

Grit In My Gizzard, No. 11

Off to College

My graduating class of seven girls and nineteen boys saw no settling of the dust to reveal promise of jobs. Many jobless men rode the rails in freight cars seeking their fortunes in California and other places. Our government offered some youth work programs, and disturbing situations in Europe led our country to increase its military; so that opened doors of opportunity for many young men. Only one other boy to my knowledge attended college, that being Pat Wyatt with whom I was a classmate from the second grade through college. He excelled as a career airman serving as a colonel.

Much of our family communication about important matters was “silent communication.” I recall no family gathering in which Fay and Emily and Bud and I discussed plans or possibilities with Dad and Mom about entering college in the fall of 1937. Our intentions were known generally. Mom strongly favored our going but Dad never gave any encouragement. He could give no financial help, and we were not expecting to receive any. As we worked in the fields that summer after my graduation from high school, we did realize what impact it would have on Dad’s farm operation with only Elda and Lois left to help.

The day came for our departure. As we talked about it at breakfast, without previous discussion, Dad injected, “Well, Ceace, it looks like you won’t get to go.” There was silence. I made no response and he added nothing more. I just continued with my plans. It was not out of rebellion for I deeply felt with him and his struggle with the farm with both boys leaving.

I wish I had a picture of our departure but our family never owned a “Kodak.” Our company included Fay, George, and me who would enter ACC, plus Emily and two year-old Kay. But that was not all. In the trailer hitched to the car was Ol’ Rosie, the Wilson’s cow! So we were off to fantasy land where we expected some sort of magic to change us into persons we could only hope to become. A new kind of idealistic gizzard stones would masticate our new influences.

Down on Cedarcrest on the creek near Ambler (the Albany Highway), we rented a guest house by the nice house of a retired rancher. The little brick house which is still there consisted of two bedrooms separated by a small kitchen and bathroom. Now we were getting up in high cotton – living in a brick house with electricity, running hot and cold water, an indoor bathroom and a gas (open flame) heater. And for Rosie, she was staked across the road in mesquite pasture land. From Zellner Hall to the highway and angling on down to Cedarcrest was virgin soil with no construction. So that was Rosie’s home away from home.

Some other preacher-boys had rooms in residences a bit closer to the campus. I remember Claude and Bob Guild, Murray Marshall, Ted Waller, and Clifton Inman.

We brought available food from the farm, especially eggs and pork. Emily was generous to cook a pot of pinto beans and a pan of cornbread for Bud and me each evening, and we

always had milk. So we were faring well. Every few weeks one of us would hitch-hike back to the farm to load our little cardboard suitcase with food. People were considerate to give hitch-hiking students rides though we often waited a long time for one of those generous ones to come along. When I returned home after just a few weeks and walked down the sidewalk in Rochester, I already felt totally out of place.

Around the turn of the century, our Movement emphasized education and started many little colleges. There were about a dozen in Texas in towns like Waco, Fort Worth, Hereford, Midland, Lockney, Gunter, Childress, Lingleville, Thorp Springs, Sabinal, and Abilene. The one started in Abilene in 1906 was called Childers Classical Institute until its name change in 1920 to Abilene Christian College. After a fire in 1929, the school was moved from downtown to its present campus. Consisting of the Administration Building (minus the added wings), Sewell Auditorium, McDonald Hall, Zellner Hall, Chambers Hall, Bennett Gymnasium, and the Education Building, the rather bare campus, born just as the Great Depression struck, was only eight years old when I arrived.

The depression hit the school severely so that it was in danger of bankruptcy. It was rescued by the Hardins of Burkburnett by a donation that would seem pitifully small today. The faculty and staff of the school served out of dedication to Christian education rather than for money. They believed in what they were doing. The small salaries may account for so many unmarried persons being employed.

At that time, James F. Cox was president of the school, Don Morris was vice-president, and Walter Adams was dean. John Stevens was a popular senior, though no older than I. Garvin Beauchamp, from Roby, was among a number of freshman recruits from the cotton patch to play football. Jack Lewis was a freshman and Louie Welch was a sophomore. Jack is a recognized scholar and Louie has served five terms as mayor of Houston.

I have no record of the classes I took in ACC and my recall is dim. In my freshman year the 35-year old Don Morris taught public speaking to a class of about three dozen of us freshman. He got as much fun from our stupid speeches as we did.

Though Homer Hailey (age 34) was kind and considerate, he was all business, always intense in his teaching Old Testament survey to a big room full of freshmen. Addressing us boys as "Mister", he would hurriedly call the roll, offer a brief prayer, and then go into his lesson with deep earnestness as though it were his last chance to rescue us. He made present-day applications. He was also the forceful preacher of the Highland congregation. In off hours you might find him with his boxing gloves vigorously attacking the punching bag in the gymnasium. He was held in respect.

How we became involved in this, I cannot remember, but Bud and I were in a scrub volleyball team that played a faculty team many nights in Bennett gymnasium. I remember a few of the faculty – Dean Adams, Gilmer Belcher, Earl Brown, Jerome Reese, and Lawrence Smith. We would play almost to the point of exhaustion. Faculty men were addressed as "Brother." Very few held doctorates.

My first two brave ventures into the pulpit were tolerated by nice people in Sylvester and Truby, communities near Abilene.

Bud and I were in “hog heaven.” Farm life seemed a distant past. But our scant supply of cash was ebbing away. Rent and a few other bills had to be paid. After a long fruitless search for part-time jobs, we learned that some ACC boys worked at the Hilton Hotel. We investigated it and were hired. We helped “poor” Conrad Hilton on his way! (Well, he was saved from bankruptcy in 1931 by the Moodys of Galveston.) His first hotel was one he bought in 1919 in Cisco, about forty miles east of Abilene. He bought some others and then began building them, the 16-story Hilton in Abilene being the second one he built. It later has been known as the Windsor.

We were assigned to wash dishes and pots and scrub floors from 6:00 to 12:00 each evening seven days each week for meals (not from the menu) and \$10.00 per month. Never did we get out by 12:00 for we had to get everything ready for the morning. Usually we could catch a ride to work, but nobody picked up a hiker after midnight. One Easter morning after parties had kept me there until after 2:00, and I was approaching the Hill, I saw strange lights in the northern sky. Watching them intently as I walked, I determined that it was the aurora borealis which I had never seen before. I awoke Bud and the Wilsons so they could enjoy that phenomenon of nature.

When you begin making big money, the government gets involved. So, on February 3, 1938 I had to sign up for Social Security so that withholdings could be taken from my \$10.00 monthly check. For 68 years I have carried that card in my wallet (still cannot remember the number) and have continued to pay self-employment taxes most of the time, but that was the best investment that I have ever made.

Having text-books would have seemed almost like cheating. Bud and I shared a Greek primer and probably four other texts during our four years of college. We relied on listening in class and studying in the library. I did not even own a Bible! Emily lent me her KJV Bible, and I soon bought a pocket-size ASV New Testament. When we worked, we had little time to study but utilized our off periods. We failed no courses but never made the honor rolls.

With about 500 students singing in Sewell Auditorium with its great acoustics, it was a thrilling experience. For the first time I heard some of the best-loved hymns. And we sang from a hardback book, a thing I had not seen before. It was not the greatest collection of songs but we could not use the much better “*Great Songs of the Church*” for it was published by a pre-millennialist! Watch dogs in the brotherhood were quick to detect any pre-millennial leanings. Buying hymn books from one who held such beliefs would be a compromise and a dead give-away of a church’s lack of soundness. So ACC was held close to the truth – which happened to be the narrowed scruples of the particular enforcers.

I have attended upward to half of the Lectureships at ACC since my first one in 1938. Students were given cuts from classes to attend. I was appalled at the conduct of some preaching brethren -- watch dogs who were sniffing the air for any pre-millennial scent and barking ugly-spirited accusations against ACC and faculty for whom I already held respect -- like I had not seen before among brethren. I will withhold all names in order to protect the guilty! As I look back I can see how we had already come to base our claims on doctrinal correctness more than in a loving relationship in Christ.

Back then, the College Church met in Sewell Auditorium and had a “gospel meeting” each semester. Morning sessions were extended chapel. I cannot remember all the

preachers used, but one was an articulate 32-year old red-head by the name of Burton Coffman. Another was the gentle John Banister (27) with his conversational style of delivery. They were both very effective and many students were converted, including Garvin Beauchamp whose name is prominent in ACC history, and most of the other football recruits.

We soon came to know just about every other student and teacher and greetings were exchanged as we passed each other – Texas style friendliness. In my estimation, the most unifying influence on campus was the daily chapel. A brief devotional was conducted each day with great singing and followed by various short presentations of interest. There was a flow of visiting persons of note, including preachers and missionaries, some serious and some in fun, leaving an impression on us. Favorite from the faculty among the students was Paul Southern (age 36) whose relevant messages hit home and his devilish humor made us like it. On short notice he could fill in for a no-show speaker at the lectureship and always give the best speech.

We were forming ties with hundreds of students of similar interests, coming from across the nation, and from different cultures. Couples began to form romantic relationships. The grit in our gizzards was encountering a new diet to assimilate.

Yes, 1937, 69 years ago, is ancient history to most of you. George H. Bush had just entered his teens and George W. Bush would be born about nine years later. Bill Cosby was born that year. A 22-year-old Frank Sinatra was hitting the airways. That was two years before “*The Wizard of Oz*” and “*Gone With the Wind*.” []

(Cecil Hook: April 2006)

FOR THE ENVIOUS: In the back yard Mira has tomato plants two feet tall in bloom!