



The BEST ADVICE I Ever Had

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I MUST HAVE BEEN quite young when I first heard it, for the quaint, old-fashioned phrase runs through all my childhood memories with the persistence of a familiar tune: "Willful waste makes woeful want, and you may live to see the day when you will say, 'Oh, how I wish I had the bread that once I threw away.'"

I hear the words spoken in my mother's soft voice as she worked in her quick, industrious fashion

*See "The Little Professor of Piney Woods," *The Reader's Digest*, May, '56.

around the neat little house in St. Joseph, Mo., where my sisters and I were born. Far from being the practical realist that those words suggest, my fragile, poetry-loving mother was a dreamer. But she knew that within that phrase lay the chance for her dreams, and mine, to come true.

At first the words meant literally the piece of bread and jam in my hand which I might have tossed aside uneaten. Later they meant money, for from the age of six I always had a job of some sort, and learned to save the pennies, dimes and quarters toward the dream of a college education.

At the University of Iowa, where I tended furnace and waited table to pay my way, waste came to mean time. Since I had only a few hours each day for study, I had to make up in extra concentration what I lacked in time. Consequently my lessons burned into my memory, and they did much to shape the course of my life.

When I finished college, waste suddenly took on a new important meaning: the possible waste of opportunity.

In 1907, the year of my graduation, comparatively few Negroes had a similar chance at formal education. Although I had tempting job offers which ranged from the insurance business to a subsidized career in

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musical comedy, it seemed to me that if I used my education for selfish profit, that too would be a form of "willful waste."

I decided to share my advantages with the neediest people of my race in the Black Belt of Mississippi. There was the most shocking waste of all: the waste of the human mind and soul. Men, women and children exhausted their bodies in the fields, making their living as farmers but having no knowledge of farming beyond the drudgery of chopping and picking cotton. Unable to read, write or figure, they had no way of knowing if what they were charged at the store was correct, or if their wages were paid in full. Winter diets were corn meal and dried peas, because the women had never learned how to can or preserve the summer yield from their gardens or the wild berries that grew at their doors.

My mother's phrase came sharply to mind. My job would be to begin at the bottom and teach them, first of all, how to save what pitiful little they had. I set up a school of practical education, to teach good work habits, sanitation, diversified farming, how to cook, can and sew. The dream that lay ahead of this practical saving was better living conditions, adequate schools and

churches, and ultimately instruction in trades and professions.

Then, after almost 20 years of work, as Piney Woods began to take shape as a real school, with the beginnings of an adequate plant, a steady enrollment and nearly enough teachers, my wife died, leaving a void not only in my life but in the operation of the school in which she had played a vital role. The temptation to give way to personal grief was strong. But once again my mother's words echoed in my ears. Grief, too, was a luxury, a "willful waste," when 500 children were depending on me for their education, their chance to become useful citizens.

What is education, or civilization itself for that matter, but a form of saving? We harvest and keep the best of the world's ideas and inventions so that we may pass them along to the generations that follow.

My job in life has been to try to save human beings from the willful waste of ignorance and despair, and to help them take their places as competent citizens in tomorrow's world. It is a task that I would choose again, if I were young. It was motivated by these words which I share with you. I can vouch for the rewards they will bring.

