



Perspective

By JAMIE BUCKINGHAM

His name was Paul Mansfield. When he graduated from medical school his professors predicted he would become one of the great surgeons of the world. They were right—but they didn't know just "how" right they were.

After graduation he turned down a partnership with a distinguished physician and moved to a desolate little village in the coal mining region of Appalachia. The only doctor in a 50-mile radius, he opened a small office in a room over the town's one dry goods store. For 40 years he ministered to the poor, living and working out of his office above the store.

He delivered babies in hovels where even the animals shivered in the cold. He extracted tonsils, set broken limbs, and sutured cuts—often without the aid of basic drugs. He diagnosed disease, performed minor operations, and referred when necessary to the big city hospital 50 miles away. He helped the aged, comforted the incurables, tended the dying, and suffered through many a long, cold night with anxious loved ones.

Everyone was poor. Very poor. They paid him as they could, sometimes in produce, but most of the time not at all. But he was not working for a wage, but because he had received a "calling" to minister. His goal: to heal the sick.

When the flu epidemic struck the mountain area, he gave himself day after day—traveling from one mountain shack to another giving shots and antibiotics. There was little time for sleep for as soon as he lay his weary head on the pillow in his upstairs office there would be a knock at the door or the phone would ring. It wasn't long before he, too, became a victim of the flu.

His last conscious act was to call for his day book and across each account scribble "Paid in Full." Then he died.

People came from all over the mountains to attend his funeral. They even shut down the operations in the coal mines so the men could pay homage. The little white church was jammed with people. They stood outside the windows, the women in bonnets and the men holding little children on their shoulders—most of whom had been delivered by the country doctor.

Eight strong mountain men, looking strange in their mismatched coats and ties, carried the casket from the church. Placing it on their shoulders they walked quietly down the mountain path to the country graveyard. Hundreds of people fell in step behind them, singing softly with tear stained faces, "There's a land that is fairer than day . . . and by faith we shall see it afar . . ."

They lowered the wooden box into the open grave, and then by common consent scattered far and wide. Each person returned with a stone which he placed on the grave. The mountain of rocks was shoulder high when the last stone was in place.

Then the country preacher stepped forward and laid the last object on the grave. It was the doctor's shingle that he had pulled off the pole in front of the dry goods store. It simply said, "Dr. Mansfield. Office Upstairs."

That was 30 years ago. Those same poor people still live in the mountains. Now they are without a doctor or a preacher. Perhaps the call of the plush office has more appeal than a simple wooden shingle that says, "Office Upstairs."