

Chapter 11 - Cooks at the Ramey Children's Home

Mary Painter

Mary Painter cooked for twenty-six years for Ramey-Estep. Gertrude Ramey hired her in 1979.

"I came to be part of this episodic grace-filled style as each day brought surprise and often crisis. The State Police installed a police scanner right in her bedroom, because they often rescued children at night," Mary recalled.

"Gertrude Ramey housed fifty-three children at the Ramey Home at one time. I've never met anybody like her; she gave and she shared. Once she cashed in her insurance policy to buy a graduation dress for one of the girls. She used her own money to pay for piano lessons. June Conn donated the dance classes, but GR paid for the piano lessons," Mary emphasized.

"Twenty-six years ago in 1979, I answered an ad in the ADI for a cook at the Ramey Home. I worked for Gertrude for ten years until she died. I continue to cook for the Ramey Estep Home." Mary said.

"Gertrude's policies were formed for function. We always said grace before each meal. The children learned to pray too, and what it really meant to pray. Part of my cook's job too, was to greet guests and to answer questions about how Gertrude started her Home for Children, when people toured the campus. So, I was fond of telling this story:

At one point in the establishment of the Home, she was down to her last food on the table with a houseful of children to feed, and she clearly did not have any prospects for their next day, when a little boy reminded her, "Miss Ramey, let's just pray about it." "Gertrude believed in prayer; the next morning the porch was filled with baskets of food." Mary continued. "Gertrude had no long-term plan. She ran the Home in the same simplistic manner she had in 1944 when she converted from a boarding house for Ashland Oil workers in Catlettsburg. As children were brought in, she made room for them. It was a basic needs program for a safe haven, hot food and clean beds. She depended upon the contributions of others. If professional counseling were available, she did not avail herself of it. Nor perhaps did she even believe in it. Neither did she pretend to be a counselor, although she often found ways to praise a child, and to spur it on. She did not allow a child to become maudlin. And she certainly did not allow it to feel deprived," Mary said.

"If a child needed something special, and Gertrude didn't have the money to just buy it, she would go down to Ashland and call on one of the merchants. One way or another, she'd come home with what that child needed; and she was dedicated to us, her workers. We loved her too. We worried right along with her. We knew we could depend upon her. And that brings up another feature of her life: her dedication and loyalty to the children."

"She almost never left the Home. She was cautious about leaving the children. While I don't recall any real problems that occurred when she was there, Gertrude feared an accident; she stayed in house almost continuously for many years.

As the new cook, in 1979, I learned to arrive by 7 a.m., to prepare Gertrude's menu. We had freezers of food in reserve. Fresh turkeys and hams were donated on a regular basis. Often, fresh vegetables came

in, we all helped process them; even the older children helped and therefore learned to cook. Betty Jo Lucas was the breakfast cook. Betty Jo was a beautiful girl who grew up at the Ramey Home and she never left. Her story was that she wanted to leave and Gertrude bought a bus ticket for her to go where she wanted to go. Betty Jo got on the bus. Then before the bus left, Betty Jo got off and walked back to the only home she knew. Her room was right above the kitchen, so she got up early to prepare the early morning meal for the children. Betty Jo loved to sing. It was usual in the mornings, that she serenaded the children as she cooked eggs and baked biscuits. Each child had a hot meal before the school bus came. I bought our meat selection at White's. The children ate pork chops, ground beef, chicken and all kinds of good food. We received our canned goods from Ashland Distributing Center.

Of course, I was hired to cook but I soon learned to perform any extraordinary deed. Sometimes, the work was ordinary, and I drove a child to the doctor, or to dance classes, and for piano lessons. I lived only a few blocks away. When new children arrived I stayed all night to help. However, one night Gertrude took fifteen children from McLaughlin County of age six months to twelve years old. For reasons of security, they were brought in the middle of the night. She kept them for months until the social workers could get them settled into homes. They were all related, and had been living in a bad situation. Gertrude had her own way of counseling. She always gave a new child a stuffed toy. It was something that child could hug and hold for its own while it was so frightened.

"She worked with social workers to place children. Two precious children named Brandon and Crystal came when their mother died. The father came and claimed Crystal who was just a tiny baby; but he said Brandon wasn't his son. So, Brandon was placed with an adoptive family. I won't forget those children and the way that man behaved. He signed away his custody of Brandon without a blink.

We all cried when Brandon left for his new adoptive home. We tried to ease his anxiety by teaching him a song to sing. We became attached to each child. My job was definitely not a regular cook's job. As Gertrude became older, and the number of children brought to her, increased, it was difficult for her to observe everything, as she always had. She rested in her room between walks through the halls to check on operations. She was satisfied only when the children were safe, she expected one adult to sleep near the children on each floor. Later on, she came to depend upon staff. As you expect, problems arose from that as Gertrude became frail and her eyesight failed. Some members of her staff, Minnie Suttles and Bettye Jane Sullivan were former homeless children who could not adjust to the outside world. Gertrude wanted to help everyone it seemed, as ill advised as that was," Mary said.

"Her Board of Directors checked in on us too. They came to offer support." Mary added. "It was another level of comfort. But when state regulations grew, it became necessary to hire a regular housekeeper to do the laundry, ironing, and to clean.

Traditionally, the older children helped the younger ones with homework, and dressed them for school in the morning. At night, they often shared a room with a baby. We had outside volunteers too," Mary added.

"When difficult cases came in, Gertrude knew what to do. Bettye Jane Sullivan, I was told was rescued from a shanty boat on the Ohio River. Her stomach distended from malnutrition. Gertrude placed Betty Jayne next to her own bed and slept with her hand across the baby's chest to make certain she was breathing," Mary recalled.

Mary Painter, Cook and Assistant to Gertrude Ramey.

It was not often, but foundlings were left at the doorstep too. According to legend, Tommy Smith, whose arms were twisted with the effects of polio, was left in a cardboard box at the Catlettsburg Home in 1946. He grew up in Gertrude's care. She sent him to school and he became a chef at the Henry Clay hotel in Ashland. His son, Bill and daughter also came to live with Gertrude years later when their mother became ill.

Social workers made decisions for the children as to whether they were kept at the Ramey Home or sent to foster care or to adoption. Instances were that a boy, if he were older, was transferred and left his little sister behind.

If a child caused any trouble, Gertrude Ramey had them sent away; even siblings were separated in such a manner. Gertrude's management style was not popular with America Holbrook, supervisor for Social Services. America brought in one of her most difficult cases in November 1961 when James and Mary Fannin along with their sisters Martha and Hallie Ann, and brothers Delbert and Elbert, and Henry T., and Mary Lou were shuttled to the Home in police cars after a violent confrontation between their parents and the Sheriff.

A major conflict developed after that, when Gertrude posed the Fannin children for a newspaper photographer, with a sensational headline: 'Family Found Living in under a rock cliff.' America Holbrook recoiled. She wanted young children protected, to be adopted into families right away. Gertrude, wanted to keep the children. In July 1965, James and Mary Fannin were returned for a third time, and came to the Home to stay. In her way, Gertrude did become attached. Bonnie and Connie Ramey, identical twin girls born in 1953 in Huntington, West Virginia to Helen Juanita Chapman were brought to Gertrude at five days old. Gertrude rebuffed all offers to adopt them, even to Cowboy Boy, the 1950 television personality, who once entertained at the Ramey Home.

Neither woman had children of her own; except for a short marriage to Bryan Holbrook, America lived a solitary life dedicated to social work. Gertrude chose a life of hard work as well. America was a highly trained social worker, with an advanced degree from University of Chicago. She was a caring advocate for children. Gertrude was self-trained.

Gertrude Ramey's children became marketing tools. She dressed each child for Sunday church; after church, still wearing best clothes, she instructed the child to be 'nice to guests.' No one denied Gertrude needed help for the children. Her approach to raising money was straightforward. She used the media, and sometimes she made a personal call.

From the onset, Gertrude used her first child to generate capital. When Violet Stevens told her story in 1944 of being held captive and abused by her parents, Gertrude embellished the tale and even printed a version of it on a fund raising brochure.

Except in a general way, the law was not clear about child abuse at that time, and there were no teeth-in laws to protect children from harm; none were passed until the 1975 when the Commonwealth's constitution was amended to upgrade the Judiciary with the Judicial Article. Before then, and sometimes after, America and Gertrude worked in her own way to solve the problems, not always in tandem nor in harmony. Years later, the Cave Story that Gertrude had advanced dogged the Fannin children through

their school years; they were taunted by peers. A reporter wrote the cave story, by her own admittance, she was not at the scene but she said she interviewed Gertrude, who also was not at the scene. Moreover, the Ashland Daily Independent published it without corroboration. To this day, 2008, people remember the sensationalized story of: The family found living in a cave.

In 2004, James Fannin told me how the Cave story had eroded his self-esteem, and shamed him; it still does. To ease his anxiety, James and I made a special trip to the cliff in the Wheeler Hollow. He saw his former home was situated next to a beautiful sandstone cliff, and that no such cave existed. The mostly false, already embellished tale, coupled with Gertrude's translation of 'Hiding in fear from the state troopers under a cliff', to a more sensational: 'Found living in a cave,' raised her capital. The Fannin children were hungry when they arrived at the Ramey Home; when questioned, one Fannin boy replied he had eaten some walnuts. This became: 'All the children had to eat today, was walnuts.' The Fannin children suffered from many disadvantages, including malnutrition, a lack of provisions and education, their father had camped under a rock cliff from time to time to hide out from welfare authorities, but they had not lived in this cave.

Editorial. LJE