



## The Girl Who Taught Herself to Read

By Sally McMillan

"If only . . . ," Anna sighed.

"If only what?" her brother asked as he drank the cool water his little sister had carried from the spring. "You wish you did not have to haul water anymore? You should try hoeing this field if you want to feel sorry for yourself."

"No. I do not mind bringing you water to drink. I just wish I could somehow figure out how to read."

"Well, you might as well quit worrying about that because nobody around here will ever give book learning to a poor black girl like you."

Anna knew her brother was right. How could she expect to go to school? She should be happy that things were no worse. Her mother had been a slave just a few years before. The stories her mother told made her happy that people did not have to work as slaves anymore. Still she wished that somehow she could learn to read.

"Water," Anna called down the row to relatives hoeing in the field.

"What are you doing?" Anna's uncle asked reaching for a drink.

"Nothing," she mumbled, trying to cover the letters she had made in the soil with her finger. Anna wished he would hurry up and finish his share of water so she would not have to answer.

"Yes, it was too something," he said. "Are you trying to write words? You can not do that. There is too much work to do to waste time with letters and figures and such. Do you not know that we all have to work hard? If we do, your grandmother can pay for this land, and we will not have to sharecrop anymore. Then this whole field will belong to the Knight family."

Anna hung her head and walked on down the row. She did work hard, and she did want to help, but she wanted to read too.

But not even the uncles worked all the time. That afternoon the sun shone so hot that Grandmother came to the fields. "Put up the hoes for the afternoon," she said, "and we will go down to the creek. I think everyone could use a swim."

Nobody needed to say any more. Anna and her brothers, sisters, and cousins started to run for the creek right away. The grown-ups came along more slowly, but they shouted warnings to the children. "Do not go out over your head. Remember the quicksand." Anna heard the words, but she was too excited to listen.

"Last one in gets your head pushed under the water," Anna yelled as she jumped in ahead of the rest.

Even though Anna was the littlest girl of the family, she took some big chances. All the other children stayed close to shore. They splashed and played, getting water all over each other. Anna tiptoed out deeper and deeper, feeling the water come up over her knees, then her waist, then almost up to her neck.





"Help!" The others looked out just in time to see Anna's head go under water.

"Help!" she screamed, gasping for air. She kept getting water in her mouth. She tried to push with her feet, but the more she pushed, the more her feet stuck in the quicksand. If only I knew how to swim, she thought, maybe I could pull myself out.

"Help! Help!"

Finally Mother was there beside her. Her strong, dark hand pulled and pulled until at last Anna was safe.

"Anna. Anna."

Slowly she realized that someone was calling her name. Mother leaned close. "Anna. Anna."

"Yes," she tried to answer, but it did not come out that way. She was still gasping for breath.

"Anna, Anna, can you hear me?" Anna weakly nodded her head and coughed up some water. Mother bent close and spoke softly. "You are lucky to be alive. I warned you about the deep water and quicksand, but you did not listen. When I tell you to be careful, I have a reason. I do not want you to be hurt. You must learn to obey."

Anna opened her eyes and looked at Mother. She wanted to tell Mother that she would try to obey, but all she could do was smile through her gasps and coughs. Mother smiled too. "Well, it looks as though you will be all right. What you need to do now is learn to swim."

"Swim!" Anna choked out the word. How could Mother expect her to go back in the water?

"You must learn to work with the water instead of fighting it. Do not be afraid."

Anna knew that she must obey. Mother was right. So Anna tried. Mother showed her how to relax. Soon she discovered that she really could stay above water if she moved her arms and legs the right way.

Anna kept on learning, not only about water but about hoeing fields too. As she got older, she started doing harder work in the fields, but she never forgot about learning to read.

On Sundays the whole family put their tools away and rested. Sometimes on rainy Sunday afternoons Anna ran down the road to a friend's house. This girl could go to school, and she even had books.

"Please help me read," Anna begged her friend. "Just tell me the words on this page, and then I can figure out the rest."

"Not on Sunday. I do not have to go to school today, and I want to play with my dolls. Here is an old book. Take it, and if you can figure it out, then you can read it all you want."

"Do you mean I can have it for keeps?"

"Sure, what do I want with an old book?"

Anna ran down the road again. She hardly even felt the rain now. A book, she had a





book!

At night after work, while everyone else slept, Anna sat for hours by the fire with her book. Slowly she worked out the puzzle. Words, sentences, and stories all fit together and made sense.

Anna read everything she could find. She tried writing too. She did not have paper or pencils, but she wrote in the soil with a stick. One day, while she scratched in the soil, she found a scrap of magazine. Carefully she sounded out the letters.

"Send your name, and we will find pen pals for you."

Anna caught her breath with excitement. I wonder if somebody could read my letters, she thought. Maybe they could tell me how to write. Maybe they would help me learn to read better.

Carefully Anna planned. From her neighbors she borrowed a piece of paper and a pencil stub. She spent hours writing her name and a short letter. "Please, I want pen pals," she wrote. Working at extra little jobs for the neighbors, Anna earned money for the stamps. Then she had to wait.

Finally letters started to come. Every Friday one of the uncles would go to town for mail. Anna got more letters than anybody else in town. She read every word her pen pals wrote.

Soon reading became easier, but writing was still hard. She did not have enough practice, and it cost money to write back. She answered a few letters, but most of her pen pals stopped writing when they did not get answers. One lady kept writing. She sent books and magazines too. The things she sent told about Jesus. Anna liked these and saved all her money so she could write and ask for more. Before long she learned about the Sabbath. After writing to her Adventist friend for a long time and reading the magazines, books, and letters, Anna decided to give her heart to God.

Finally the day of her baptism came. As she stood in the creek she remembered the time she had nearly drowned. That day she had learned a lesson about obedience. Now here she was in the creek again, not to swim, but to be baptized. This time she wanted to obey God and serve Him.

Anna went to school to become a nurse. One thing that helped many patients feel better was learning to swim. "We need someone to teach swimming to some of the patients," the teacher announced in class one day. "Can any of you swim?"

As she raised her hand, Anna's mind went back to the day when she felt the water rushing over her head. She had not known how to swim then, but her mother had taught her well. She liked to swim now, and she wanted to teach other people to relax in the water.

Anna taught swimming and much more. When she finished nurse's training, Anna went back home and showed her relatives how to read and write. She became a missionary nurse to India. Later she taught for many years at Oakwood College in the United States. The church school there is named the Anna Knight Elementary School.





Anna never felt as if she had wasted time on book learning. She kept on learning and sharing all her life. Before she died, the girl who longed to read and write wrote a book of her own.

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