

Grit In My Gizzard: No. 18

Out West Again

The invitation to move to Lovington, New Mexico revived our spirits, even though Lea only remembered the area from the little she saw on our honeymoon. We arranged for Mayflower to be at our place at eight in the morning. Eight came but no van. Another hour and no van. I called the company and got an unconcerned reply that their van was full and would not be coming our way. Was this some sort of omen? In the telephone book I saw the name of an individual mover, called him, and explained my needs. Well, yes, he drove a short-bed van, lived in Alamogordo, wanted to be there that weekend for his birthday and would be happy to move our goods. Upon further conversation we learned that he was a brother in the Hispanic church in Alamogordo. The Lord was working in our favor!

Lea, Sol, and Mira followed in our second car and later told me they kept asking, "What has he gotten us into?" Passing through irregular areas mixed with farming and ranching, just past Post, a steeper climb for about a minute lifted us into a new world. It was level farming land all the way to the horizon. This plain extended the hundred miles to the border, sixteen miles on to Lovington, and another twenty-five miles to a shallow Pecos River valley, then on to Artesia. Those plains were level to the eye, but beginning from Post there was a gradual climb until a few miles past Artesia. Then another hundred mile climb through foothills continued into the Sacramento Mountains at over 8,000 feet. On top of the mountain the town of Cloudcroft is perched at 8,663 feet where one can look past a drop-off to an expansive floor below where the first atomic bomb was detonated at the Trinity Site in 1945. Going down hill 4,329 feet in sixteen miles takes one to Alamogordo at 4,334 feet leading to the White Sands a few miles farther.

In that spacious state 85% of the land is over 4,000 feet elevation. The lowest point in New Mexico is higher than the highest points in a third of the other states. The air is light and crisp, the stars are multiplied, the clouds are low, and the lightning is close. Because of the lack of humidity, most homes were cooled by "swamp coolers" instead of compression air conditioners.

The Dallas-Fort Worth metropolitan area which we had left had more people and autos than the entire expansive state of New Mexico. Except for church acquaintances, I could go about in Dallas all day and see no one I knew. The Monday after our first assembly in Lovington, when I walked to the post office, a number of people greeted me by name! It was a world with real people again! A visitor from many of our states might think in terms of desolation and isolation, but residents soon come to feel freedom and individuality.

New Mexico became our 47th state in 1912. One of our elders had come in a covered wagon as a boy while it was still a territory. The original church building was adobe and it was still in use as a fellowship area. In the church Mrs. Jim Love, for whose family the town was named, had been an early settler there. This town of probably 8,000 was in cattle country to the west and irrigated farming to the east, and then there was a great oil field operation. The congregation of 450 had an attractive building that could seat 800 and had the largest attendance of any church in town. It was unusual that so many of the

members were business and civic leaders in the community. There was the same general friendliness as I grew up with in West Texas.

Though the church was traditional, it did not dwell doctrinal issues. It was progressive and of good standing in the city. I attribute a better spirit among the churches of the plains to the influence of G. C. Brewer, Norvel Young, Bill Banowsky, and Joe Barnett who had served the great Broadway Church in Lubbock about ninety miles away.

Lea and I breathed in this fresh air and our spirits began to revive. Lea's first Sunday with them drew many comments about her beautiful singing which was distinct even in the larger crowd. Sol, having been moved from school to school, had learned to adjust and to assert his leadership, and he was happy to have so many others his age. Being assigned to teach the high school class on Wednesday evening, I could hardly believe we could have thirty to thirty-five in attendance, as we did. Sol quickly found his place as a junior and in his senior year was president of both his class and the student council. Mira started her schooling there. Numerous helpful teachers were from our congregation.

Even when we were in Louisiana, the vacations we took other than to kinfolks were camping trips to the Rocky Mountains. They were the only kind we could afford, but we would have chosen camping anyway. Sol and Mira loved camping, campfires, and eating the food cooked outside and Lea and I liked to cook outdoors. An oft recalled memory is of the night in Yellowstone when the bears cleaned out all our supplies. Living in Lovington, we could be set up in a campsite at Cloudcroft in three hours. Our love for the state grew. Much of the land was owned by the government and all citizens were free to roam in it. There was freedom. The state is appropriately advertised as "*The Land of Enchantment.*"

Having gone through the tumultuous time of the civil rights movement, I was curious to learn first-hand the effects of it in New Mexico. I knew that the state which had four distinct groups – whites, blacks, Hispanics, and Indians – never had segregated schools. I wanted to see the effects on their education. One of our deacons was a dedicated teacher in middle school who pressed minority students to get their education. In dismay one day he told of a student who came to school Monday morning to pick up her Crayolas – for she had married over the weekend. That speaks for the general disappointment. Very few minority students graduated from high school. The failure is in the home and culture rather than in discrimination.

Lovington had a small hospital and numerous doctors, but there were no specialists. In my constant visits with the sick, I came to greatly appreciate small town, isolated doctors. Not having specialists to pass patients on to, they learned a much wider practice of medicine than the big city doctors dealt with. And when they determined that a patient needed a specialist, the ninety mile dash to Lubbock over wide-open Texas roads did not take much longer than for some trips to, and finding a parking place at, hospitals in large cities.

With the consent of the elders, I initiated a unique program. At least, I had not known of one. I visited most of the pastors whom I already knew and proposed that the young people of all the churches in town visit with each other's youth group in their church to broaden their acquaintances. The pastor or priest would tell the youths of their beliefs and practices. The youth would then be free to ask questions, but no sponsoring adults would do so. This would rotate until each church had hosted the group. Six or eight

churches cooperated in what I believe was a very educational experience for the kids. They asked appropriate questions but always in inquiring attitude rather than for argument.

Sadly, our 800-seat auditorium was filled once. A woman in our congregation was married to a policeman and they had three sons aged about eight, ten, and twelve. The father took the boys fishing on a lake in Texas. In a boating accident, all four of them were drowned. It was a tragedy that touched the heart of the entire community. With the help of a Baptist preacher, we conducted the funeral in our building. Even our large building seemed to shrink with four caskets extended across in front of us. Such an awesome sight lingers long in the mind.

Having finished high school, Sol was preparing to go to Abilene Christian College. I was amused at his mother trying to live that experience through him. She wanted to get him a nice car, which was out of the question for us. She collected all sorts of supplies for him as though he would be at a remote outpost. I, however, showed my usual frugality. I found a car for \$300.00. At that price, need I describe it to you? It looked like a salvage from a wrecking yard -- a 1960 Ford Falcon with dents and bruises all over, dull red with patches of repaint. To his credit Sol had self-image high enough that he did not let that hold him back. In fact, he and some of his friends had lots of fun with it.

It was the time when students were growing beards and long hair, against which there was such strong dislike that none of the boys with long hair were asked to lead prayers or serve the Communion. At college Sol was to play the villain Mordred in "*Camelot*" and Dr. Fulks gave him written permission to grow a beard and long hair on campus. On a visit back home, he was asked to lead the prayer, which he did very thoughtfully and reverently. There were rumblings so that it was approached in the next elders' meeting. I showed them a picture of Alexander Campbell whose ears were completely covered by long hair, but that did not make it right, they contended. Finally, I ventured that I wanted my boy to always respect us enough to come back home. That was a sort of low blow to some whose sons were already being alienated. To their credit, no one became angry and the subject was then dropped.

During our six years of 1967-1973 in Lovington, great change was working in our nation. The disastrous war in Vietnam was raging. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy were killed. Neil Armstrong walked on the moon. Woodstock initiated a new type of musical culture. Developing mainly in California and glorified through cabled color television, the sexual revolution brought miniskirts, unashamed "shacking up," children out of wedlock, single parent families, the drug culture, general promiscuity, acceptability of abortion, and Roe vs. Wade. The political Watergate scandal was trivial in comparison to the social and moral changes destroying the Judeo-Christian standards in our country. What better place could we choose for our teenage son than Lovington for such radical times? Anderson Carter from our congregation won the Republican nomination for the U.S Senate but lost to a Democrat. The last year we were there, we saw Pete Dominici up close and personal in his first campaign for the U. S. Senate. That was in 1973 and he still serves with the second highest tenure for a Republican.

Lea continued to have her bi-polar shifts but generally kept her balance so as to participate in church activities. When she did have times of more debilitating depression some would interpret it as attitude problems. That lack of understanding helped no one. She did have some very supportive special friends. She leaned heavily on doctors but

they knew little about treating her disorder then. Other health problems sent her to the hospital a few times. She was in Methodist Hospital in Lubbock after surgery when the devastating tornado swept through downtown Lubbock.

Back in 1958 while working in New Iberia a shocking discovery disturbed my thinking about my teaching. I conducted an unsigned poll in my midweek class of twenty-two people, some of whom I had converted. We think of midweek attendees as being the strongest spiritually. One question was: If you were to die now, do you think that you would be saved? The answers: 11 yes, 4 no, 7 undecided or equivocal! Fifty percent were confident; fifty percent were burdened with feelings of guilt and insecurity!

Since that time I had been trying to instill more hope, assurance, and comfort but, due to my lack of understanding of the problem, I was undermining confidence by emphasizing the necessity of knowing all the right doctrinal answers, obeying each detail properly, and fully accomplishing righteousness through constant dedication, reformation, and works. I was still confusing a system of salvation by grace through faith as a system of law and works. I cover this more comprehensively in Chapter 1 of "*Free To Change*."

Ira Rice's *Contending for the Faith* came to the church regularly but I never let the elders see his negative onslaughts for I had grown beyond such belligerent sectarian concepts. I began to receive tapes of lessons of Wesley Reagan in Pasadena, Texas. Although I had read all the slanderous things about Carl Ketcherside's writings, I became bold enough to subscribe to his *Mission Messenger*. I faintly recalled having seen Leroy Garrett as a student in ACC, and I had read warning against such a divisive radical, but I subscribed to his *Restoration Review* also. Surely enough, these fellows were teaching things I should have been listening to all along. Winston Hamby, the pre-teen son of Woodie Hamby in Beaumont when I went there in 1944, worked as an associate holding many liberating concepts, and Bob Williams who followed him had advanced even further. I was only on the road rather than being near its end. I did introduce some refreshing thoughts in Lovington which were favorably received. A new kind of grit was grinding in me.

As the years passed my energy and concentration continued to decline. A cup of coffee or refreshment no longer gave lifts but only aggravated the problem. Being in my sixth year there, I realized that my work was being adversely affected both by the long tenure and the mental fatigue. I attributed it to tension. Once when my regular doctor was not available I went to a new doctor. Even he did not know the real problem but started giving me a vitamin shot every two weeks to keep me going. That helped but did not cure.

Although her message did not surprise me, the messenger bearer did. One night a woman who was sort of on the outskirts of the kingdom, evidently bolstered by a few sips from the bottle, called to inform me that there was talk of my dismissal. I still do not know how she got that information. God has used some strange spokespersons in history. Sometime after that, the elders set a termination date generously giving me six months in which to relocate.

Our six years in Lovington was a happy chapter in our lives. Mira was now ready for middle school. Sol finished high school and college and, having found the love of his life, Linda Williamson of Vivian, Louisiana, had married. Though Lea and I were having

health problems, we were refreshed in spirit by the church and community and by more liberating concepts of grace and unity. A better grade of grit had been grinding. []

(Cecil Hook: May 2006)