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Friend I Have Known: Cecil Mills

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Add FRIENDS I HAVE KNOWN.

CECIL MILLS.

When I became pastor of the Old Wabash and South Wabash meetings, it seemed as if I had found some relatives, though I knew that the Mills family were ^{my} kin to me. But Mrs. Mills had lost her parents when she was a girl, and had been reared in the home of my grandparents, and was like a sister to my father, and her husband and my father had been fellow soldiers during the Civil War, and it seemed as if Cecil and Rose Mills were younger cousins of mine. ~~friend~~

Sunday School
Cecil was in a class of High School boys which I taught. When we had our monthly class meetings, after the business was transacted and before Rebecca served some light refreshments, we would have various kinds of indoor athletics in the vacant room in the back of the parsonage. Two brothers in the class had a set of boxing gloves, and they asked if they ~~could~~ ^{might} bring them and we could have boxing along with our other athletic stunts. My brothers and I had had boxing gloves and had used them with lots of fun and no damage, so I agreed, and I not only watched the husky teenagers box, but I put on the gloves occasionally, and nobody even got a black eye.

(It was some time before I learned how I had shocked some of the older members of the meeting, and how it contributed to my being relieved from my pastorate if it had not been for Ira C. Johnson -- but that's another story. Anyhow there was something quite as bad as boxing gloves, and that was the horribly late hours of those class business meetings. Actually one of the young fellows who lived some distance out in the country did not get home sometimes until after ten o'clock.)

In those hours after the class business meetings, I told these High School young fellows that there were simply limitless opportunities for Christian men in the field of physical education, recreation, etc. And the idea struck fire in the heart of Cecil Mills.

After a teaching job in Southland College, the school that Friends maintained for years for negro youth in Arkansas, Cecil got a job in another city, where he did such a remarkable work that the Wabash school system brought him back home. The Wabash physical education department became widely known, and Cecil had tempting offers to go to other cities, but he stayed right there, and presently visitors came from many cities to learn how Cecil had accomplished such remarkable results. Not only in the school system but in the summer recreation program the apparently impossible was being done.

But the old warehouse that had been abandoned and bought for a song and remodeled into a gymnasium at unbelievably small expense by the free work that Cecil did and the free work done by volunteers whom he inspired -- this building was condemned as unsafe and had to be abandoned by ^{the school authorities,} ~~the school authorities.~~ It was soon after World War II.; the requirements for other school buildings convinced ^{them} that they could ~~not~~ ^{not} ~~build a gymnasium~~ ^{build a gymnasium} and the physical education ~~work~~ ^{work} of the school system was,

not build a gymnasium

as the old German janitor expressed it, "All to pieces gershotten."

Wabash had a wealthy resident who had a big and profitable business, most of his factories being in other cities. Cecil went to see him; told him of the situation, and of the great injury that the young people of the city would suffer without a gymnasium, and made a simple but strong appeal for this man of wealth to provide the city with a gymnasium. At the close of the interview the millionaire said, "I am not building any monuments to myself." And Cecil went out of the office a thoroughly disappointed man.

But soon the newspaper came out with the story that this millionaire had bought a quarter of block right down town, and was to start at once on a Youth Center to cost \$600,000.00, and that was real money in those days. Rebecca and I visited the building shortly before its completion. It was a fine contribution to the educational equipment of Wabash.

Soon after this Cecil and his wife made a visit to Oregon, and in a small group of friends I told of this fine gift that Cecil had influenced this man of wealth to give to the city. With his quiet smile Cecil told us ^{that} this man had bought the other three fourths of that block and had already spent two million dollars on a building that contained little theater, swimming pool, art museum and many other things that have made the place so well known that many thousands of tourists visit it from year to year.

From the standpoint of the city there is much more that could be told; but I wanted just to give a picture of the Friend I had known.

The city did not wait till after his death to show its appreciation. ^{Cecil Mills} One award after another came to this modest man who did big things without any big talk. One thing of particular interest was done by the school system of the town. A policy had been adopted "many long years ago" that no Wabash school should be named in honor of anybody, President of the United States, great general, great educator, great humanitarian, great philanthropist -- no school named in anybody's honor. This policy had been followed without any deviation -- but it was changed for one man, and a school was named the Cecil Mills school.

Cecil Mills died in the year that has not three hours to live as I write. In the article that told of his death, he was called the best loved and the most highly honored man in the history of Wabash. There was nobody to question it.