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Since the quarry shut down,  
the town is a ghost of times past,  
but for those who call it  
Home, there is certainly

# Life in Esmont

by Maryann MacConochie

**A**long the tree-shadowed road a man walks, step light and springy like a dancer's, body poised at solar plexus, muscles flexing like a cat's, pace even, never erratic nor hurried, the pace of a man at one with himself, knowing his purpose, and on his way — as the little and the great of Time have walked. Into focus he comes, serene, calm, the eyes deep and far-seeing like a pharaoh's but glinting like sunlight upon human contact. He speaks: the voice low and quiet with the mysterious reed quality of a clarinet, the speech measured and direct.

This is John Danfourth Bolden of Esmont, husband of Muriel Calista Jones Bolden and father of four. The saying goes: "If John Bolden says it's so, it is so." If one needs advice, one goes to John, the wise one. If an unruly bull or wandering heifer is your problem, he'll tell you what to do; and if you find an old bottle he can give you a complete history of it. He

is a patriarch, and a happy benign one.

Down the road lives another of similar ilk but younger, more electric, Frank Bolling, the groom of longest standing at Nydrrie, the great stud farm nearby. Bolling didn't mature into goodness. When at Fort Meade he was assigned duty from eleven at night to eight in the morning, he had difficulty in realizing in the early evening that his workday started at eleven that night. Several times his "catnap" extended itself. Once when it reached to when the sun was shining brightly, he pulled himself together and went to his officer. "Captain, I can't make these hours. What about a transfer?"

The officer, his frequent rouser, replied: "I ought not to do it. I really cannot do it, and if you weren't such a good guy, I wouldn't do it."

Having ridden bareback since the age of four and been taught by his daddy the care and keep of horses, he started in 1954 to work at Nydrrie.

So far he has missed one yearling sale. "You know some horses are born intelligent, some you have to teach. Sometimes you can dress one so he looks better than he really is. They're just like people. And you have to help the younger men 'cause sometimes they haven't had enough experience, and sometimes they just don't care enough. To put out your best effort you got to love what you're doing . . . Over here we're all just one big team. We're everyone just as anxious to have a horse bring a high price as Mr. Van Clief. We all work together. I'm so grateful to my daddy for all he taught me. We had only draught horses and that was when you couldn't always find hay in the barn but no matter how tired we were at the end of the day, we always rubbed them down and made them as comfortable as we could. With horses you don't work hours, you work the job. Sometimes you have to go beyond what's expected of you." (Note: And this is



not called "collecting overtime pay" as is the rule in bureaucracies.) "It's so gratifying to work with them, talk to them, tickle their chin and see their response . . . Last year we had three young ladies to help. I didn't think much of it at first but I held my patience and they turned out fine. One was especially good with the foals. Anyhow, life on a farm is like a wagon wheel. It takes all the different spokes but with the right attitude it makes a good wheel, or team. You know, in the Army they told us that when we wore the uniform we had to respect it for it isn't just you. That uniform represents every last man, woman, and child that was, is, and will be the United States of America."

**A**cross the way and down a bit lives Mrs. Rebecca Jordan, a reverend in the South Garden Baptist Church since 1973. As a young girl she had wanted to go into the ministry but "The devil kept saying, 'Women don't speak.'" But

at age fifty, the call came again and this time she responded, even if it had meant changing denomination. At that time some of the sanctified churches such as the Church of Holiness had already accepted women as preachers. She enrolled in Virginia Union University in Petersburg to prepare for her ministry.

Rebecca Jordan went to work caring for children at the age of sixteen. This gave her the opportunity to travel in the summer and she visited Little Rock, Arkansas and Ocean City. Being the eldest of ten in a serious and responsible family prepared her for this occupation. She entered kindergarten at age nine but was immediately put into the second grade because her mother had taught her to read, write, and multiply. "I knew my Roman numerals better than I do now." The school had been established by Mrs. H. D. Forsyth, Becky's grandmother who brought up Miss Rebecca Moore

from New Orleans to teach the children. The fathers each paid a share of her transportation as their contribution.

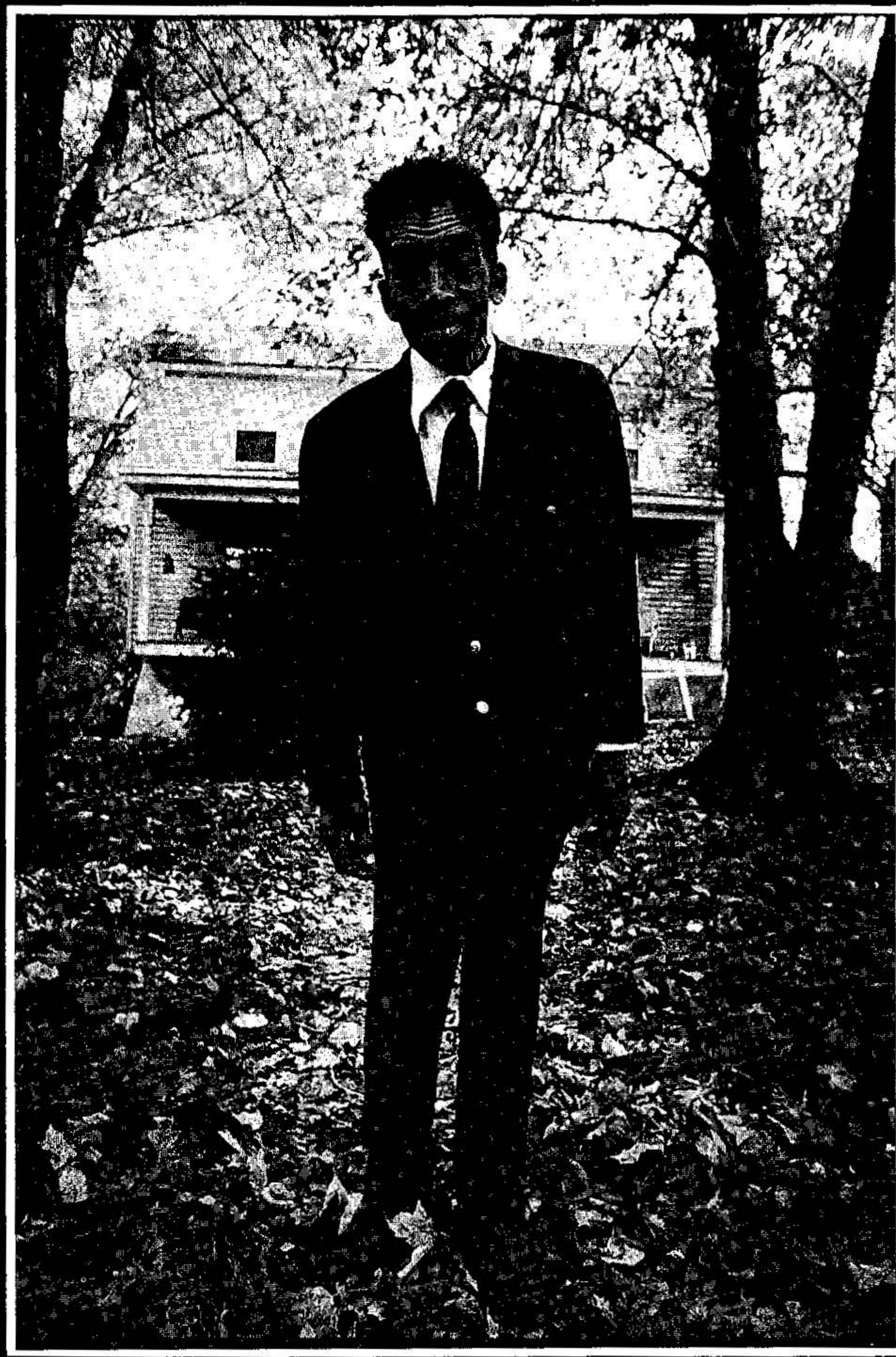
In time she married, had twelve children, of which ten are still living. Her husband worked for WPA and received scrip instead of money. She'd take the children to the store where they would see ice cream and candy. Mrs. Butler, the storekeeper would say, "Mrs. Jordan, let them have it. They need a treat now and then. I'll call it thread or shoe polish, something you can use and need."

For her marriage in 1924 Mrs. Leila Forsyth offered her her own wedding dress, now twenty-five years old, to wear, and told her: "Rebecca, if you want to keep the luck, scissors must never touch this gown. If it is anywhere too long, just tuck it up." And her father said, "Becky, if you wear Mrs. Forsyth's dress, you will have as many children as she did." She exceeded her by one.

Mrs. Jordan's father helped to

## Esmont

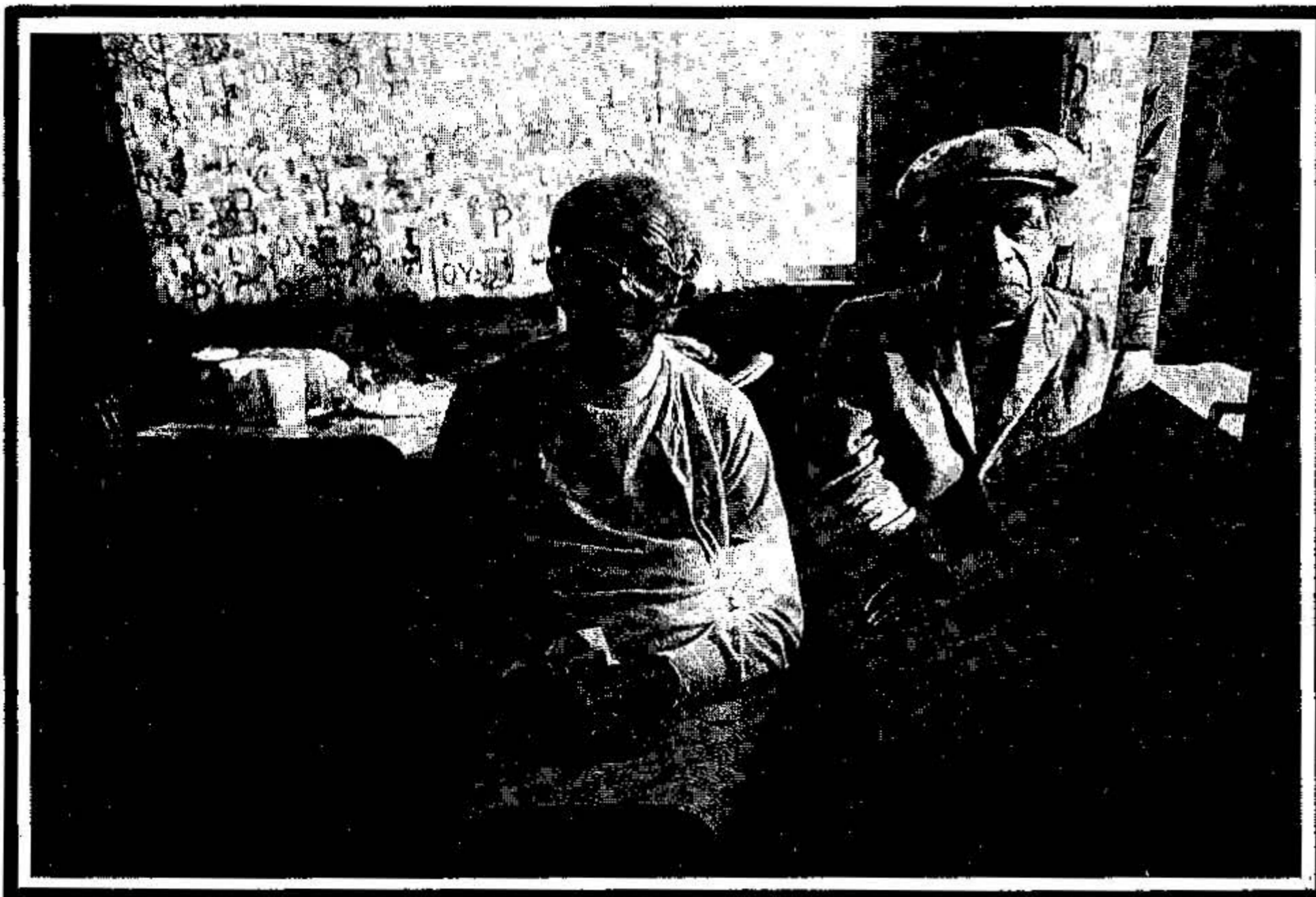
build the "big stone house on the hill," known as Guthrie Hall. One day someone took pictures of the men working. The photograph turned out so dark that they could hardly be discerned. Only three white spots stood out. However her mother espied her daddy, "There he is. Those are the three white buttons I sewed on his shirt." Later, Mrs. Jordan worked in that very house, then owned by a Danish baron who told her the house was haunted. He called her "Raybecca, you'd better watch out. There are people in those



rooms upstairs whom you can't see. You be careful."

**E**smont missed being nationally famous and Ella Scott could have been the mother of a wealthy son had "Buster only stayed on that team." Buster, born Albert in a log cabin on Guthrie, was an amazing pitcher and could have been at the top of baseball fame. Even now this can be observed when he swings an axe to cut a tree. Ella, now 88 with a mind as clear as a mountain stream, begot twelve children, who produced 24 grandchildren, and they, 21 great grandchildren. This clarity of mind and jolly sense of humor is a hardy confirmation of the triumph of character over hard work, long hours, and low pay. For a salary of three dollars a week and keep, she made breakfast for ten to fifteen hands at 5:30 in the morning, did all the housework in the mansion, and when cattle and hogs were slaughtered, she cut and dried the meat. Later when the baron came she got good pay so long as he had money. "He always was playing cards or the horses. Sometimes he won but often he lost. Yes, there was a ghost. I seen him once. He stood all white on the cement porch, and stayed and stayed without a sound. I turned my head a minute and he was gone."

Then there is Big Frank Carey, father of twelve-year-old Little Frank. Big Frank — six foot four —



says his mother is 72 and he admits to being 70. However, in Esmont time is sometimes qualitative. When he wanted to get married Frank refused to have his church wedding until he was assured that Mr. and Mrs. Tapscott, his employer, and Mr. and Mrs. Massie would attend. Before he retired from construction work with Massie and Boatright he had to be laid off for awhile because of the depression. When he went to get his unemployment check, he turned to thank the man and asked, "Say, could you help my boss with some food stamps 'cause he's an awful good man and business is really bad, bad." One of a fast disappearing line to whom being able to help someone is the greatest pleasure and happiness.

A wistaria vine had entwined a tree, roof and some columns. The entire crew was trying to get it off but the vine was too massive. One man hung from it but this only turned it into a swing. So they went to fetch Big Frank. He came ready to do battle with that vine. He lifted his great hands and with one tug pulled not only the vine but two trees and part of the roof as well. Even now, Big Frank Carey is a legend of strength, kindness and love for his fellow-man.

*left:* Mr. John Bolden of Esmont.  
*top left:* Mrs. Bolden.  
*top right:* Ella Scott and her son Albert.  
*right:* Mrs. Lucille Purvis Goff.

**T**hese are some of the "blessings." The real hub of Esmont is Purvis Store, nexus of the village, and its handsome, bright-eyed chatelaine, Lucille Purvis, now Goff. In 1937 when she and her husband came, only they had a telephone. So all communications came through their line and one of the Purvises would traipse with the message. This got to be such an habitual service that instead of greeting with "Hello" when a Purvis knocked at the door, it was "What's happened now?" Since that time, although relieved of the transmittance of telephone messages (which, however, continues in case of emergency, storms, power failure, busy party lines, or unpaid bills) Mrs. Purvis-Goff is still the "Mother

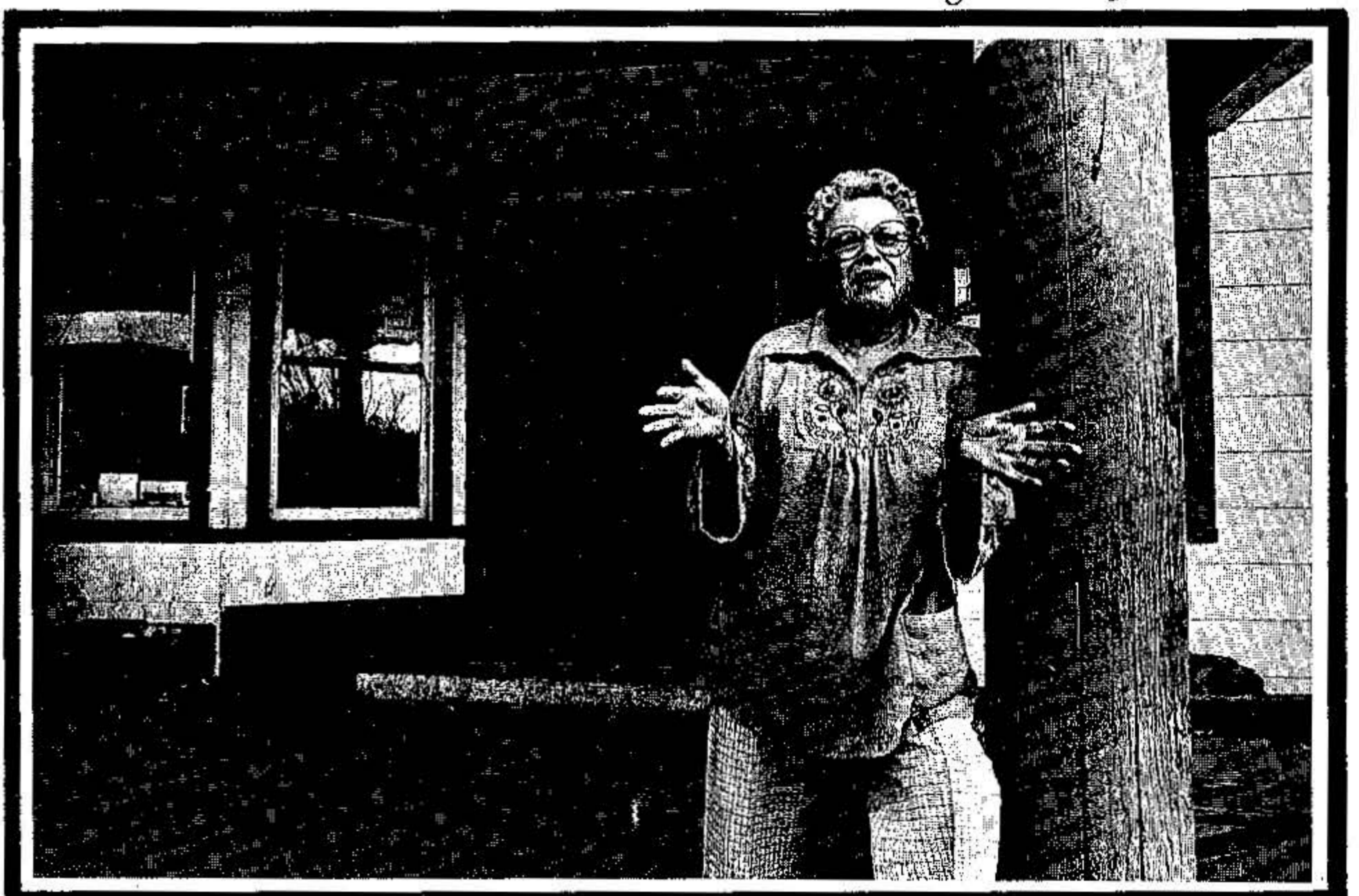
Confidante," the heart for most everyone's problems. She's been asked to lend money, to tell someone something, not to say this to anyone, and indeed she was once ordered, "Now, when my wife comes in to buy pork chops, you sell her pork chops. Last night she came in for pork chops and you refused because you told her I'd just been in and bought some pork chops. Now, I didn't take those pork chops home. You remember what I said, yes."

Last year or so a young man leaned up against their gas tank, blood streaming from a deep gash in his skull from a bludgeoning. It took ten rolls of paper towels to blot the flow until the Rescue Squad came. He had somehow managed to walk from Chestnut Grove, a mile away, to the mecca of help, Purvis Store. He died two days later.

When the former post master was nearly crushed to death by his overturned tractor, everyone round rushed to pull it off. An elderly lady puffed into the store, "Lucille, I'm too old to pull off that tractor but you can help. Go and I'll tend the store."

Once she got a woeful call from a young woman in labor at the hospital saying that they wouldn't admit her because she hadn't any money with her and the baby would come soon. In dashed Lucille — a half hour's jaunt — paid the hospital, a boy was born, and the husband, now father, brought the money to Lucille that evening.

Sometime ago a man was arrested





in front of the store because he'd been drinking a can of beer in his car. He objected because the car was not running. But law is the law so he went in to Mr. Purvis to get money enough to go free that night. And even recently the telephone rang late in the evening: "Mr. Goff, they got me locked up and I ain't goin' to spend the night in this here place. Bring over some money and get me out quick, will you, please."

**E**smont is a continuum. Now a so-called ghost town since the quarry shut down because too many people were dying from the lung disease, from slate dust. In its halcyon days it had a doctor, a bank, railroad station with turntable, a daily train to Washington, drug-store, horseshoeing shop, a flour mill, ice plant, beef and vegetable market, and a store that sold men's shoes and clothing. Not a car in the place. John Paige who ran the first

Pony Express from Warren to North Garden once a day, died at 86 in the early '60's, "as good a person as ever walked this earth." And Jules Coletrain, has been called "a thorough gentleman and a wonderful guy" by Prescott Carter.

Many flowers have bloomed and died in the rich Davison Red on which Esmont has grown. Beneath, rocks, minerals and roots abound. It takes some bitters to appreciate the sweet. Esmont even survived the infestation of 1970, a microcosm in which dark and light go in harmony. But the fact remains that after 75-year old Sammy Coletrain, manager of Esmont House Farm, went to his peace a few years ago, Roger MacBride, owner of the farm, came to Mrs. Goff with sadness in his eyes. "Lucille, can't you help me to find someone to take Sammy's place?"

"Roger, Sammy can't be replaced. They don't come like that anymore."