

Grit In My Gizzard: No 15

Beyond the Sabine

The moment that a visitor passed over the bridge of the Sabine River at Orange, the introduction into Louisiana was impressive – but not beautiful. One crossed over a mile or more of marshland on a rickety, rumbling wooden bridge over murky alligator infested water growing marsh grass and water lilies. The two-lane Highway 90 was crowded due to oil field operations and there were always barricades for road repair. Still having open-range laws in the state, cattle wandered on to the road. At night cattle would often collect close to the pavement where the passing vehicles would fan the mosquitoes away, and sometime a cow would decide to cross the road. If you hit one, it was yours for you had to pay for it. At night one of the other dangers was the emerging of traffic from the numerous honky-tonks after a night of dancing, carousing, and drinking. Such scenes were not the most appealing to newcomers.

That was a negative introduction to a lush landscape with towering pines and majestic, ancient, moss-draped oaks along sluggish bayous. Adding to their industries of lumbering, sugar cane, and rice, the war had tapped into the rich oil reserves in Louisiana. Northern Louisiana was more like the surrounding states in national origin and religion while the southern part was predominantly French and Catholic. Lake Charles was a mixture of both cultures while Maplewood was a new planned development of houses and apartments accommodating the new petro-chemical industry during the war. Many of those working in the refineries and plants were implants from Texas and Oklahoma. These would be our neighbors, friends, and fellow disciples for the next five years.

Due to the influx of people housing was critical. We started in an improvised sort of attic apartment on the outskirts and later moved into Lake Charles to share a small house with a single woman. Soon a family friend in Daisetta who owned a dealership sold us our first new car, a 1947 Plymouth, the payments for which almost drove us into poverty. It was the only new car that Lea and I ever owned. Happily sitting at the wheel wearing her sun glasses, my lovely wife outclassed the movie celebrities! That was worth all those stiff payments – a treasured memory still photographed in my mind!

Very quickly I settled into a routine of work. On Sundays I had an early morning radio program, then I went back for Lea and we always picked up persons who had no ride. I taught a class and delivered my sermon. In mid-afternoon we went to Maplewood for services and then back to Lake Charles for another one. The drawbridge over the Calcasieu River always raised anxiety for we never knew when we would have to wait in a long line of traffic while a boat went through. Often kind people invited for lunch. It would have been a crime to have refused their invitations, but I much preferred going home for a sandwich so I could rest a bit for the later services. Usually there were visits after evening services which I enjoyed as much as my fatigue allowed. We did well to have two or three nights each week alone at home.

Built of green lumber during the war, the small frame building looked pitiful after the lumber had dried! The walls had begun to bulge outwardly so that oil well sucker rods had been run wall to wall overhead to buckle the walls. Few churches had offices in

those days, so I did my studying at home. The group in Maplewood met in the school building which was nice enough after clearing out the cigarette butts and beer bottles left over from the Saturday night dances.

Lea began teaching classes and making calls with me just like an old hand at the job. Since she was not timid as I still was, she was a great team mate. Her lack of timidity gave me a sort of pleasant scare very early. One of the leaders in the church was telling us with some delight about his refusal to pay a black teenager for mowing the lawn for some picayune reason. Lea immediately got in his face like a flogging setting hen giving him the tongue lashing of his life. I give him a little credit for sheepishly walking away instead of any retaliation in anger. Still ill at ease while speaking in public, I always batted my eyes nervously and that made some listeners/viewers nervous also. As I have stated before, I chose preaching out of idealism rather than because I had any talent in that area. I have always needed longsuffering listeners.

Very early in Lake Charles and then at Maplewood we made volleyball courts next to our buildings and that sort of became my trade mark as I served other congregations later. It brought us together in a fun situation. Through the years, a good number of persons were converted after playing volleyball with us.

I received an invitation to speak in a rural church near Merryville. Many in that area near the Sabine marshland were either Franks or related to the Franks. Not knowing the roads, I took a longer route and then was held up a long time by a logging train. But I was not too concerned for it was only about sunset when I reached the building. Two men were outside and I learned later that they were discussing whether to dismiss the congregation after having delayed in a long song-session awaiting my arrival! No time for starting had been mentioned. In West Texas we *started* at “dark-thirty” but they seemed to *end* before dark. Many times Lea and I were invited to the Boxwood church at “Booger Branch” as it was nick-named. Those great people who were fun to be around came to mean much to Lea and me.

What would be a novel way to advertise our upcoming “gospel meeting” to the public? By flying slowly and lowly over the city announcing it by a bull-horn! That’s what we hired a fellow to do in Lake Charles – once!

Being from West Texas, there were three things that caught my eye early in South Louisiana. Driveways and parking lots were covered with oyster shells instead of gravel. For the building of larger buildings, pile drivers drove cypress logs deep into the soil which was devoid of rocks. Because of termite problems, dwellings were built on piers with a termite proof metal plate on top and often water could be seen standing under houses.

The air base at Lake Charles closed down and the chapel was to be disposed of, so the Maplewood church made a bid for it and was awarded the nice structure at a give-away price. How were we to get it to Maplewood over the narrow roads and a draw-bridge across the river? A favorable bid from a mover to put it on a barge and tow it down the river to the refinery docks was accepted. The big mistake we made was not in thinking it could be barged down the river, but in making a verbal contract with a contractor who was not bonded. He successfully removed the steeple, cut the building in halves, and loaded it on the barge. But he began to run out of money. At more than one point we either had to abandon the building or come up with more money. As he got it moving

down the river, I called a reporter, and he made some great pictures and gave a good write up for us in the local paper. It was successfully unloaded at the refinery dock and had about two more miles to go. Utility crews and various other helpers were on hand at the time to move out – except the highway patrol to escort it. We waited nervously as all those crews would be paid whether we were moving or not. The contractor told us the police wanted a payoff! He did not have money for that and I don't think we were ready for such underhanded dealings. After waiting helplessly so long, someone gave me the number of the highway police headquarters Baton Rouge. Calling and timidly explaining our situation, I was connected with the head honcho. Just a few minutes later, we had an escort!

With much volunteer help, the building was one to be proud of for it even had central heating controlled by thermostats. We worked into Saturday night on last minute preparations for our grand opening the next morning. An excited crowd gathered – in a frigid building! Everyone had depended on someone else to set the thermostats!

I invited members to give the cost of an azalea plant (\$1.00) to go along our property line, and sufficient money was given. Another man and I set them out then collected cow manure with which to fertilize them. Caution: do not try that at home. Azaleas do not like cow manure. Every plant died.

Our work was going well in both congregations as each reached capability of supporting its own preacher. Lea and I were given our choice as to which church to continue with, and we chose Maplewood. There we were blessed to rent a two-bedroom studio apartment that had thermostatically controlled central heating which was still a luxury. There we decided to start our family but the Lord was not ready. After two years, on our first vacation to the Rocky Mountains, Lea seemed to have caught a virus whose undiminished misery she endured for nine months. One of the anxieties of women in Maplewood as time of delivery approached was the draw-bridge. When Lea's time came, we breezed right on through on our way to St. Patrick's Hospital. Her misery was repaid as she held Sol Watson in her arms. Having no regulation of visiting hours, dear people began coming by as early as seven in the morning and almost continuously until as late as eleven in the evening. That continued after we returned home with a crying baby until Lea was almost at the breaking point. Her mother who had come to help began to intercept visitors downstairs. When we disregarded the prescribed feeding schedule and fed Sol when he indicated hunger, he was a most peaceable little fellow soon sleeping all night.

While Lea was pregnant, I went to New Iberia about a hundred miles further east on the coastal plains for a two-week meeting. Due to the exciting success, it was insisted that I continue another week. During that week friends brought Lea who was feeling somewhat better. After she returned home she came down with a stomach virus, and while in the pulpit on the last night, it struck me very suddenly. I struggled to speak as I grew faint, but finally had to make a hasty exit. I suppose I have delivered many sermons that should have been cut short but I don't prescribe that method for shortening them.

In the early development of our Movement, there were many "tent-making" preachers, but soon the dependence upon professional preachers began to prevail. Outside men were brought in as new voices and different personalities that generally brought good results – while on a honeymoon period with the church. But their novelty soon dulled and statistics were not swelling, all of which was blamed on these men hired to keep

things moving. So a new man was exploited for another year or two – seldom for more than three years. This was a demonstration of immaturity on the part of both the preachers and the congregations. My elaboration on this matter, partly in humor and partly serious, can be read in my second book, *Free To Speak*, Chapter 27, titled “*Lamentations of A Mediocre Preacher.*”

There is much outcry presently against the oil companies prejudicially stereotyped by the imaginary big tribe of “fat-cats” who make such big salaries. I have a much softer view. Most of my support through my career came from people in oil related jobs. They were common, hard-working persons, often doing dirty and dangerous jobs on up through highly skilled jobs and management. Though oil companies treated employees better than most big businesses, none of them became those despicable fat-cats. Maybe a few at the top made as much as movie actors, entertainers, talk show hosts, and athletes – and Elvis who, being dead, made \$45 million last year! The major companies like Exxon have many thousands, maybe millions, of employees for whom they provide insurance and pensions, and over two million shareholders who expect profits. Exploration, drilling, refineries, and equipment are tremendously expensive. They are always subject to lawsuits from greedy people. They have good times to strengthen their companies and bad times in which smaller companies fail. They, like other businesses, have had to conglomerate in order to survive. Some have had gross incomes exceeding those of third world nations, but they serve more people than those nations did. Like any other successful business, their purpose is to make profits for their shareholders. According to stories I have heard, Standard Oil Company was rebuffed in Texas by requiring any company operating in Texas to have its headquarters in the state. Being humiliated by Texas, Standard Oil Company created Humble Oil Company, and the city of Humble in the Houston area is so named. Exxon is only one of various names they have worn. Now they are strangled by environmentalists who are forcing them to become more dependent on foreign oil, the price of which is controlled by OPEC. Getting on with my point, those oil companies have been a tremendous asset in the growth of our country and the provision of jobs. I doubt if any of you really want more government control of businesses, for the government cannot compete with private companies for efficiency. The price of gasoline is just now adjusting to the inflationary rate of other products and salaries since my youth. So, my question for those who complain about the huge profits of oil companies (and drug companies, etc.): If they are making all those big profits, why aren't you buying shares in them to get in on that source of easy wealth?

In our fifth year in Maplewood, I was told my contract would not be renewed. I use the word loosely for no church ever made a written contract with me. In agreeing to work with churches, very little was ever outlined as to what was expected of me or days off or vacations. I was supposed to know all that; that was what they hired me for! But that did not keep individuals from expressing their expectations later.

The dreaded preacher perplexing problem had arisen again – where to now? The folks in New Iberia eagerly invited me but could give only partial support. I gained promise of support from churches in Texas, and we looked a hundred miles farther east. Those strange gizzard stones! []

(Cecil Hook: June 2006)

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

