who were just as happy to get what we discarded as we were to discard it; but the few valuable pieces of furniture we possessed, antiques that linked the family with the spirit of the old South, were carefully handled and retained to add prestige to the newer and shiner things.

So absorbed had we been in the renovation of the old house that we were actually surprised when a printed copy of "Let Me Call You Sweetheart" made its appearance in the home.

How could the publishers work so fast? We questioned each other in astonishment. But once my brother, Beth and myself, in company with our parents, stood around the piano humming the melody that Leo Friedman had composed for the lyric, we seemed to realize its true value, and my father, with his arms about my sister, reverently thanks God for the gift entrusted to his care.

Like "Dreamland," Mr. Friedman brought out at his own expense "Let Me Call You Sweetheart" and strange to say, he sold his interest in this number to Harold Rossiter, competitor publisher to Will. Again Mr. Friedman reaped a nice fat sum for his interest, the price being 85 hundred dollars, but in this instance my sister was also considered, not by the composer but the publisher, and she chose to retain a royalty for her share instead of an outright sale as Friedman had made.

For three years the song brought a monthly reminder that it was all and more than we could ever have hoped for, and during this time the author had gained for herself a catalog of more than 200 songs; two especially outstanding numbers had been added to her list: "Tell Me That You Love Me" published by Will Rossiter, and another entitled, "Don't Wake Me Up, I Am Dreaming", published by Shapiro Bern-Stein of New York, a song Mr. Shapiro labeled an American classic.

Those two numbers ran neck and neck in sales with “Let Me Call You Sweetheart” for awhile and life really became a song of joy for the inhabitants of Happy Valley. But in the midst of our happiness came the sad news of Mr. Shapiro’s sudden death, and somehow, we sensed with the loss of this friend one avenue of our income would cease, and strange to say, we never received another penny from the publishing house on that particular song until the son of the famous publisher renewed the first copyright edition in 1937.

Having had little school advantages, we took up correspondence courses offered by legitimate collages, and behind the closed doors of our little home and with Beth as leader and father an ardent supporter the light from the lamp was often glowing far into the night. In order to acquaint ourselves with knowledge on simple subjects of history, art and literature we labored long and earnestly.

The summer of 1913 my sister for recreation more than profit, turned from the field of song writing to short fiction, and her first story, “Broken Shoes”, appeared in Collier’s Weekly in less than two months after she finished it.

Beth’s easy break into fiction caused my father to turn his eyes upon me and in a private conference he announced that it was time for the last of the brood to get busy. Had he slapped my face I would not have felt so injured in spirit, but to know I was looked upon as a failure because I hadn’t even made an effort stung like a wasp. Something had to be done about that, so I sought my sister.

“Father’s right,” she said, when I told her what had taken place. “I’ve known ever since we composed the chorus of ‘Let Me Call You Sweetheart’ together that you could write if you’d only apply yourself to the task.”

This statement was but adding insult to injury, and nothing less than a trip across the state, I insisted, would set me straight again.

When I returned unexpectedly three weeks later, I found the family in a state of confusion such as I’ve never witnessed before.

“We’re going to move,” my sister explained when she saw my distressed eyes roving about the bare walls of the house.

Everybody had something to say on the matter but nothing brought any relief to my troubled soul. Leave Happy Valley, the trees, the familiar bridle paths, the friends we knew throughout the country side, the place we’d been so happy in. It was unbelievable to me, and I loudly voiced my disapproval.

I have reason yet to believe the stunned feeling that enveloped me at that moment must have surely been a fore-warning of the unhappiness that lay ahead. I wept, I argued, I pleaded that we remain in Happy Valley, we moved into a large, only house near Nashville, a place my sister felt the family would be comfortable in until we could find just what we wanted. But scarcely had we settled in the new location when the music published business began to tumble.

Over night the royalties coming in from the catalog of sister’s numbers seemed to dwindle into nothingness and even editors began to buy sparingly of fiction.

Our savings, which had never been great because of our careless spending, disappeared like snow-flakes in the sun and I realized the move to the city was going to prove a far more serious venture in our lives than the family had anticipated.

“Don’t Wake Me Up, I Am Dreaming” had dropped into oblivion. “Tell Me That You Love Me,” was dead. “Meet Me Tonight In Dreamland” was not paying enough any more to justify a monthly check. Only “Let Me Call You Sweetheart” out of my sister’s full catalog was still holding the board and that very lightly. Sometimes 10, 12, 15 and occasionally \$25 came on the regular monthly royalty pay day, but so little even the publisher considered keeping books on it a bore, and finally one day we had an offer from Mr. Rossiter to buy the number outright, just to eliminate the bookkeeping annoyance.

This indeed was a vital thing for us to discuss and again I found my voice carrying little weight, but because of my noisy argument the song did not go out of the family just then. But another day when my sister happened to be in Chicago and I was not there to hold the restraining hand or press the argument in favor of keeping the number in our possession, she fell for the very generous price Mr. Rossiter offered for the outright control of the lyric and came home exceedingly proud of the cash in her pocket.

With the income from “Let Me Call You Sweetheart” gone, I faced the bare fact that I must knuckle down to some sort of task myself, and I began making pilgrimages to the city. But what I found to do that I was capable of doing, proved such uninteresting things that I began to reflect on the possibility of the creative ability my family insisted I possessed.

I had written one little folks story, a story and an article before we left Happy Valley. The article, my first effort, sold to McCalls, the little folks story sold to Boys Life of Cincinnati. The check in each instance was trivial but the efforts had sold – that was something, especially when one was floundering in uncertainty.

I remembered these bits of creative work another rainy afternoon while retuning home from a fruitless search for employment up town, and a sudden determination to enter the literary field took possession of me. Unlike my sister, when I decided on anything, it was a definite decision. Hence, the next morning when I announced to the family that I was turning my room into a den to write in, nobody seemed to question for a moment that I would write.

from: The Hickman County Times
Thursday – July 12, 1956

PART FIVE - CONCLUSION

(as told by Alice Whitson Norton – continued from last week)

Maybe because I chose the juvenile field for my endeavors – or maybe because I wrote about nature and only the things I knew immediately – was the reason I found a ready sale for my efforts; this I've never stopped to question. I only know once I began writing I wrote with a will, and before long my efforts, even though they were poor in plot and crude in construction, began furnishing substantial aid in our household.

In the face of serious depression and rumors of war breaking about us, I made a trip to Philadelphia and New York to make the personal acquaintances of the editors who were patronizing my work, and don't think I didn't make a great effort to cement that friendship, for I did, and today I still have the pleasure of writing for one of those first editors.

Strangely enough, the slump in the adult market did not seem to affect the juvenile magazines. The music business, that source from which our easy living had come for some seven years, was a closed book, however, and the outlook decidedly dark.

A couple of years passed, years in which we continually robbed Peter to pay Paul. Of course we always knew that the house in Happy Valley was ours to return to if worse came to worst, but we had grown up on the idea that the worst never happens.

We were mightily closed to disbelieving this, however, when Beth Slater's short stories again began attracting the notice of editors, and a number of stories were sold and our pressing obligations lifted.

Naturally I had to write a dozen juveniles to match the price paid for one story from my sister's pen, and I frequently fell short on my part, but I wrote regularly as the day came, and eventually found the courage to undertake verse.

Here I encountered what seemed an insurmountable barrier. According to my limited knowledge of words there were very few in the world that rhymed, and that second and fourth line very forcefully brought the keen realization to me of my ignorance in the matter of words, and I developed a keen desire for the study of them. Hence, the next check I received after my decision to add verse to my efforts and representing the full amount for a three-thousand word story, went for rhyming dictionary, a Writer's Marker Guide, and a small pamphlet entitled 'Rhymes And Meters', but what those three books did for me can never be estimated in dollars and cents.

Writing verse, even with all the help the new tools gave, was labor to me, equal to any pick and shovel job in the world, but my father stood back of these efforts; at heart he himself was a poet, but such things as he had written had been editorials.

Like my story work, I also pointed my verses to the juvenile markets and to my utter surprise, I soon found them selling far more rapidly than I could produce them; but practice makes perfect in any art, and so much practice followed in this venture on my behalf that finally the little rhyming words that had so eluded me in the beginning began to come tumbling right out of the pencil I wielded. Today, with hundreds of little verses to my credit, way down in my heart I seem to feel that some sweet spirit who perhaps never finished her mission on this earth still pushes my pencil.

In 1916, I believe it was, with all four walls of financial support laid and rumors of war enveloping America, my sister seemed to glimpse the future with the eye of a crystal gazer and created a story entitled, "I Knitter of Leige". This story brought a letter from every editor who saw it, but it took a contest in which judges instead of editors made the decision, to produce a check; even at that the story was not allowed first prize, but it was tripled-starred above the prize contest winner as one of the best stories of the year in O'Brien's selection the following January.

In the Autumn of 1916 while Beth Slater was making a trip to New York to investigate the fiction market, I located an old rambling brick house high on a hill and surrounded by 16 acres of land and many magnificent trees. The prices, since the place was selling for a mortgage was exceedingly reasonable, and our purse was exceedingly flat, but I saw inspiration in the view the old place offered. My brother, with a magic hand for growing things, saw possibilities in the acreage surrounding the house. The house was bargained for with a small down payment and monthly notes at a moderate rate. Hence, when Beth Slater returned from what proved to be a fruitless visit to the East, she was hilariously welcomed in the new-old house which we had moved into during her absence.

Establish Whitson Studio

We fitted up a little out-door house in the corner of the garden and settled down to work eight hours per day, with a screen between us. Our work went out on stationary bearing the caption: "The Whitson Studio – Where song, verse and stories are woven." With a letterhead like that, there was nothing to do but make it good.

In January 1917, with war and pestilence abroad in the land, my sister married George M. Whitson of very distant if any relationship, and who had earned the title of Captain in the Spanish-American War.

The Whitsons, at least our brand, had always been a very clannish set. Hence, it was all settled before the wedding date that Beth's marriage would not mean a break in the family nor did it. The captain soon became one of the family, and certainly, the family annexed themselves to him.

He was a prosperous stock and bond man and this along with the earnings of Beth Slater and myself, with the expert management of the place by our brothers, we soon found ourselves on easy street again.

In then midst of our plenty, "Let Me Call You Sweetheart" staged a phenomenal comeback. Overnight with a new generation to sing and dance to its melody, it again became a best seller, earning for its author international fame and financial comfort for the publisher.

Of course we regretted the sale of the contract, but so pleasantly situated were we, it troubled us little until the business operated by Captain Whitson crashed. Again we found ourselves at the bottom of the ladder. Then was when the knowledge that her creation was furnishing a comfortable living for the publisher's family in Chicago, while Beth Slater was getting nothing from it began to hurt.

Harold Rossiter possessed not the generous heart of his brother, Will; a bargain with him was a bargain. He had bought for a small sum the rights to a great song and the profits belonged to him.

But the fact that she had sold her birthright for a pittance began to gnaw at the author's heart-strings and her sensitive nature suffered from it, suffered so intently because she realized had she but retained her interest in the song, want and need would never have touched her or her family circle. The thought played heavily on her mind and the high-tensioned nerves began to tighten. She became ill, operations took place, huge hospital bills, doctors, nurses, everything that demanded money seemed to come to us.

Home Mortgaged

The saving account went, the home was mortgaged, by extra land acquired by the captain was sold, and yet funds to meet the daily need were lacking. Everything had been wiped out except our indomitable belief in our own ability. On that believe the physically strong of our family staged a come-back.

With the healing of Beth's broken body, the creative powers began to assert themselves. Verse markets were open and the silent pictures offered a new avenue for expression.

Behind closed doors Beth plotted her first and together we moved through the five reels inch by inch a hundred times or more, but when we started the finished product out in answer to a contest offer by the late Allen Holubar, we felt reasonably sure we had a winner.

Because of illness of the star who was to play in the winning picture, the contest was deferred, but the story brought recognition and Holubar recommended a New York agent to handle it. The scenario was offered the literary representative as Holubar suggested and it a remarkably short time a check for thirteen hundred dollars for the scenario was in our hands.

While the Captain wrestled with his new venture, and Beth Slater plotted the outline of a scenario, I wrote juvenile material. When the scenario was finished, my sister and I went into seclusion and worked up the picture step by step together.

Like so many other efforts from this gifted sister of mine, who seemed to have a way of stepping on the top rung of the ladder first, we found our second and third effort in scenario creation hanging on our hands, and before we could account for this we learned that the first story bearing our heart's blood, and then in the making, had been halted on account of the star's sudden death.

This bit of news put a damper on our spirits for a little while. It was resold, however, in 1926 to Universal Corporation of Los Angeles, and produced by Denver Dixon with John Gilbert and Adolph Menjo in the star roles. The director brought the movie to Nashville on his way east for a premiere, showing it in Nashville first in courtesy to my sister.

Married in 1924

In 1924 I married, and though I only moved across the city, the distance was entirely too much between the two of us. Beth, who had never felt the responsibility of housekeeping, found such duties irksome to her temperamental soul.

She worried through trying conditions for 18 months, months in which genius fretted with menus, cooks, inefficient housekeepers, things that so upset her physical being that she found herself unable to do creative work. The old nerve trouble began to show up again, and at the doctor's order she closed her study and went into the gardens surrounding the house, in an effort to regain her health by working in the soil. The body remained frail, however, and all creative work was abandoned for months.

In the fall of '26 when my father without any appearance of illness, simply walked into our garden and failed to come back, I closed my house and returned to my sister's home. I did this chiefly to relieve my sister of the burden of housekeeping and to spread what cheer I could in a house minus the enthusiastic spirit of my father.

With the household responsibilities lifted, my sister's health improved rapidly, and eventually she was doing creative work again in earnest. For a couple of years she consistently turned out splendid material in story, scenario and verse, but the mechanical structure of her body, robbed of some vital organ in an operation several years back, could not endure the strain of creative work for any length of time.

Only the indomitable will that possessed us all furnished the strength required to finish her last gigantic piece of work. Shortly after this was completed the long over-strained nerves linking the system together began to tighten and as suddenly as the snapping of a violin string they broke, and the little body collapsed in a state of helplessness.

Invalid Four Years

Four years of invalidism followed, years in which everything that love and money could do to restore a human being to normalcy was done, but to no avail. And yet sometimes I wonder if through her suffering the "little shadow" that had followed in her steps all the days of her life did not reap a harvest; in sacrificial giving, in character building and spiritual contact that would never have been hers otherwise.

During the four years my sister lay a helpless invalid my workshop was within 20 feet of her bed, and I made a record of writing a story a day for juvenile publications, not for the glory, but to provide comfort for one whose unselfish nature had given me the most delightful girlhood a heart could ask for.

Never once in that four years did she have to call the second time. Night and day her first call brought me to her side, and when the end came in April, 1930, she was in my arms. Something from my soul that I have never been able to recapture went out with her on that mysterious journey. I felt then and I still feel it was the unity of spirits that even death could not separate.

At the funeral of this gifted woman who had given so many beautiful songs to the world, no voice was raised in song, only the tone from a violin's muted strings and the soft echo of a piano accompaniment spilled its sweetness on the air, and as the body was borne from the home the strains of "Meet Me Tonight In Dreamland" softly resounded through the high-ceilinged house in which she had lived.

For months after the death of my sister, I was a ship without compass, chart or port. Then slowly, I began picking up and retying the broken threads as best I could and turned to creative work as she had done on my heart-breaking occasions for solace and comfort.

Beginning with 1925 the second copyrights on my of Beth Slater's compositions began to come to light, and among them were "Meet Me Tonight In Dreamland" and "Let Me Call You Sweetheart". According to his ever generous heart, Will Rossiter came forward immediately with a substantial advance royalty offer for renewal. However, Will Rossiter's brother, Harold, knowing we would have upper hand on the renewal had sold the song to a New York corporation headed by Max Mayer. Fortunately, Max Mayer was one of the greatest Jews I have ever

known. When he learned of the long overdue royalties he made a very generous offer for the new copyright.

The one bleeding wound to my soul today is that my sister did not live to enjoy the heritage from her songs in their second copyright editions. I regret that she does not know that the “little shadow” has made a place for herself in the writing world. Today I go as regularly to my desk as a plowman to his field. Perhaps Beth Slater does know this, and is happy.

THE END

from: The Hickman County Times
Thursday – July 19, 1956