CHAPTER 16

A LIFE SPANNING THREE CENTURIES:
A CONVERSATION WITH FRANK MILLS

The hearing aid in Frank's newly deaf right ear is useless now. He still hears fairly well with his other ear. The wrap around his hand was prescribed by his physician to treat a malady caused by too many years of wiping freshly hatched eggs.

Frank accompanied me down the long hallway at the Country Care Manor near Gillespie, Pa. His aluminum walker lent him support, but his strength was good, his pace regular. His room was the last one on the left. He talked to me as we walked, not tired by the effort.

His room was bright with a single bed, photos on the walls. It was cool in the room on that Sunday afternoon in April. Frank offered me the only chair. He preferred to sit on the bed, he said. I arranged the tape recorder microphone to face him and pressed "Record."

Frank Mills and I talked about his life. We talked about his birth in Perry Township, his schooling, his jobs, his sixty-year marriage. We talked for nearly two hours. I offered to stop and rest if he would like.

We did not stop. He had too much to tell me.

As Frank shared the stories of his lifetime with me, I found myself wondering: What memories will stand out in my own mind someday when I look back upon my life?

Although I had brought a written list of questions to ask Frank, the conversation flowed naturally, and I rarely consulted the list. What would you have asked Frank if you were in my place? What would you talk about with a longtime native of this area whose memory is sharp, who enjoys conversing, and who tells wonderfully detailed stories? Oh, and did I neglect to mention?

Frank is one hundred and eight years old.

"I was born on April 30, 1891 in a log house," Frank began. "Born in Perry Township. Do you know where Virgin Run Lake is?"

"Yes."

"You cross the bridge to go up to the lake, go right straight up the road like you was goin' towards Perryopolis. It was the first house right up the road. That's where I was born."

"Who were your father and mother, Frank?"

"John D. Mills and Margaret Marshall. He was married twice. His first wife died young. She just had one boy, Wilbur, a half-brother of mine. He was about two or three years older than me."

There were four girls and four boys in the household, plus Frank's mother and father.

"So you have no living brothers or sisters?"

"Yes, I have a sister in Florida. She's ninety-six."

"Let's see," I mused. "You were born in 1891 during the administration of the twenty-third President, Benjamin Harrison. He was followed in 1893 by Grover Cleveland, then William McKinley in 1897."

"William McKinley," Frank repeated slowly. Then he observed matter-of-factly, "I remember when William McKinley was shot. I don't know how old I was."

I was speechless for a moment. I knew. I teach U. S. History. William McKinley was shot at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York, on September 6, 1901.

"You would have been ten years old," I said to him. Amazing, I thought to myself. That's an entire century ago, and he remembers it happening.

But Frank was already moving on with the conversation.

"I started to school when I was eight years old," he said. "Then I had what they called ringworms come on my face. Red scaly spots. Someone told my dad, who smoked a pipe, take the nicotine out of that pipestem, put it on them things and kill 'em! So he put some of it on, but it kept spreading.

"It went down my neck, right down my body. Finally, we went to the doctor at Star Junction. He gave me some salve. That eczema went all over me, down to my feet. My toes cracked, my fingers cracked. So the school directors told my dad, you better stop that boy from school awhile, 'cause some of the other kids might get the same thing. So they did stop me.

"Later on, we went to a skin doctor in Connellsville. You go up the Brimstone Corner, and right up that street, there was a house that had posts that big around."

He demonstrated their circumference with his two hands.

"That's how I could remember where to go. He told my dad, 'I can cure him, but in the spring of the year and in the fall, when the leaves come out and when they fall off, it'll come on him, back of his ears and back of his neck.' It did for a long time."

"Where did you go to school?"

"Jackson School, about two miles from where my home was. Up the road, like you was goin' towards Perryopolis, out to what we always called Carson Hill. There was a hill there, and the snow blowed it in during the winter. We had to go out and shovel the snow so the horse and sled could get up there. One-room school.

"Agnes Walters was one of my teachers. She married a dentist from Perryopolis, Jobie Martin. The first year she taught at Jackson School, they found out she was a Catholic, they stopped her. But a little later on, they let her go back to school.

"Her son still comes down here to see me. He never got married. He's eighty-four. He still has his house right next to the bank in Perry Township. Does his own cooking, comes to see me every three weeks."

Frank recalled his teen years. "We lived in a log house. My dad worked in a stone quarry called the old Sand Rock stone quarry in Perry Township. It was right above the Youghiogheny River. They leased it from a man by the name of March for ninety-nine years. My dad worked there, and I worked there 'running the drum' when I was fourteen years old."

"Running the drum?"

"This drum went around. It was like a sweep, I guess they'd call it, and I had to hitch the horse to that. There was a big derrick at the stone quarry, and it had a chain on it. They put holes in the stones, and the horse went around, drawed the stone up, swung it around and put it on the stone pile. Then the Italians that worked for them would dress the stones. Next, they would run them down an incline, down to the river, and load them on flat railroad cars of the P. & L. E. Railroad. They sold them stones in Pittsburgh, New York, Philadelphia, all over."

We turned to his family life.

"Frank, would you tell me about your wife, Viola?" I asked.

"Viola, me, Charley Conn, and my wife's sister, we all joined the church," Frank said. "We accepted the Lord in the Presbyterian Church in Vanderbilt in April 1916. My wife, me, and her sister were baptized in the Nellie Reservoir near Vanderbilt. Charlie, he wanted to be sprinkled."

"Who baptized you?"

"Reverend White."

"Was anyone else there?"

"Yes, the biggest part of the church was there. They wanted to know if we wanted to be sprinkled or we wanted to be put under. We told 'em we wanted to be put under."

The following year, Frank and Viola were married.

"She was a Snyder," he said. "Viola Snyder. Here's her picture."

He pointed toward the headboard of the bed and indicated a photograph.

"That's her and me."

I studied the photo taken in 1917. I looked over at Frank, then back at the photo. He was twenty-six when he got married. Viola had promised her mother she would not marry before she was twenty-one. On May 23, 1917, she turned twenty-one.

"I see it says you were married in Uniontown on May 24, 1917."

"Got my license in Uniontown," Frank replied. "Guy in the court house said to me, 'If you want to get married today, I'll tell you where you can go to a preacher who'll marry you. His name is on there, if you can get up there close."

Frank referred me again to the photo's inscription. It read, "W. Scott Bowman, D.D., Pastor, Second Presbyterian Church, Uniontown, Pa."

As World War I raged in Europe in 1917, Frank and Viola Mills started married life together. America had entered that war just one month before they said their wedding vows. It wasn't long before Uncle Sam came calling at Frank's door.

PERRY NATIVE RECALLS FIRST GLIMPSE OF A MOTOR CAR

As 108-year-old Frank Mills and I discussed his early years in Perry Township, Frank remembered a childhood incident that had occurred nearly a century before. It was his first glimpse of an automobile.

"My dad had a gray horse, and there was a blacksmith at Flatwoods," Frank told me. "A couple of shoes came off her front feet, so he had me take her up. I'd just gone part way and I heard somethin' comin', and I turned around and looked back. Here come a white automobile.

"That was the first one I ever seen. I got the horse clear over in the ditch, 'cause I was afraid she was goin' to throw me off and kill me. I think I was about twelve years old."

It was 1903.

"The car was white?" I asked. I had assumed all cars back then were black.

"The car was white, and I think the name of it was a White." Frank was thinking about cars now. "I can remember the first automobile I bought. Model T Ford. $360. Brand new. Harry Harper lived in Dawson. He sold cars. I bought the first one. Next I had a car called a

Brisco."

"Brisco?"

"B-r-i-s-c-o. Brisco, yes sir. I had that car eight or nine years. When I traded that car in, they allowed me $400 for it. That was more than I paid for it. I traded it because my wife and me drove down to my home in April, but it was cold. I didn't have no garage, so it sat outside and it froze that night, busted the block and busted the radiator."

"What did you usually put in the radiator in the winter?"

"Pure alcohol. But I had water in it. My brother-in-law was working for a tinner, and he tried to braise it, but it wouldn't hold. So I traded it off for an old Model T Ford roadster."

The conversation shifted from cars to making a living.

"After Viola and me were married, I was working on the slate dump near Vanderbilt. They wanted a couple of bosses down on the railroad, on the track along the river, you know. Put me down there with a boss whose last name was Joseph, at Dickerson Run. They were trying to break me in to be a boss on the railroad, but I didn't want that job.

"Somebody told me, 'They're hiring street car men in Uniontown.' I went up there and made out an application. I got word the very next day, 'Go to Uniontown, they need two motormen up there.' I went up and got a job. I got the job in 1917."

At the time, World War I was raging in Europe.

"I worked until January or February, 1918. Then I got called. Draft, you know. I went to Camp Lee, Virginia. We was out in the field practicing, and I fell out. They took me, and when I came to, I was in my barracks. I said, 'What's goin' on here?'

"Two fellows were with me. They said, 'We were out in the field runnin' and you passed out. We fetched you in. We're waitin' now for the ambulance to take you to the hospital.' I was in the hospital nine weeks. Then they sent me home."

"What did the doctors say caused you to pass out?"

"The doctor said, 'You've got valvular heart disease.' They discharged me. Before I left up there, I had a great big red heart drawed on me."

I detected humor in his voice as he continued. "They said, 'You have an enlarged heart too! You're not able to go fight.'"

Frank was chuckling now.

"So now here I am, 108 years old on April 30, 1999. I'd like to see that doctor and tell him about his mistake.

"I went back to being a motorman for six years," Frank continued. "I worked from 4:30 p.m. to 2:30 a.m. We'd lay over in Brownsville past midnight for half an hour, waiting for the last train from Pittsburgh,

in case someone wanted to ride the streetcar to Uniontown.

"Then they decided to make the motorman do the collecting. The cars that I ran, the doors were in the middle of the streetcar. They made a door up next to the motorman. When people got on, the motorman collected the fare for wherever they wanted to go. So I quit that."

Frank worked the slate dump, the street cars, even the railroad for a short time. But when most people who have known Frank think of him, one word comes to mind.

Eggs.

Frank decided early on that he wanted a poultry farm, and his wife liked the idea too. By the early 1930s, they had purchased a farm in Perry Township. At first, they sold eggs directly from there. Then there were too many eggs to sell from the farm, so Frank began delivering eggs in Perryopolis, and then added Belle Vernon, Uniontown, and other communities.

"I bought the little chickens, paid fifty-one cents for 'em. Got five hundred in the last part of January or early February. Then, we got five hundred again in late March, and five hundred again in May. Fifteen hundred every spring. You couldn't keep 'em more than one year. The next year, they would just lay enough to pay for their feed. Couldn't make any profit."

"How old were they when you bought them?"

"Day old. Hatched today, shipped out tomorrow."

"When would they start laying eggs? How old would they be?"

"About seven months. We put them out in a field with a fence around it when they were about eight weeks old. Then later, we had to shut 'em up. Foxes, hoot owls, polecats got so bad I had to build another chicken house.

"My wife done all the feedin' of the chickens. I'd clean the chicken house, sell the eggs. When she gathered the eggs, she fetched 'em up and set 'em down at the feed room door, and I'd carry them in.

"I used a damp cloth to wipe the eggs. The eggs would be stained, you know. Had to wipe every egg and put it in the case."

Frank, who traces his hand troubles to this repetitive task, wiped about fourteen hundred eggs a day for forty-seven years. That's about twenty-four million eggs.

"What did your wife collect the eggs in?"

"Bucket. She carried two buckets of feed at a time, one in each hand. She was stout; she wasn't very tall. She was only fifty-nine inches tall, one inch less than five feet. I had seven chicken houses, fourteen hundred chickens. She fed every one of them. She gathered all the eggs. She'd lift the board up inside; there was the egg. The chicken

nest was dark. It had to be dark. If it wasn't, first thing you know, you'd have cannibalism."

"Cannibalism?"

"When the egg comes out the back end of the hen, the gland stays out when the egg lays; it don't go back right away. After a minute it goes back in. But if that chicken was out where the others could see her, they'd start to peck at her right away. So they have to be in the dark 'til that thing goes back in. If the other chickens started to peck her and got blood started, they'd pick that there hen's insides out."

For forty-seven years, Frank and his wife were in the egg business. In 1977, at eighty-one, his wife Viola had a fatal heart attack. Today, Frank lives at the Country Care Manor near Gillespie. He likes visitors, but he told me they don't come as often any more. What an incredible span of history he has witnessed and is still living to talk about.

When Frank was twelve years old, the Wright brothers' biplane left the ground at Kittyhawk, North Carolina.

When Frank was twenty, an infant named Ronald Reagan was born.

When Frank was fifty, Japanese planes appeared over Pearl Harbor.

When Frank was eighty-three years old, Richard Nixon resigned from the presidency of the United States.

So, which of the many headline stories of the twentieth century does Frank tell and retell?

None of them. Those historic events are nothing more than mileposts marking the passage of time for Frank. They help him date the memories that he truly treasures. Such as working with his dad while growing up. Making a home together with the love of his life, Viola. Meeting the daily challenge of earning a living, year after year.

What have I learned from talking with Frank?

Frank Mills is a gentle man, born in the nineteenth century and nearing the twenty-first, who learned long ago to identify the important things in life. Talking with him has reminded me that while we may always remember the headline stories of our lifetime, the memories that we will truly cherish will be found much closer to home.