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PEOPLE I HAVE KNOWN (PART 2)

In the Bible we read that Timothy was a young preacher (1 Tim. 4:12). I, too, began preaching at a young age. I was holding meetings various places in California and Arizona at age 18. Then when I had just turned 20, doors opened for me to hold meetings in Texas, the first being at Lubbock. That meeting had been planned to last two weeks, but the Lord blessed. We went into a third week, and a fourth, night after night.



Having never been to this area, a number of "firsts" come to mind. Lubbock has a lovely park spread over many acres which includes a large Prairie Dog Town. This was my first time to see (or even know about) Prairie Dogs. I learned that farmers hated them because of the holes they dig, so I assume this protected setting in a park was an effort to give them a safe home.

Something else I saw for the first time: when lawns died and turned brown because of cold weather, some would have them spray-painted green for the winter. I had not seen signal lights before with a turn arrow—only the standard red, green, and orange lights. One day some people took me to Palo Duro Canyon. While not as impressive as the Grand Canyon in Arizona, at 120 miles long it is considered the second-largest canyon in the United States.

My first time to see a United States President in person was at Lubbock: **HARRY TRUMAN**. By this time he was a former president, of course. A man from the church who worked at the airport phoned and said Truman was flying in that afternoon. He was to give a speech that night in Lubbock, but his arrival at the airport had not been widely announced ahead of time. A couple of us headed out to the airport.

With a relatively small crowd there, we were close as the airplane taxied up and Truman came down the steps of the plane. There was a brief welcoming ceremony during which he was handed a certificate making him an honorary member of some local organization.

As he moved among the people, he was smiling and shaking hands. Just as he got to us, he turned and shook hands in the other direction. But I was right next to him, close enough to see the gold bridgework on his teeth.

President Truman was ushered through the airport to where a limousine was waiting. The man we knew who worked at the airport took us around another way, so—ahead of the others—we were close when Truman got into the limousine. For a moment he was alone in the back seat. Just then, an older man—apparently irritated about something—rushed up and began knocking on the window. "Harry! Open this window!" he hollered. "Open up, Harry!" President Truman never looked up, but just calmly continued to look at the certificate he was holding. Soon, of course, the security people moved in.

Sometimes we remember odd things that happen, possibly more than things of greater importance. On my way to Lubbock, while driving on "Route 66" (this was before the I-40 freeway), I turned on the car radio. Someone was singing a folksy, light-hearted song: "*Twelve More Miles to Tucumcari*." Just then I passed a sign causing me to know that I was, then and there, about 12 miles from Tucumcari! I am not aware that the song was ever a big hit, but after all these years it can still be heard on YouTube.

It was during the meetings in Lubbock I met **JIMMIE WESTBROOK** who had grown up there. His father, Sidney Westbrook, had pastored this church for many years. Becoming acquainted with Jimmie would have a far-reaching impact.

The following summer—1960—I planned to conduct tent revival meetings in the San Joaquin Valley of California, beginning at Tulare (see the following photos). I phoned Jimmie and asked if he would like to team up with me for these meetings. Along with preaching ability, he was also musical, played an electric guitar, a fine singer, and could lead singing.





A man once told me that Paul made tents (Acts 18:3), but there is no indication he ever made a *gospel* tent. I am not sure what his point was, but it is probably correct to say that tent meetings were probably more effective at some times than others. Bear in mind that the year 1960 was only eleven years since the Billy Graham Tent Crusade in Los Angeles that drew nationwide attention to his ministry. Over the years that followed, Graham probably preached to more people in person than anyone who ever lived.

There was a time when Brush Arbor meetings were effective, a part of our Americana. Even country singer George Jones sang a song about old Brush Arbors by the side of the road: "There we heard about salvation, from the book of Revelation," etc.

The location of the tent meeting in Tulare was at Cross and " Streets, near the railroad track. Each evening a scheduled freight train would come through pulled by a steam locomotive, very noisy and with a loud whistle for the intersection. Usually we tried to wait until the train came through before starting to preach. I think some of the people realized this, for after the train passed they would be smiling as though to say it is time now to preach.

It may be of some interest to here include photos used on our advertizing handbills for the 1960 meetings. (Jimmie is on the left, Ralph on the right.) Looks like a couple *young* guys!



That year, as usual, was a hot summer in the valley. We stayed in a small trailer behind the tent. I think we had a fan, but no air conditioning. In Tulare, there was an A & W root beer stand nearby. Served in mugs frosted with ice, I don't know when root beer tasted any better!

Compared to prices today, what I am about to say may seem unbelievable. A & W root beer was served in two sizes: the .5 cent mug and the .10 cent mug. Jimmie and I did a comparison and discovered that we got more in *two* .5 cent mugs than *one* .10 cent size. So we would order 4 of the nickel size

mugs! When we were told they had a .10 cent size, we would give our explanation, usually with some smiles all around. For a price comparison: a McDonald's hamburger at that time was .15 cents.

I later learned A & W had been around a long time, had actually started in the San Joaquin Valley, but further north at Lodi in 1919. The name was based on the initial letters of the last names of Roy Allen and Frank Wright who were business partners. When Arlene and I married, a little joke between us was that her initials were now A and W.

My mother used to tell about her family making root beer when she was a girl. Later in life, even when she was up in years, root beer remained a favorite. She would say, "I'm going to have a *beer!*" But then she would always add: "A root beer." Being a teetotaler she wanted to make this clear.

Following the tent meeting in Tulare, the next meeting was in Hanford. Some Christian brothers came over from Tulare to help put up the tent. One of the men owned a nice



DeSoto automobile with a two-tone color scheme. I have the feeling he took a lot of pride in this car, which adds to the intrigue of this story. I needed to borrow his car to go check on some last-minute detail at the City Hall.

I drove into town, attended to the business at hand, came out and got into his car - well, I *thought* it was his car. It was a DeSoto, same two-tone color scheme; but as I drove back to the tent, it did not seem to be running right. The motor was cutting out. This was a concern - I didn't want him to think I had misused his car in some way. I then noticed something I had not seen earlier: over to my right on the seat was a pack of cigarettes. I was certain he did not smoke, so it was a mystery why a pack of cigarettes would be in his car. It still did not dawn on me *I was in the wrong car!*

Later, when he saw me back at the tent, he asked, "Where is my car?" When we went over to what I thought was his car, I noticed something else: the whole side of this car, opposite to the driver's side, had scraped against something, was dented in, and the chrome was missing. Obviously this was the *wrong* car! Figuring we might need to do some "explaining," I told him we better go back to the City Hall *together!* Arriving there, the parking space where this car had been was vacant. I pulled in, leaving the keys as I had found them: in the ignition. Two or three spaces away was the right car, the keys to which were in my pocket!

After the meetings in Hanford, Jimmie and I took a couple days off to go to Yosemite - to enjoy its scenic beauty, to seek the Lord with prayer and fasting, also to escape from the extreme valley heat.

Yosemite is known for its spectacular waterfalls, but back then thousands would gather to watch a different kind of fall: The Firefall. For many years (until discontinued in 1968), each

summer night at the appointed time, a forest ranger would cry out: “LET THE FIRE FALL!” Then, from Glacier Point, 3,000 feet above, coals of fire would be pushed over the cliff forming a magnificent, glowing firefall.

I am sure this reminded many who were Bible believers of the time someone else called for fire to fall: Elijah. He boldly challenged the prophets of Baal on that occasion: “The God who answers by fire, let him be God” (1 Kings 18:24). There was no answer from Baal, but the true God answered as fire fell from heaven upon Mount Carmel.

Jimmie went on to pastor churches in California, Kansas, Oklahoma, Alabama, and Texas. Even after many years in the ministry, each of us looked back to those meetings in the summer of 1960 with fond memories. It was a special time. We saw a lot of people touched by the Lord, with many testimonies of salvation, and also healing. Among outstanding conversions, was a man who was fairly well-known locally as a country singer. He immediately quit singing in bars and was in church every night with a glowing testimony. After the Tulare meeting we went to the river that flows from Sequoia National Park where many followed the Lord in water baptism.



It was during these meetings that Jimmie met Phyllis Ann Smith who a year later would become his wife. (I am not sure when the accompanying photo was taken.) As part of a girl’s trio, along with Bonnie and Roberta, she sang and was the pianist. The trio had the opportunity to sing for a number of churches, and quite often in our meetings that summer. Phyllis (later she used her middle name Ann) had a heart for God and was a great asset to Jimmie’s ministry.

Some years ago, he told me that the people in the church he was pastoring in Amarillo liked her better than him. When I introduced him to speak at our church here in the desert, I mentioned this. As he took the pulpit, he corrected me. It was not “one” church he pastored, but the people in “all” the churches he pastored liked her better than him! Indeed, she was a lovely person, truly a woman of God.

I will now need to explain some background to lead into what comes next. Beginning perhaps around age 10, I would often ride my bike a few blocks and watch trains go by. The Union Pacific and Santa Fe railroads shared tracks through Riverside. Having an interest in trains and travel I was intrigued with an article I read in 1960. For the same fare to go



round trip from Los Angeles to Chicago, the trip could be lengthened considerably, including going by way of Vancouver, British Columbia. I don’t recall the fare, but it was very inexpensive, because of this special offer. I told Jimmie about it; he was interested. Our tent meetings would be over by October, so we made reservations for what would be a 7,000 mile trip.

From Los Angeles the train was the *Coast Daylight* which followed a scenic route including 113 miles along the coast. At San Jose we spent a couple nights with my aunt and uncle, and attended a revival meeting. Continuing on to Oakland, we boarded the *Shasta Daylight* to Portland.

Most of the trains on the trip had vista dome cars, so we could “look up, look down, look all around.” This was the case with *The Canadian* which provided a highlight of the trip: travel from Vancouver through the spectacular Canadian Rockies, with stops at places like Lake Louise and Banff.

From Minneapolis we took what was then the fastest train in the United States, *The Morning Zephyr* to Chicago. There we boarded the *California Zephyr* to Denver. We then opted for the less-direct route and took the train that went through the Royal Gorge. It stopped in the gorge for 10 minutes so people could walk around, look at the steep cliffs, and “over a thousand feet above” what was considered the highest suspension bridge in the world.



The reader will need to understand we did this travel on a budget. We were traveling “coach,” not in a sleeping car. Arriving at Glenwood Springs, it was good to have a hotel room for the night! The cost for a room at the Hotel Denver, right across the street from the train station, was about \$6. A room in this hotel now runs around \$150!

The next afternoon we again boarded the *California Zephyr* which took us through Salt Lake City and on to Oakland by way of the lovely Feather River Canyon. That night we attended a revival meeting before leaving late on a mail train. Even though this train made a lot of stops, we chose it in order to get off at the relatively small town of Selma, California. Arriving there about 3 a.m., Phyllis and her parents, Bud and Lucille Smith, picked us up. We had planned this stop so Jimmie could see Phyllis again before heading back to Texas. By now their romance was blossoming.

The following night we planned to again take the train that stopped at Selma (the one we had taken from Oakland). The timetable said that Selma was a “flag stop.” Not realizing those arrangements had to be made *ahead*, I assumed (wrongly) that we could flag down the train. We sat our suitcases by the

tracks. At 3 a.m., as that steam train passed, it was going so fast it knocked our suitcases over!

So this gave us a few more hours there before the Smiths took us to Fresno where, around noon, we boarded the *San Joaquin Daylight* to Los Angeles. Later we were glad things worked out this way because of an interesting experience that happened on this train.

Again, I will need to preface what follows with some background. During our tent meeting in Porterville some people gave me a book by a Colorado preacher, William L. Blessing. To some extent I think they believed he had some "deep truth," but did not agree with everything. One chapter in his book claimed there were 600,000 men employed in building the Tower of Babel, that it was about 60 miles around its base, and was 3,650 MILES high (this is not a misprint!). When it collapsed it fell with such force that it broke the earth into continents and islands as it is today. Genesis 10:25 was quoted: "In the days of Peleg the earth was divided."

From what we read in this book, Jimmie and I knew William Blessing dressed in white—white shoes, white suit, and white tie—based on Ecclesiastes 9:8: "Let your garments be always white." But, otherwise, we did not know what he looked like. On the train we noticed a man dressed in white (he was also smoking a white cigarette!). Jimmie and I looked at each other and said, "Blessing?" We did not suppose it was him. Back to this in a moment....

A man who was returning from a Church of the Nazarene Conference in the northwest, came through the train handing out gospel tracts. We told him we were both preachers and visited a while. He said he was going to go on through the train with his tracts, would see us later, suggesting that we have a little church service on the train! Jimmie and I felt a bit awkward with this. Not that we were "ashamed" of the gospel (Rom. 1:16), but we realized that if actions appear to be too aggressive or pushy, people can be turned off.

When he returned, he announced to everyone that there were two young evangelists in that car, and that he thought it would be good to hear from them! (About then, the man dressed in white, seemingly irritated, headed for the lounge car.) In the meetings that summer both Jimmie and I preached, but he led the singing. So, referring to Jimmie as a "song bird," the Nazarene man asked him to go first with some singing.

When Jimmie stood up, he said: "Do any of YOU have a testimony?" To my relief (and I am sure to his also) a woman stood up and testified. With enthusiasm she said she had attended our meetings in Tulare, had been blessed to be there, and it was a pleasant surprise to know we were on the train! She was part of a group of nurses on their way to Los Angeles for special medical training. A few more testimonies followed and Jimmie led a couple familiar choruses.

It was now my turn. My text was Hebrews 9:27, "It is appointed unto man once to die and after that the judgment." I said the rich die, the poor die, the young die, the old die—this is one "appointment" we will all keep. I asked them to consider that this life will soon be past, only what's done for

Christ will last. While I was bringing this brief message, the Nazarene brother had moved back by the door that came into our car. That was a good thing, because the conductor came in the door and asked him: "Is that young man causing a disturbance?" He told him no, that the people were enjoying it. So he did not come on through, but went back the other way!

It was a while after this that the man dressed in white returned to his seat in the first row. I went up and asked if he was William L. Blessing. It was! I motioned for Jimmie. We told him we had read what he wrote about the Tower of Babel and wondered where he got this information. He was friendly enough, said his teachings were based on the Bible and some other books. He reached in his briefcase and pulled out the book of *Jasher* as an example. But when I pressed him about the Tower of Babel, after hedging a while, he told us he had received this information "by direct revelation!"

The reader may judge for himself the feasibility of a tower being 3,650 MILES high. The highest mountain in the world, Mount Everest (29,028 feet above sea level), is not even six miles high!

Following the summer tent meetings and the October train trip, Jimmie and I held one more meeting together. This was in a church in Prescott, Arizona, after which he headed back to Texas and I returned to California. We never held any more meetings together (as such), but maintained friendship over the years. When my wife Arlene passed from this life on October 10, 2019, he was one of the first I let know. It was only three days after this that *he*, suddenly and unexpectedly, died.

Over the weeks prior to this he had shared with me that Ann had been diagnosed with cancer and it had spread. She asked their doctor, a Christian man, "How much longer do I have to live?" He told her he was surprised, in her condition, she was still alive. It seemed she would be the first to go. But it ended up she outlived Jimmie, passing peacefully from this life some months later on July 29, 2020.

Jimmie often played his guitar and sang "*Until Then*." As we come to the end of this article, the words of that song, written by Stuart Hamblin, are meaningful:

*My heart can sing when I pause to remember
A heartache here is but a stepping stone
Along a path that's winding always upward
This troubled world is not my final home.
But until then my heart will go on singing
Until then with joy I'll carry on
Until the day my eyes behold that City
Until the day God calls me home.*

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