

Grit In My Gizzard: No. 13

Out Into The World

Television accounts of graduations show cheering students exuberantly sailing their mortar boards into the air because they are so happy to be through with college. That was a lesser part of the scene at my graduation from ACC for there were more tears than shouts of joy. There was such a bonding of students that the thought of our going separate ways was painful. We were leaving ACC to disperse through the world, never to sing together again in chapel.

Sooner or later, children have to “fly the coop” of family life, going out as adults when they may not be quite ready for adulthood. I can think of no better environment for making that transition than a Christian university where the entire faculty is dedicated to the continuation of the development nurtured by the parents. Schools like ACU teach much more than facts and skills preparing one for a career for they instill character so essential to life itself. And if the person finds a soul mate for life there, it is an invaluable plus. I owe a life-long debt to ACC for adding grit in my gizzard. Through the intervening years, I have followed the familiar names of students and now have lived to see many of them in the obituaries.

If any of our family came to see George and me graduate, I do not remember it. Dad and Mom had never ventured to Abilene. Now we were facing the world and there were no business or church representatives there offering us jobs. There was no source of information about churches needing additional personnel. This was before churches had youth ministers. With no prospects, we went back to the farm. I made application with some congregations but would receive no response. Who would want a single kid just out of college? Bud and I followed up on leads for teaching positions but, because of the military draft, schools were reluctant to hire men. As summer wore on, I preached each Sunday at Weinert about ten miles from the farm where I continued working.

Then I received a PENNY POST CARD from Dean Adams’ office advising me of an opening in the three-teacher rural Pumphrey school about eight miles from Winters, Texas. I went down there immediately – and was hired! – as the principal! -- two weeks before school was to start! It was the year Texas schools changed to the twelve-grade system and they put in a lunch room. I was to teach Grades 7, 8, and 9 in one room and I had never seen one of the text-books before! Oh yes, I was also to be master of a troop of Boy Scouts.

If I had possessed wings, I probably would have flown like a bat out of a cave but having more of a shell like a turtle, I braced myself for the task. For a salary of a bit more than \$80.00 per month, I could endure most anything.

I was assigned one side of the “teacherage” on the school ground and two single women occupied the other side. I had electricity and a wood stove but no luxury of an ice box or indoor toilet. A small store across the street was helpful. So, there I was stranded without a car. I was badly in need of shirts, so I wrote a note to Sears-Roebuck in Dallas explaining my situation and asking if they would send me three shirts which I specified,

promising to pay for them out of my first paycheck. A few days later, my shirts arrived! I still did all my own cooking, washing, and ironing.

How do you teach about thirty kids in three grades in one room all at the same time? The answer: very poorly. I did not teach school. I held school! For spelling, I could teach them all at once, calling out the words for each class separately, then having the kids exchange, check, and grade each other's papers as we went down the list with correct spelling. For other subjects, I could devise similar methods, but much written work was assigned which could be done while having oral discussion with another class. But who was to grade all those papers? Hard as I might try, the stack of ungraded papers would climb mercilessly. It was a real task to read the unfamiliar text-books to stay ahead of the students. Not being accustomed to talking, in the first weeks my throat would ache from having to talk so much. In spite of all, I did learn to love those good country kids. They came from solid homes enriched by a strong Baptist influence in their community.

The lunch room menu was primarily of government surplus foods consisting mostly of pinto beans, peanut butter, and canned grapefruit juice. Neither the kids nor I ever complained about the deliciously prepared beans, peanut butter cookies, and grapefruit juice. One of the teachers or students would offer thanks before each meal, always with complete respect from the students. The meals cost five cents.

After that year of school, I never saw any of those students again – until 62 years later when Woody Woodfin visited his son in our congregation here in Round Rock.

Without a car, I was stranded. Somehow, Grover Ross, who served the Winters Church of Christ, learned about me and began to come for me on Sunday mornings. After several weeks, I bought a used 1938 Ford V-8 for \$350, though it would cost about half of my monthly paycheck. Now things were looking up!

I still had my first radio with such poor reception. From it on the Sunday morning of December 7, 1941, I heard the jarring news of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Our world changed that day, and my generation bore the dreadful brunt of it with 292,131 battle deaths and 115,185 other related deaths, and 16,353,851 serving in uniform. Beginning with terrorist attacks in 1979 and culminating in 9-11, our world changed again facing a new kind of unseen enemy whose aim is to destroy us out of religious fanaticism. So far, in comparison to WWII, it ranks with a school-yard fight; yet political opposition has killed the will of many of our people against defending ourselves.

Because needs of the military came first, many items like bacon and ham were no longer available. Cars and tires had to last for "the duration." Ration stamps were required in order to buy gasoline and sugar. Prices of many items were frozen.

On December 20 I performed my second wedding, this one being in Pecos in which George and Margarete began 61 years together.

As the year progressed, and even though I had grown more relaxed with teaching, I knew I did not want to continue it. Grover and Thelma Ross had befriended me greatly. Toward the end of the school year he accepted the invitation of a church in Portales, New Mexico and urged me to move there with them assuring me that there were small rural churches there where I could preach. I wanted both to go westward and to be preaching,

so that was my opening door. A person of interest had come into my life but that interest did not accrue! I helped the Rosses with their moving.

I quickly lined up regular appointments with churches in Hiway, Rogers, and Causey, and spoke at other area churches at times. The members were hard-working farmers who usually milked eight to ten cows for cream to sell. As I visited among them, I helped with the milking or cranked the separator. At meals I would help clear the table and help with the dishes. I wasn't showing off for I had done such things all my life, but they saw me as different from the usual run of preachers. I think that helped their evaluation of my pulpit efforts!

By the end of July, arrangements had been made for me to conduct a meeting at Milnesand where there was no church and a business district of one store. Out under the New Mexico sky, makeshift seating was arranged and a Coleman lantern or two were set up. That was my first "gospel meeting" with my first baptism as a young woman asked to be baptized. Using a surface tank, I immersed her in about two feet of water and what seemed like a foot of mud.

A week later we began a ten-day meeting near the Texas border in the Bluit and Bledsoe communities. We met in a school house and a young woman led the singing for no one else was capable. In that summer seven adults and two teenagers were baptized. Three more adults were added at Bluit in a meeting there in 1943. These were all immersed in watering troughs or storage tanks by windmills. One fellow was much larger than I, and we entered a storage tank where the water came almost to my chin. That should make the immersion easy, I thought, but when I tried to put him under the water I began to float! After a brief panic, I managed to put my elbow on his chest and ride him into submersion.

The deep sand of the area made farming marginal. Some of it was for sale for \$6.00 per acre, but I was not interested in farm land. That was before the gas wells were drilled in the area! If it were to rain soup, I would be standing somewhere with a fork in my hand.

Two firsts: I did my first radio broadcast in Clovis January 13, 1943, and I got my first sight of girls wearing shorts in downtown Portales -- until the constable sent the two teenagers home to put on some clothes! Where have all the constables gone!

With this success I was gaining confidence and enjoying the people but I was still restless. So I agreed to serve a bigger church in the oil field town of Sundown on weekends while taking some courses at Texas Tech in Lubbock. But instead of school, I got a job at Sansom Paint and Paper Company selling wallpaper and artist supplies, and framing pictures. I enjoyed framing hundreds of pictures, even an original Varga water color, but selling wallpaper to discerning women was sometimes a wee bit tedious.

I learned about this later from long-time friend, Mary Frazier Clark. In my visit in prospect of working with the Sundown church, I visited the in homes of several members including the Frazier family. They were killing hogs, so I pitched in and helped. That greatly impressed Mr. Frazier who was influential in my being accepted! The church folks at Sundown were nice to me and were fun to be around. Well, one good brother did put down a stump that I had to cautiously plow around. He "hinted" that if a preacher ever told his kids that it was all right to go to a picture show, he would never let them hear him again.

On Wednesday evenings I attended Broadway Church which was then near downtown Lubbock and was served by Grover C. Brewer, a man of imposing presence and masterful eloquence. Texas Tech was at the western edge of the city with a military glider training field west of the university.

The war was raging, commodities were scarce, and prices were escalating. An energetic salesman, Cubby Key, selling auto paint particularly, was commenting on how people were buying so readily. Pointing to the floor, he ventured, "I believe if I had a pile of cow manure in the middle of this floor, I could sell it." Little could he have dreamed that a few years later, manure would be sold by the bag at gardening stores and shiploads would go to Saudi Arabia. In time Cubby went on to establish a chain of auto supply stores in Lubbock.

Do you remember Kemtone paints? They were innovative in that they were water based and were sold with a roller which any housewife could operate. The painters snarled at such a thing vowing never to use one of those rollers. You know the rest of that story.

At last, I was not doing my own cooking, for I roomed in a now extinct boarding house in Lubbock, and I was sending my shirts to a laundry. Preparing two sermons each week while holding a regular job challenged my ability and kept me out of mischief. By working the two jobs, I was accumulating some money which I still spent very frugally. But I still was not on a promising course for my career.

Having majored in secondary education, there were Bible courses at ACC which I had been unable to take. So I enrolled for the spring semester in 1944 – and who knew what might develop? I preached on weekends and enjoyed my classes, forming friendships with a good number who were fun to be with. I had a few dates but nothing sparked. (In my boyhood, courting was called "sparking.") Toward the end of the semester, a group was planning a mission trip to Utah, and I raised support to go with them. Westward was my direction.

I was living with some boys in the rear of a beauty shop in the first building south of the café and post office in front of the Ad Building. School was out and we were readying for our trip when someone called across to me that I was wanted on the pay phone in front of the café. Who in the world knew to call me there?

It was Harry Payne who worked with the South Park church in Beaumont, Texas, a person of whom I had never heard. He quickly explained that Jimmy, a student whom I knew, had agreed to work with the congregation during the summer while Harry was to be away in meetings. Harry also had a daily radio program. Jimmy had changed his mind at the last minute and had recommended me as a substitute. Bless Ol' Jimmy's heart! Could and would I come at once to fill that capacity? WOW! Yes! Yes!

One five-minute phone call from a stranger spun me around 180 degrees! Beaumont in the southeast corner of Texas and Utah were opposite directions from Abilene. My life was to take a new course which I could not have foreseen. God had marvelous surprises ahead for which he had prepared me. His gizzard stones were at work. []

(Cecil Hook: May 2006)

“I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24).