

Chapter 14

To the Golden Triangle

After receiving the unbelievable and welcomed call from Beaumont, I went back to Rochester to tell the folks goodbye and started on my 500 mile journey into the unknown the next morning. In order to save gasoline and tires, a federal law had been passed setting the speed limit at 35 miles per hour, so it took me two days to reach Beaumont. Nylon was not yet available for use in tires to prevent sidewalls of tires from splitting and blowing out. As holes came a “boot” would be put inside to prevent the tube from blowing out but it made the ride bumpy. Before the war ended, local companies were equipped to re-tread tires but they still had the weak sidewalls.

Leaving the higher altitude of West Texas for the coastal plains in the heat of June in 1944 made my clothes seem damp and sticky. Because the Golden Triangle of Beaumont, Port Arthur, and Orange was a petro-chemical center, there were various unfamiliar smells in the air. One of the heavy aromas that filled the air and settled in houses was not from chemicals, however, but from the coffee roasting whose dark roast smell settled in the heavy air and blended with the moldy smells.

Rooms or apartments were not readily available, but District Judge Snowden Nichols and his wife, Eva, came to my rescue. These two great people who had a heart for the strays were sent into my life to my great profit in every way. Their son, Bill, was in Texas A&M and then in the navy, so they invited me to occupy his room which was a bit separate from the other quarters. Their cute blond daughter, Mary, was in high school.

Judge Nichols, though a kind and considerate person, had the dignity and persona of a judge. “Aunt Eva,” however shunned the very appearance of affluence. I have never known a more selfless person. In her print dresses she was always neat

but one was attracted by her intelligence, humor, and care for others. The family had no car, so mine came in handy. I happily became a delivery person, for most every morning she made at least one banana pudding, batch of divinity, or bouquet from her yard to be taken to someone who was sick, lonely, aged, or discouraged. Through that she taught me much about practical religion and opened the way for me to meet so many of the people who needed attention. Many ate at her table while she preferred to serve and watch others eat than to sit and eat with them. A visitor in her home could hardly leave without some thoughtful gift. Children always left with books, and that included my children years later. She was a Bible teacher, loved learning, and received her master's degree after her children were grown.

Harry Payne was in and out during the summer, so I was quickly involved with the daily radio program and pulpit preaching. The kind people tolerated my inadequacies and cheered me on and I enjoyed it. Much of the time when Harry was at home, I received calls to fill pulpits in the area. We made many calls together with me learning much from him.

I owned no watch by which to time my radio and pulpit lessons and none were readily available during the war. Judge Nichols honored and surprised me with an expensive gold Waltham pocket watch which I still treasure. By it, I have timed hundreds, even thousands, of radio and pulpit lessons as it was laid before me. In those times before the prevalence of wrist watches, men's trousers had built-in pockets near the belt-line for pocket watches.

Of course Aunt Eva was interested in my love life, or lack of it. She made mention of the Holladay girl as though I might not have seen her. I had seen her! I can see her yet as she and her mother walked down the center aisle of the crowded frame building and took seats near the front. Who could miss such a vision of loveliness? At five-foot-five with shapely figure, she had wide-set blue eyes, a classic profile, and a flawless "peaches and cream" complexion that almost glowed

when she was animated. She was outgoing and effervescent, greeting others around her without timidity. Yes, I had seen her but I quickly learned that she was dating another fellow.

Elma Lea Holladay, a happy and only child of Watt and Elma Holladay, had grown up in Daisetta, an oil-field town 35 miles west of Beaumont. She was popular in school and dated the quarterback. But during her senior year, Eldred Stevens, who eventually started Preston Road School of Preaching in Dallas, was coming out from Houston to preach in Daisetta, so the two began dating and developed a serious attraction, but they soon went their separate ways. She had little encouragement to go to college, so after graduation in 1941 she went to Beaumont where she was hired by the telephone company. Soon her parents moved to Beaumont where he took a job in the Spindletop oil field. Very quickly Lea advanced to become payroll clerk for 300 operators. Curtis, a man in his thirties who lived in Houston, came to inaugurate a new program which required that he teach Elma Lea to use a slide rule. They began dating and developed a serious relationship. Being a Christian but not of her persuasion, he attended services with her. To make the story short and get him out of the picture, he staunchly declared that he would never change to the Church of Christ and Lea was equally as staunch about ever changing. So they quit dating. I am ever thankful that Lea's Mom had made her so unbending! The grindings were working in my favor!

As weeks had passed I became friends with Luryl Nisbett, another bachelor preacher in town. We commiserated about our situations. About the time that Elma Lea was free again, he and I had decided to try to start double-dating with various girls for fun without looking like we were as desperate as we were. For our first excursion, Luryl dated Lea and I dated another girl whose name I cannot remember. It was fun, eating in Orange, crossing the Sabine so I could say I had been in Louisiana, going to Port Arthur over the 177 foot high Rainbow Bridge, and walking the pier into moonlit Lake Sabine. After

services the next Wednesday night, I approached Elma Lea stating, “Luryl and I want to do another double-dating Friday, only this time, I want you to ride in the front seat.” She giggled and accepted. After that date I ignored our proposed dating plan!

In 1998 I wrote a tribute to Lea and about our lives together titled, “Riding in the Front Seat.” On reading it, she asked that it be read at her funeral, and it was in May 2003. I have included it as Chapter 24 of this book. It is also accessible at my website: www.freedomstring.org listed as FR 31 and a revision after her death as FR 172. You may wish to read it at this point.

Neither of us attended movies so she would go to area preaching appointments with me. Doesn’t that sound exciting and romantic? She enjoyed going to church. On one of our earliest dates we went to a nearby Baptist Church to hear Ben Bogard who had debated with many preachers of the Church of Christ. Walking to the entrance in the dark, I stepped in a pile of dog poop. I cleaned my shoes as much as possible on the grass but the smell was still there to my embarrassment. However, the lingering aroma was overpowered by Bogard’s elaborate tale of a man who prepared lunch for his family while they were at church by roasting the family cat. Lea’s Dad always had a hunting dog or two, so she was familiar with smells, but she loved cats and the preacher’s story was more repulsive to her than the odor.

As we began seeing each other, I tried not to build hopes too quickly for, though she was compatible, she was reserved. I thought her previous experiences were causing her to be cautious, and I could appreciate that. Our first date was in October and soon one of the elders, Woodie Hamby, proposed that I do some mission work in his home state of Louisiana. So I met with people in Pine Prairie, Ville Platte, Turkey Creek, and Colfax for several weeks in November and December, very apprehensive about having so little time to cement a relationship with Lea.

At Colfax we were meeting in a vacant store building that had a wood burning heater. Arriving early one cold evening, I decided to build a fire using the stump-like wood in the wood box. Soon after igniting it, the stove began to almost explode. Cutting the dampers back would make the stove try to dance. It became red hot and the stove pipe was becoming red also. In my fright I kept working with the air flow until the flame finally began to subside. I learned that the wood that I had used was pine knots that are used sparingly due to their being a concentration of resin which could be extracted as turpentine.

Back at home, Lea and I began to feel more at ease with each other and had fun together. As I stated above, she began going with me to fill area preaching appointments but we never attended a movie together before our marriage. Feeling that she was growing to love me gave me a sense of peace like I had never felt before.

Our first date was in October 1944 and we were married October 8, 1945. In the next month, November 22 and 24, she became 22 and I reached 27. In Beaumont I had witnessed a formal wedding with all the pomp and ceremony and decided then that I wanted nothing of that sort. Being from a humble background also, Lea agreed that we would have a simple ceremony with family in attendance. Since none of my family was around, that included few people. Film was unavailable, so we had no pictures of our wedding. I suppose professional photographers might have had film but I did not know about them.

The war having recently ended, I was fortunate to buy a set of new tires, and the rationing of gasoline had ended. So we set out to show her off to the family at Rochester by a circuitous route. It was a rainy day and as we approached Houston the sun broke through the clouds low in the west and we sang spontaneously, "Beyond the sunset's radiant glow, there is a brighter world I know." Our first night was in Houston. The next day we experienced the awe of a visit to the Alamo then

spent the night in Uvalde. A year before the newspapers had carried a story about the plans to make a divided highway across the country that would have no stop lights and access to it would be limited. We could not visualize such. The main southern cross-country highway then was Highway 90 which was two-lane even through Houston except for a little stretch of four lanes, Wayside Drive, I think it was. Only about fifty years later has IH-10 been completed through Fort Stockton and Phoenix following the general route of Highway 90.

At Del Rio we walked across the bridge over the Rio Grande and were amazed at the difference on the other side. In open markets dressed goat carcasses were hanging in open air and covered with flies. We did not linger long, but we had frequent stops on the trip to put oil in the engine which I should have repaired long before.

Carlsbad Caverns was an unforgettable highlight of our trip. That was before elevators were installed, so we enjoyed the lengthy route in and out on foot. At breakfast in Carlsbad the next morning, Lea had another delightful thrill – bacon with her eggs! It had been so long since bacon was available.

On the way to Rochester Lea got her introduction to the expansive plains of New Mexico and West Texas. And the family and people at Rochester got to see a “citized” girl – with no suntan, plucked eyebrows, bright red Tangee lipstick, and nice department store clothes which she had bought with her earnings. And Lea got to see sand! She accepted my Dad and siblings readily as a new experience since she had no siblings. But Mom – well, subtle and not so subtle hints from Mom kept Lea and Mom at arm’s length throughout the years.

The honeymoon was worth the long years of waiting, and it continued back in Beaumont. Though Lea had already been teaching a class of teenage girls, she now was in the new role of “preacher’s wife,” not just riding in the front seat but sharing in my work making calls with me.

A young bachelor preacher from Tennessee, Edward J. Craddock, came for a meeting at the South Park church in 1945.

I jotted down the outline of an impressive sermon of his and made it my favorite and most used lesson through the years. My version of it became Chapter 4, “*Why Is Love The Great Commandment?*” in my first book, *Free In Christ*.

As the congregation was planning its work for 1946, Woodie Hamby told me that they would not be using an associate for that year. In December he told of a vacancy in Louisiana and set an appointment for me when I showed interest. The groups in Lake Charles and Maplewood, across the Calcasieu River and lake from each other, each maybe 50/75 members in number, wanted to pool their resources and share a preacher. Lea and I “tried out” and agreed to move 60 miles further east into Louisiana. She was always an asset for our trial visits for she was a lot better looking than I was and her singing sounded better than my preaching!

What a gizzard stone that one phone call in Abilene had been! I intended to go west but God used it to send us east. Good grit in my gizzard would enable me to happily adapt to Cajun cuisine and culture with my young bride. Well, I would have been happy anywhere with her! []