**1. In the beginning**

When Mark died on April 5, 1981, I had been married to him for sixty years, lacking six months. So if anybody is sufficiently knowledgeable to write a biography about him, I’m the one. I met him when he came to Macon, Georgia, to take a job as a cub reporter on the Macon Telegraph. It was 1915. He was nineteen. He delighted in recounting the circumstances of our meeting:

“After some months in Macon, I began to see frequently on the sports pages of the Telegraph glowing stories about a girl, Willie Snow”, he would say. “She played forward on the Lanier High School girls’ basketball team, and every time the team played, she starred. Lanier could lose 10 to 30, but no matter, Snow starred,” so the Telegraph reported. “It got so bad I finally said to George Sparks, the sports editor who wrote the stories. I found out later he had a crush on her. ‘I’d certainly like to meet that girl who stars whether her team wins or loses.’

“He said he’d be glad to introduce me if I would go with him the next Sunday night to the B.Y.P.U., that is, the Baptist Young Peoples Union. So I went. We got there early, but soon Willie, wearing a dark blue taffeta dress that swished when she walked, came in with two of her brothers. They were all giggling to beat the band. George introduced me to Willie, and she kept on giggling. But anyway, I went with her to church and then walked home with her. When we got there and she gave me olive-and-cream-cheese sandwiches and iced lemonade, we sat in the swing on the front porch, eating the sandwiches and drinking the lemonade. After that I was hooked. It was a case of true love that didn’t always run smoothly, but we made it in spite of everything.”

Those were the actual circumstances of our meeting, though I don’t believe I giggled that much. But because I was born in Savannah and often visited my aunt in Guyton, thirty miles away, Mark sometimes changed his story to swear solemnly that he coaxed me out of the Ogeechee swamp with a stick of peppermint candy, and I, barefoot.

Mark looked very different from other nineteen-year-olds, though it is hard to say why. His face, oval-shaped, had unblemished, shiny white and pink skin, a large nose, nice mouth, lean jaws, the whole lit by keenly alive, dark, ocean-blue eyes. He was slim and of medium height. He walked briskly, head up and seemingly questing, almost always with a rolled up Telegraph in his right hand. Every day he marked all the stories he had written with vigorous black checks. Some days the paper looked as if he had written every local story.

He was a fine talker with a pleasant, well-pitched voice, not too high, not too low. He gestured with both hands. When amused, he smiled entirely with his eyes. They sparkled brilliantly, relaxing and warming his whole face, but his lips never opened. Nor did he ever laugh out loud; he simply drew in long breath and let it out softly, steam-like.

He was proud of his family, though not boringly so. To begin with, old English records spelled the name Ethridge in innumerable, intricate ways, but by the fifteenth century it was whittled down to Etheredge. During the American Revolution, so tradition has it, those Etheredges on the side of the colonists dropped the second “e” in indignant rage with the Etheredges who stayed loyal to the English crown. Or it could be that some Etheredge ancestor grew tired of writing all those “e’s”. That struck Mark as admirably sensible.

However, long before the “e” was dropped, there lived an Etheredge with whom Mark especially enjoyed claiming kin. He was Sir George Etheredge, England’s famous Restoration comedy-dramatist and author of scatological limericks. Sir George Etheredge’s grandfather, a vintner, was one of Bermuda’s original “adventurers”, and Sir George’s father, Captain George Etheredge, lived there until his death in 1650.

Mark felt high excitement in 1969 when, on a visit to Bermuda, he walked the extensive land once owned by his family. He wrote in the guest book of James Stewart Duncan, the current owner, “Get off my land!”

Another ancestor who seemed noteworthy to mark was William E. Ethridge, who came from England to Virginia in 1645 and accumulated a substantial estate. When he died in 1716, that property, among others, included a thousand acres of land in Norfolk County, Virginia. About that time other Etheredges settled along the southern coast of Virginia and the northern shores of North Carolina. From there Mark’s branch of Etheredges moved southwest by slow stages until they finally reached Old Marion, Mississippi.

On his maternal side, Mark had a grandmother who was Scottish, a Davidson. This Scottish blood in his veins pleased him inordinately. On special occasions he wore the Davidson plaid in scarfs and tams, and once on a visit to Scotland he bought enough plaid to make our youngest son, David, a tuxedo jacket. Mark frequently suggested Scottish songs for groups to sing. This revered grandmother came to America as a young girl to join her brothers in Aberdeen, Mississippi. Her parents had died in Scotland. “Mama told me she had a thick, Scottish brogue,” Mark bragged.

Mark was born April 22, 1896 in Meridian, Mississippi. He was the seventh of nine children, five girls and four boys. He was the youngest boy. His father, William Nathaniel Ethridge, worked as a very young boy during the Civil War to help support the family. Afterwards he read law and became a member of the Mississippi bar. And advanced thinker for his day, he condemned the privately-owned Meridian water works and won municipal ownership for the city. He attaked the Bell Telephone Company as a monopoly and helped establish the Meridian Home Telephone Company, a competing system that has since disappeared. When he died, the Memphis Commercial Appeal called him the leading lawyer of Mississippi. But Mark’s mother, Mary, found her husband had left her very little money. He owned, among other things, bales of worthless telephone stock and two Negro churches.

Mark’s father was very finicky about his dress. All William Nathaniel’s clothes and shoes were tailor-made. He and Mary used to go to Hot Springs, Arkansas, and he always took along his Prince Albert and his evening clothes. “How he got such fancy notions, God only knows,” Mark mused when he talked about his father. “He made big fees in his law practice and spent them like water or gave them away. Long after he got to be the leading member of the Mississippi bar, I knew him to go into police court and fight a case where he thought some injustice was involved. He was always trying to get more pay for firemen, policemen, and railroad workers. He used to have silver services that had been given to him by the firemen and the police.”

This “dude or democrat” had almost as many black clients as white. He had a reputation of never refusing a client because of color or financial circumstances. One of his most celebrated cases involved a Negro accused of murdering a white man. William Nathaniel’s defense was so strong that a jury, all white of course, found the black innocent, a rare verdict in those days in Mississippi. Mark was fond of boasting that two brothers of the murdered man, enraged by the verdict, came to his father’s office, threatening to horsewhip him. He simply picked them up, one after the other, and threw them down the stairs. He did it with one arm at that.

When he was about ten or eleven years old his mother sent him to the grocery store across town, on the other side of the railroad tracks. On the way back he ran around a train standing on one set of tracks but failed to see another one coming. It knocked him down and cut off his arm just below the sholder. Mary always insisted that her husband hugged harder with one arm than any other man with two.

Mark never enjoyed jokes about Negroes. He remembered something his father had said to him when he was very young: “Nothing that embarrasses anybody is ever funny.”

William Nathaniel also defended prostitutes, arrested for plying their traid to zealously. When he succeeded in getting the judge to discharge them, when they had served their time, he brought them home for Mary to teach them sewing so they could make an honest living as seamstresses.

Mark’s father was a Methodist and his mother a Baptist. The children were allowed to go where they pleased. Five of them became Baptists and four Methodists. “I was confirmed a Methodist,” Mark related, “and won all the stars for Bible reading that the Epworth League offered. I was perfectly content being a Methodist. But the Baptist church installed an organ that had to be pumped up by hand. For some reason I don’t understand, considering my aversion for manual labor, I left the Methodist church and joined the Baptist just so I could pump that organ. That was the depth of my religious convictions.

\*\*\*. He remained an ardent Bible reader all his life. In fact in his middle years he wrote a letter to the manager of the then new Hilton hotel in Atlanta complaining that there was no Gideon Bible in our room. In fact, he told him he didn’t consider the Hilton a first-class hotel for two reasons: there was no bottle-opener in the bathroom and no Bible on the bedside table.

In these early years of the century, Mark delivered the Meridian Dispatch with the help of a worn-out mare named Nellie. Nellie knew the paper route as well as Mark did, and when somebody cancelled his subscription, Mark had trouble with Nellie. She had been accustomed to stopping at that subscriber’s house, and she refused to go on without considerable coaxing and rein slapping.

Meridian had a hitching ordinance requiring anyone leaving his horse on the street to tie her to a hitching block, no matter how gentle she was. One cold winter afternoon, Mark left Nellie in front of the building in which his father had his law office. While he was gone, the sun dipped behind the building and left Nellie in the shade. So she dragged her hitching block across the street where the sun still shone.

Almost every afternoon Mark and his friends played fireman. They built a contraption on the stable that rang a bell and moved a ship to flick Nellie on the rump. She’d run out, get between the shafts of the buggy, and they’d hitch up, jump in the buggy and race two or three blocks to the make-believe fire.

“One morning before I went to school,” Mark told the children years later, “I went to the stable to feed Nellie and found she wasn’t there. I was shocked and frightened: she had never gone off before. I looked all around the neighborhood, but couldn’t find her. I told everyone I saw that she was gone, and when I reached school I got word she was at the vet’s once or twice, but she had never gone by herself. I had taken her to the vet once or twice, but she had never gone by herself. The vet said he had discovered her waiting at the front door when he got to his office that morning, rolling on the ground in great agony with what seemed to be a terrible stomachache. He thought she had eaten some kind of poison barley and had given her medicine, but nothing seemed to help.

“When she saw me, she carried on in the most touching manner. She whinnied and tried to get up, but the pain was too great. The vet said, ‘Let her lie there.’ I stayed with her the rest of the day and into the night until she died.”

Mark was heartbroken. He adored Nellie. And this love of an animal, any animal—horse, mule, cat, dog—remained with him all his years.

Another lifelong characteristic, his determination to finish whatever he set his mind to, also surfaced early. But his family didn’t consider it determination as much as stubbornness and, in some instances, temper. He had a temper, all right; when he really got mad, he stayed mad; but it was his determination that was overriding. One morning he flew into a rage because he wanted to do something and his mother wouldn’t let him. He fell to the floor and screamed and kicked as if he’d never stop. However, the blare of a circus parade band finally penetrated his ears. (The Ethridge’s home was near the downtown section of Meridian.) Instantly he shut up and went outside to see the parade. It was a long parade, and by the time it was over, he had forgotten what he was so angry about. However, that was no problem. He asked his mother, and when she told him, he fell right back down to the floor and resumed his screaming and kicking as if he had never been interrupted.

William Nathaniel was 54 when he suffered a strock as he finished arguing a case in the Laurel, Mississippi, courthouse. He died a few hours later. Mark was fourteen. Though hihs mother had her hands full rearing all the children who were still at home, she managed many small acts to show her affection. Mark always remembered how she put a sweet potato in the oven while he was at school, so that by the time he got home early in the afternoon, it was squashy-soft, with a generous portion of butter and a sprinkling of cinnamon flavoring a slit down the middle. Mark insisted he never tasted anything equal to it.

*Suggestions on rewriting this last paragraph:*

Mary was left with \*\*\* children still at home. Then a brief description of how they made it. (Will, then 27, was a lawyer in his father’s firm and helped support them and helped put the girls through college. Mary thought the girls needed college more than boys, so they could become school teachers, etc.)

Mark liked school. More than half a century later, he wrote a reminiscing letter (it is dated July 30, 1959) to his sister Annie, two years younger than he: “I have vivid recollections about the first and fifth grades. Cousin Lena Davidson taught me in the first grade, and, because she was our cousin, she made an example of me by cracking a pencil over my head for behaving like a modern kindergarten child. She was always strict, you know, and took a good part of it out on me. The fifth grade I remember well—I believe Miss Celia Anderson was the teacher—it was in that grade that I really developed a passion for reading: so much so that I almost put my eyes out. I remember Miss Anderson told me to tell Mama and Papa that my eyes were going bad and how insulted I was that they didn’t believe it at first. But, as you remember, I did wind up with glasses.

“I remember very well one episode with you when I was in the third grade and you were in the first grade. We heard that Pat Moore, who was principal, was sick, and we considered that as good reason as any not to go to school. I am sure it was your devilish inspiration, but we decided to take her flowers. We picked some poppies—or may-pops as I remember we called them; at any rate, some common flowers growing along the sidewalk—and took them to her house. We killed enough time not to go to school that day and got spankings for it when Mama found out.

“It was always difficult for me to get to school on time. The firehouse was on the corner of the block that East End occupied, and we had to pass it on the way to school.

“Another thing I remember about the third grade was that the teacher, was it Miss Smith?, had a passion for poetry or, more correctly, a passion for making us learn it. I had to stay after school one day for pulling a girl’s hair, one of the Slaughter girls, I believe, and learn a good portion of “The Charge of the Light Brigade”. I don’t think children are made to learn poetry as early now, but it would be a good thing if they were.”

Mark especially like high school. During his senior year he made the debating team and so did his friend, Jeff Ram. They debated throughout Mississippi and some places in Alabama. The biggest interschool debate was with the York, Alabama, high school. The topic was: Resolved that the steam engine had had a greater effect on civilization than the printing press. Mark couldn’t recall in later life which side he and Jeff took, for they prepared equally well for both sides in order to rebut; but he always contended that if he had been given a choice, we would have chosen the negative. He agreed with Victor Hugo that the invention of the printing press was the greatest event in history.

Many years after that debate, a quarter of a century at least, Mark went to Minneapolis to speak at a banquet celebrating the 500th anniversary of the invention of movable type and the opening of a new newspaper plant by John and Mike Gardner Cowles. At the beginning of that speech he said, “Just consider how many of our liberties are due to Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press. Before he gave the world the art of printing, what libraries there were were the properties of princes or monasteries, and literacy was confined to the few who were of the Church or of the courts. Then came the printing press. Literacy generated human aspirations and gave human beings the outlet for the expression of their aspirations. It is not too much to say that the invention of movable type was in reality the beginning of the emergence of the world from the Dark Ages. Martin Luther certainly felt, and said, that it was responsible for the success of the Reformation.

“Virtually every right in the Bill of Rights has its tap roots in the art of printing. Freedom of worship as we know it, freedom of speech and of the press, freedom of assembly and the right of petition for redress of grievances are all meaningless phrases unless based upon and supported by the printed word. It has been through these 500 years man’s instrument in the achievement of his aspirations for freedom and his desire to improve himself as a social being.”

Though Mark gave a great deal of his time to the debating team, his Number One subject during his senior year was history. A young teacher, Miss Frances Cole from Columbia, Missouri, \*\*\* a fire that burned all his life. “She gave the teaching of history its finest meaning,” Mark insisted. “She taught me the difference between the real and the ostensible in men’s motives. She set me upon a course of study that lasted not just for one year but for all of my years.”

While in high school Mark also began writing a column for the Meridian Star called “Baseball Bubbles”. He had always been interested in newspapers. He remembered reading a newspaper for the first time when he was eight. He spread the paper on the floor and kneeled on top of it. One headline read: “JAPAN STRIKES THE FIRST BLOW”, referring to the opening of the Russo-Japanese War in 1904. After he graduated from high school in 1913, Mark worked full-time for the Star for a year. There was no money for college.

Then in September 1917, with a year’s earnings, he quit his job and left home to enter college. But his year’s earnings were not enough. He went directly to Chancellor Butts, saying, “Here I am. I hope you can give me a scholarship.” The Chancellor said, “I’m sorry, I have no scholarship to give you, but there is a job—ringing the bell for classes.” Mark took it. He and another boy who alternated with him rang the bell at intervals necessary, from eight o’clock in the morning until the last class in the afternoon. Students have reported it was the most chaotic year at the university. Mark let the history and English classes, which were his favorites, run overtime, and the mathematics and science classes, which he disliked, got short shrift.

Although fraternities had been barred from Ole Miss, Mark joined the S.A.E. fraternity by going to Jackson, Tennessee, and enrolling in Union University. Everybody had to do that to be a member of any fraternity at Ole Miss. Just as soon as the was pledged—it took about two and a half weeks—he went back to the University of Mississippi. He often wondered what the president and dean of Union thought of that ploy.

That freshman year Mark saw a good deal of William Faulkner, who was the son of the provost of the university and lived on campus. Though Faulkner, too, was in the S.A.E., he created no strong impression on Mark. Faulkner hung around with the drinking crowd on campus, and in those days, though it is hard to believe now, Mark didn’t drink, not even a beer.

Mark stayed at Ole Miss for only one year before he had to drop out for lack of money. His mother thought it was more important for his three younger sisters to have college educations than it was for him. They needed college diplomas to teach school, which she considered the only proper vocation for her daughters.

Mark was terribly unhappy over dropping out of Ole Miss, for, in spite of being badly bitten by the newspaper virus, he thought he must be a lawyer. All the men in his family were lawyers. Besides his father, he had three brothers who were just starting their practices, and at least three cousins who were lawyers. During his young years all this leaning was toward the law. He envisioned himself in the black robes of a Supreme Court judge.

However, at nineteen a newspaper job seemed his only solution. He was offered a choice of three reporting jobs. The owner of the Meridian Star also ran the Mobile, Alabama, Item and the Enquirer Sun in Columbus, Georgia. He said Mark could work on any one he liked. Mark chose Columbus. Forty-eight years later in March 1963, Mark told how he made his decision in a piece he did at the request of Mr. W.G. Tucker, editor of the Enquirer, for a special edition celebrating that paper’s 120th anniversary. “I had worked at the Meridian Star before going to college,” he wrote, “and was already dubbed around my home town as ‘Scoop, the Cub Reporter’, after a comic strip that was then running. I had to get away from that, so Meridian was out. I thought Mobile was a charming, if a dead, civic corpse. But the thing that really swung my decision for Columbus was the fact that it had a marble Y.M.C.A. Even though my staring salary was $17.50 a week, I envisioned a place that had a marble Y.M.C.A. as one where an ambitious young fellow could merely let down his bucket and bring up gold.”

Mark did not “bring up gold”, but he found other compensations in Columbus. “…My stay in Columbus was pleasant. There were good stories for reporters; for instance, the ‘Slata’ Gibson murder and the big gambling story which I wrote, but for which Briggs Fakor, also a member of the staff, got his throat cut—not too badly, but nevertheless uncomfortably—and the wild night when Phoenix City and Garard went dry. There were grand free lunches at some of the better bars around Columbus that helped considerably to augment my salary.

“There were good long walks in the Alabama hills and up along the Chattahoochee on Sunday afternoons with Robert Munn, a fraternity brother and one of the most intelligent, sensitive people I have ever known.” Mark became attached to Columbus. “Oh yes indeed Columbus was a grand place when I had all my hair and all my teeth and all the rest of a cocky young man who thought the world was his oyster.”

Evidently Mark looked at Columbus through much rosier glasses after forty-eight years. But he wasn’t too happy at first and wrote his mother on July 4, 1915, shortly after arriving there, a rather pitiful letter. “Have met several of my S.A.E. brothers over here and they are nice to me when they meet me on the street. But I work so hard there is no time for them to take me anywhere. I get to bed about 2:30 in the morning, get up about 11:30, take a bath and swim until 12 o’clock, and then dress and have dinner at 12:30, go to work at 1 o’clock, and work until the next morning. So you see I have practically no time at all. Possibly it is best for me that I don’t. Maybe I would be spending y time idly or foolishly.”

In addition to his job as reporter, he soon began writing a column called “Shoes and Ships and Sealing Wax”. He also told his mother of his shattered hopes of returning to Ole Miss. “…I began to think about not being able to go back to school next year, and it made me so miserable…However, I expect to live as cheaply as I possibly can over here and go back after next…”

A little further on in the same letter he wrote, “Well, I have my first payday Tuesday, but needless to say it and some more I will draw next week are already paid out. I will have to pay the Y.M.C.A. $11, and I still owe for the first two night I was here when I had to stay at a hotel.”

and one of the best talkers. There were nice people on my beats: Frank Foley, Bentley Cappell, Judge Cozzart, Ed Wohlwander, the Scarboroughs, Louis and his father…

“There were nice people, too, on the Enquirer: Charlie Willis, ‘Old Man’ Tucker, father of the editor, with his dry wit and encouragement for youngsters. There was George Googe, now an A.P. of L big shot; Tondee, a printer who lent me money every now and then for the simple purpose of eating between paydays, and Costa, the big stereotype whom I though in a reckless moment that I could like and discovered to my great surprise that I couldn’t. And there was Nunnally Johnson, now, indeed, a Hollywood big shot, whom I broke in as a reporter to take my place as I was leaving. Nunnally’s first story was an interview with Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson, who was then playing Columbus in, I believe, ‘The Passing of the Third Floor Back’. It was a scorching interview in which Sir Johnston paid his repects to ‘that wild man’, Gypsy Smith Jr., who had a day or so before denounced the stage, along with gambling and drinking and a lot of other things, as a pursuit of the devil.

“The literary rage of my days in Columbus was the book Are You a Bromide?, by, I believe, Gelett Burgess, and the favorite nonsensical quatrain was the one about the purple cow. There was much talk, too, about the Montessori Schools, precursor of the present-day progressive school, where children learn to express themselves even if they can’t learn to read.

“A favorite recreation on Sunday afternoons was a streetcar ride out to Wynnton, made all the more pleasant in my case because at the end of the line there was not only a park but a charming young

Its precarious financial condition aside, Mark wasn’t impressed with the Enquirer-Sun as a newspaper. Still for three months he was fairly content working for it. Then a disgraceful thing happened. A lazy editor slept through the biggest story of the year that broke right under his nose. Somebody, either from the AP or the UP, woke him one evening around ten or eleven o’clock and told him that a mob had taken Leo Frank from the state prison farm at Milledgeville and was headed toward Atlanta to lynch him.

Leo Frank’s trial for murder had held the rapt attention of the public for many months. In 1913 Mary Feagan, an employee of Frank, an Atlanta manufacturer of shoe laces, had arrived at the factory on a holiday and been murdered. (She had been ill on the regular payday.) Frank admitted being at the factory but denied murdering the girl. The trial was delayed while the Georgia authorities tried to gather evidence to convict him. Finally they called in a Pinkerton detective from new York. After a supposedly thorough investigation, the Pinkerton man declared all the evidence pointed to Frank as the guilty party, and the trial began.

The proceedings were frequently interrupted by hostile outbursts from a mob outside the courthouse. That Frank was a Jew might have inflamed the mob, though there was no public acknowledgement of prejudice. The jury returned a verdict of guilty, and Frank was sentenced to be hanged. However, in 1915 Governor Nathaniel E. Harris, because of doubt surround the case, commuted the death sentence to life imprisonment. As it turned out, the governor did Frank no favor. He was hanged from a tree in Marietta, about forty miles from Atlanta.

The Enquirer-Sun’s failure to cover the lynching was for Mark the end of his connection with that paper. He wanted to resign and get a job on the Macon Telegraph, which had quite a good reputation. Very shortly the way opened. When the Enquirer-Sun sent him to Macon to cover a highway convention, he went to the Telegraph office and introduced himself to George Long, the managing editor, who asked Mark who wrote the column in the Enquirercalled “Shoes and Ships and Sealing Was”. Mark replied, “I do”, and Long said, “How about coming to Macon?”