

Give Us This Day

BY JOY LAMOREAUX FREI

☉The early morning sun was already hot, and the red cliffs to the north of St. George blazed. I woke to hear Miss Conklin's hoe. I sat in the iron bed and rested my chin on my knees and peered through our shaded yard to see her oldness twitch as the hoe struck the earth.

She was always up before we woke. In the summer she was there waging war with the desert for her roses, and in the darkest winter mornings I could look to see her light warming the windows. "I like to see the sunrise," she said simply. But while we were sitting at breakfast, she removed her enormous straw hat, pinned more securely a gray bun of hair and, leaving little swirls of red dust behind, entered her church.

It was the only steepled church in our little town—the only one that could boast a real bell and bats in the belfry, the only one that knew the companionship of a wispy little woman who tended its floors and dusted the yellow organ keys.

"I don't know why she stays here," people would say. "She's the only Presbyterian in town. She knows she'll never convert any Mormons."

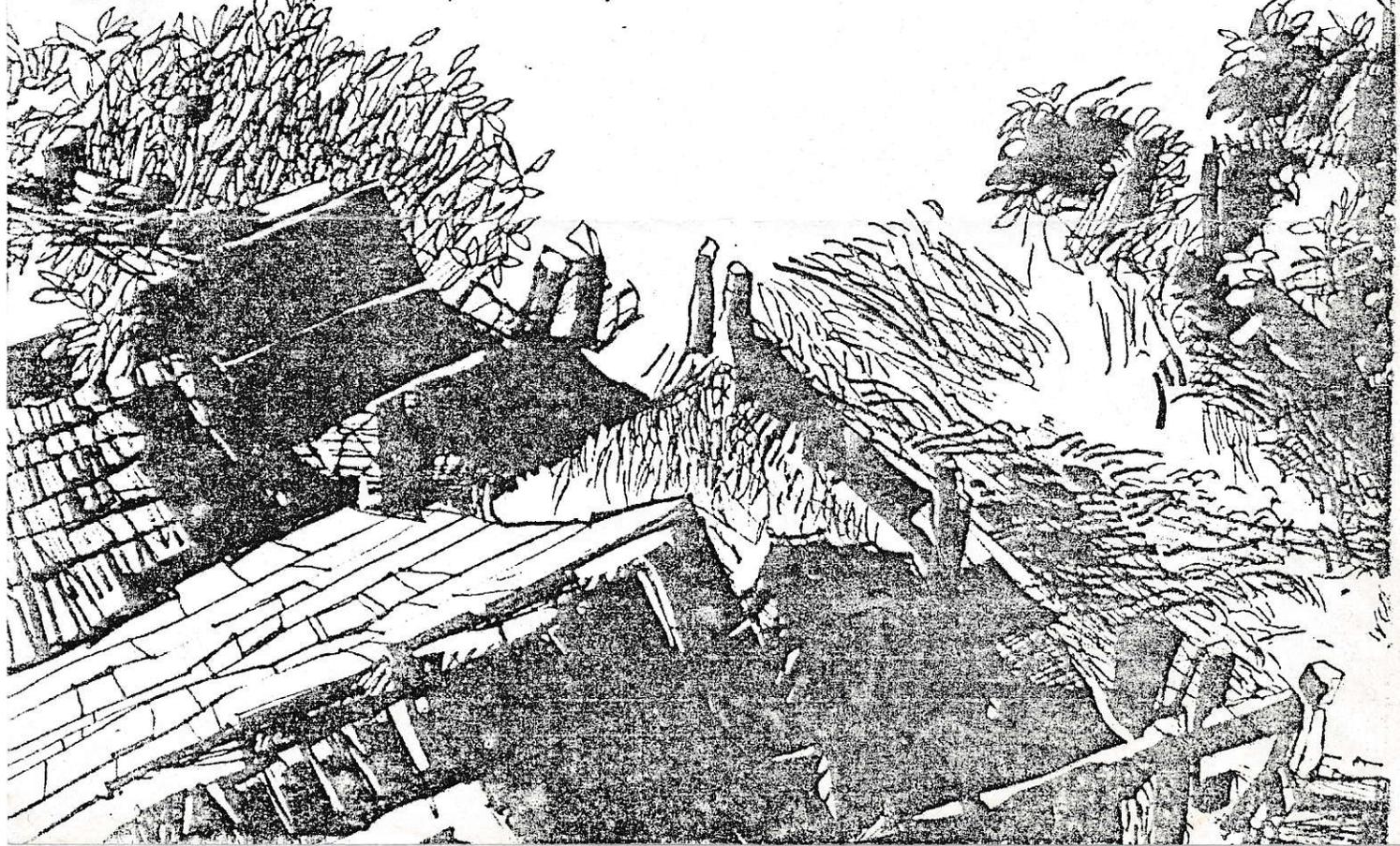
None of us children knew where Miss Conklin came from or that she had come to "do whatever her hands found to do" for her church; she had always

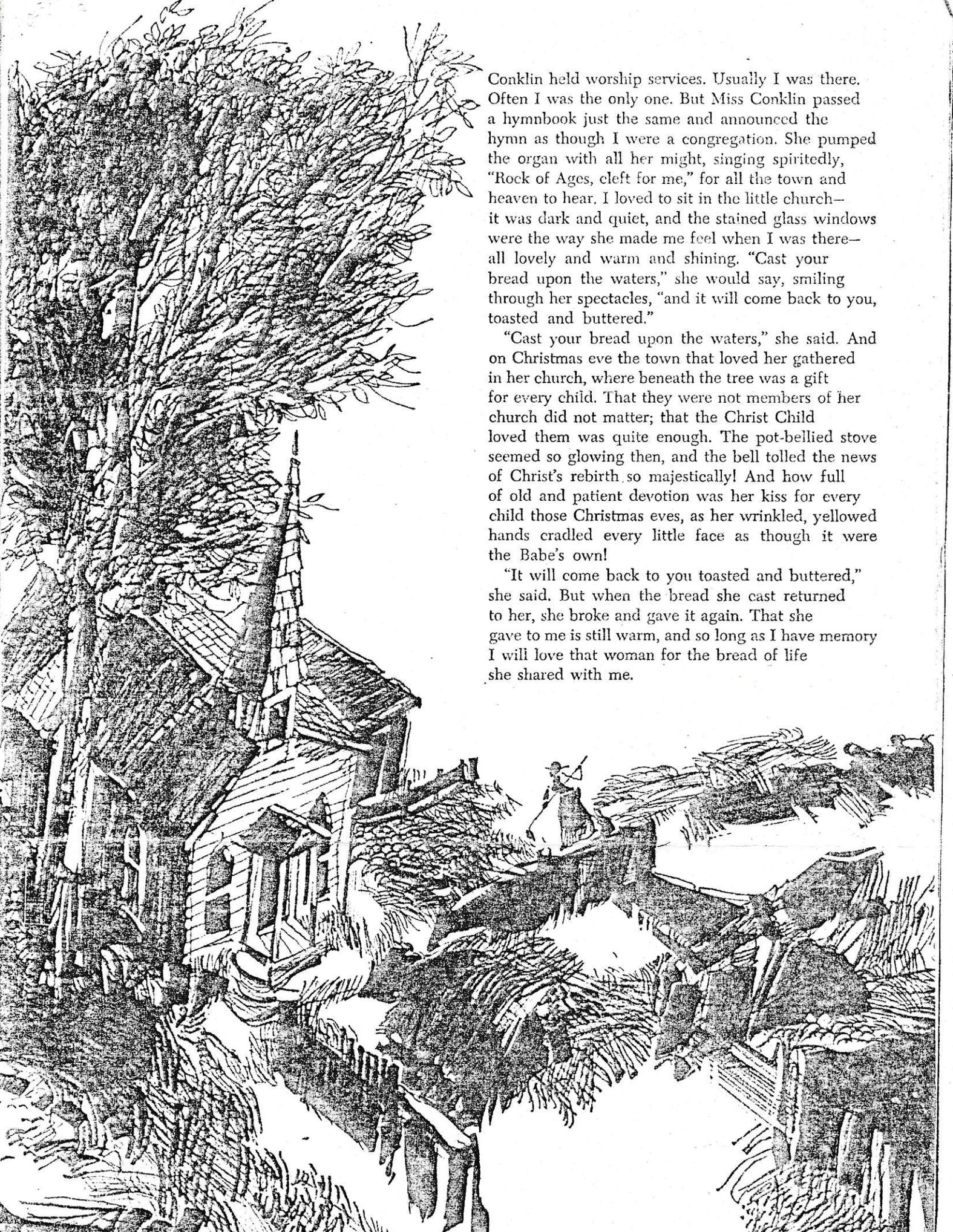
been there it seemed to us, and indeed she had come long ago when Mamma was still a child. But there she always was, as though she had put down roots with the sego lilies when they first bloomed on the hills.

I was a child then, and a child cannot be deceived when it comes to love. I knew that she stayed because she loved us. We weren't of her fold, but we were all her sheep.

"Today's Miss Conklin's birthday," Mamma might say. "Would you like to go and see her a little while?" And I would cross the street to wait at the door for her hand in mine, and her short self above me, leading me to a rocking chair. It was her birthday, but she told me stories about Jesus, and enveloped me with the delicious sweetness of the love he had for me, and always I knew that she must love me very much also. Perhaps she would tell me of her illness when she had whispered all the Psalms to herself, easing the pain, or of the hen that covered her chicks with her wings when the barn burned down, and how Jesus' love was like that. And all her stories I absorbed in my pliable little soul.

On Sabbath afternoons, after Sunday dinner, Miss





Conklin held worship services. Usually I was there. Often I was the only one. But Miss Conklin passed a hymnbook just the same and announced the hymn as though I were a congregation. She pumped the organ with all her might, singing spiritedly, "Rock of Ages, cleft for me," for all the town and heaven to hear. I loved to sit in the little church—it was dark and quiet, and the stained glass windows were the way she made me feel when I was there—all lovely and warm and shining. "Cast your bread upon the waters," she would say, smiling through her spectacles, "and it will come back to you, toasted and buttered."

"Cast your bread upon the waters," she said. And on Christmas eve the town that loved her gathered in her church, where beneath the tree was a gift for every child. That they were not members of her church did not matter; that the Christ Child loved them was quite enough. The pot-bellied stove seemed so glowing then, and the bell tolled the news of Christ's rebirth so majestically! And how full of old and patient devotion was her kiss for every child those Christmas eves, as her wrinkled, yellowed hands cradled every little face as though it were the Babe's own!

"It will come back to you toasted and buttered," she said. But when the bread she cast returned to her, she broke and gave it again. That she gave to me is still warm, and so long as I have memory I will love that woman for the bread of life she shared with me.