

4. ACTIVITY WHILE WAITING

My assignment was to Bethany congregation in Houston, Texas. It was located in the suburban area where people could keep horses, chickens and other animals in their yards. There was no public transportation to the area so one was dependent on a car, either your own or someone else's. I was met at the station by our principal whose name was Ray Alms. The school had two rooms back of the church or chapel. The principal taught the two lower grades and grade 7. Most grade schools ended with the 7th grade in that area. They believed that the youth matured earlier in that warmer climate. So I was responsible for grades 3 thru 6 and I had about 35 pupils in the class room. At least half of the pupils were from homes of non-members and gladly paid a monthly tuition in order to provide a private school training for their children, since the reputation of the public system's quality of education was at a low ebb. However, all pupils participated in the religious program without question.

Among the enrollees were some interesting personalities. One whom I recall was a slow learner and lazy besides. His name happened to be Herbert Hoover. He had become very dependent on his younger sister who had caught up to him and was in the same grade. When he had trouble finishing his work she invariably came to his aid to help him complete it and keep up his grades. Another fellow came from an Indian, or part-Indian, family in the neighborhood. His name was A. B. Monty. His father's love showed itself primarily in giving him almost anything his heart longed for. Altho he was only in the 6th grade his father gave him a pony so that he could ride all of about 6 blocks to school. During the noon recess he wanted to give his friends rides. This we could not allow since we were responsible for all pupils while they were at school. Before the end of the school year he even came one day with his own small car. A third interesting pupil was a 14-year-old named H. R. Tyler. He was somewhat retarded and also somewhat lame as a result of a bout with polio and he was only in the 6th grade. Since he was an only

child in a well-to-do family, he had come to crave a lot of attention also at school. Seemingly he was not getting this in the public school so the parents enrolled him in our school. He too needed considerable personal attention, but was very responsive. He wanted to play ball with the other boys but had difficulty keeping his mind on the game. He spent more time poking at other players to gain more attention and often got into trouble because of it. Then he would come to me seeking sympathy. One day I watched closely to see what was happening and learned that he was the cause of his problem, so I tried to straighten him out on that score.

The principal kept a close tab on the regularity of tuition payments each month. It so happened that A. B. Monty's father wasn't too reliable and faithful in making his payments, and they had become several months delinquent. Since he had a reputation in the community of being a "tough cookie" to deal with the principal was afraid to confront the parents about their son's tuition. I volunteered to go to their home and talk to them about it. Whether it was my physical size or some other consideration that made the task quite easy, I do not know. At any rate the past due tuition was paid up and each month thereafter the father regularly stopped at school to bring the payment. Because he had so many things to play with, we also had some truancy problems with the son. At times he would take off in the afternoon to go hunting with some friend whenever it struck his fancy. Or he would be absent for the whole day. Both of his parents worked and were not able to keep tab on his whereabouts. We tried to work this out with the parents rather than call in any truancy officer.

The pastor and the principal were very supportive. I had two of the pastor's children as pupils in my room but they were cooperative youngsters. In fact, there was such a close relation between the three of us that we would spend at least one evening a week just in sociability. The principal's children were below

school age and his wife happened to be a sister of a long-time pastor in the North Wisconsin District. Often I would spend an evening in their home playing with their children, for at that time evening activities at the church were limited and many evenings were free.

The process of boarding around proved to be quite interesting since I was quite adventuresome about it. I recall that one of the first months was spent with an older couple that tried to bolster their income by raising broilers in their backyard. They would keep about three groups of young chickens at all times. Occasionally one group was not quite ready for market when the next batch of baby chicks arrived. So they used the third bedroom in their home to serve as a brooder house and even kept a sack of their feed in the bathroom. Since much baby chick feed has some meatscraps in it, you can imagine the lovely odor that permeated the whole house as long as the chicks could not be moved outside. In that case, it was quite a relief to move on to the next place at month's end.

Another month I spent with a family that had two working daughters and a 14-year-old son. The son and I spent quite a bit of time together at some kind of ballplaying. The father was a building contractor and we had quite a few conversations about the kind of repair work that I had been involved with in Wisconsin. Occasionally he had contracted for several houses at once so he gave the principal and me a job on Saturdays so that we could earn a little extra cash and to help him catch up with his schedule for completion. At one time he had contracted for repainting an office building over the weekend. So we and a couple of his regular workmen started the project on Saturday and were to complete it on Sunday afternoon. As soon after church as we could we got back on the job. He had put up a little scaffold above the counter level so that we could reach the rather high ceiling. Shortly after we started with our paint pails quite full, the two of us started work from that scaffold. But it wasn't long before one end of the scaffold gave way. Fortunately I lit with both feet on top of the counter a couple feet below and stood there with paint pail and brush in hand. But the

principal was not so fortunate. Only one his feet hit the counter top so he went sprawling with paint flying and he ending up on the floor and bumping his head against the end of a settee. He was pretty well shaken up and cut a little so he had to quit and rest up to play the organ for the evening church service. Then after the rest of us cleaned up the mess, I was able to finish out the day after repairing the weak scaffolding.

A third boarding place I remember happened to be the daughter and son-in-law of the broiler raisers. He happened to be born and reared in Nebraska so we had something in common. I remember that in January he went back to his home for his mother's funeral and in the cold spell that hit them at that time he almost froze because his body had become acclimated to warmer temperatures the year-round. This couple lived about a mile from the church so I had a brisk walk each morning. They kept a couple of cows to supply their milk needs and also raised squabs, or young pigeons, for a little extra income. Each school day they sent a container of milk with me to go with my noon lunch, which they, as did other hosts, provided. However, to get away from the cowy taste in the milk without pasteurizing it they mixed in food flavorings such as strawberry, orange and the like. I had a little fun with this with some of the pupils. They would ask what kind of milk I had that day, If I would say "Strawberry", they would ask, "How can you get strawberry milk?" I answered, "That's quite easy. All you have to do is hold some strawberries in front of the cow while milking her." They usually knew that I was just handing them a line and having a little fun.

A fourth boarding place that I remember was where I stayed near the end of the school year. It was with a middle-aged couple who both worked and had no children. What I especially remember there was the spic and span cleanliness that always prevailed and the fact that they got me to eat oysters. The only oysters I had ever tasted previously had been in oyster stew. For some reason the taste of that did not appeal to me. However, they preferred deep-fried oysters to oysters in stew. That kind of

oyster I could enjoy and they served it several times while I was with them.

Because of the distance from the city and larger shopping centers I rarely got into downtown. Occasionally the principal would drive into the city after school to help his wife get some item that she wanted. But parking was such a problem in the downtown section even with the meters they had installed that most of the time he kept on driving around the block until his wife had gotten what she wanted and was ready to return home. I don't ever recall going to a movie. For a haircut the pastor usually took me with him to a barber who gave pastors and vicars like myself free haircuts. In order to keep face with the other barbers in his shop you had to go thru the motion of paying him, perhaps giving him a bill, and he then went thru the motion of giving you change as he handed the full amount back to you.

Toward spring I had accumulated a little cash and went with the principal into town to a men's store where they had good dress suits for \$25 each. I ended up buying two of them, one dark and the other light in color. My meager earnings, coupled with frugal living, enabled me also to repay a loan of \$50 that Edna's father had made to me so that I could pay up my bill at the seminary, which was required before I could get my diploma.

Since I came to Houston from the already cooler weather in Wisconsin my body was prepared for colder weather. As a result I never wore the overcoat that I had brought with me. Just a suit coat or sweater was usually enough even in their colder weather. In fact, temperatures got below freezing only a few nights during the entire winter. Since most homes were built up on blocks without a basement as a precaution against termite damage, the water pipes were exposed from the ground into the home. In the cold nights, when freezing was predicted, the occupants usually left a faucet drip slowly in the sink or bathroom to prevent the pipes from freezing up. Such frosty nights usually came about one at a time. The next day it would warm up a little to forestall another freeze.

During that winter I participated in a bit of Synodical history. The preceding summer J. W. Behnken had been elected president of Synod. He first moved to Chicago some time after I came to Houston. But his successor at the downtown church that he had served happened to be Oliver Harms, who later succeeded Behnken as president. I remember going with the pastor to attend his installation. So I got to see the church that both of these Synodical presidents had served.

Also in the early part of that year, 1936, I got to see the problems and the results of the renowned Houston flood. It seemed that a normally quiet stream of bayou flowed thru the heart of downtown and near the old Trinity church referred to in the preceding paragraph. However, about 15 miles upstream they had received 14 inches of rain within a 36-hour period and all of this excess water had to drain thru the heart of the city. Obviously all the lowlands in and around the city were flooded and it took days for this to drain off as it headed to the Gulf of Mexico. Remember that there is only a 50 foot drop in elevation from Houston to Galveston, 50 miles away. As a result water doesn't move very fast at the rate of only one foot drop per mile.

Talking about floods reminds me of another experience along this line. I had a cousin married to a teacher who was serving at Bishop, Texas, 100 or more miles to the southwest. Their pastor had invited me to preach for their spring Mission Sunday, (as they had two per year) while I came there to spend the weekend with them. Her husband, by the way, was a schoolmate during my days at Winfield but later transferred to Seward. So I arranged to take the train to Kingsville, which was 7 miles from their rural parish and home. When I arrived later on Friday, they had experienced a week of wet weather and the clay roads in their area were really slick. However, he did manage to meet me at the train depot. But when we turned off the 3 miles of concrete on to their country road, we hadn't traveled more than 300 feet when we slid out of the old rut and toward the ditch on the side of the road. So we had to leave his Chevy there and a church member living near that spot took us to their home next

to the church by means of his Model A Ford, which had only 4-inch tires and could more easily follow the old ruts. There we were situated for Saturday and the Sunday service. After the service they and I were invited to a well-to-do member's home for a sumptuous Sunday dinner. About an hour after the dinner the rain began to fall and it kept pouring for at least an hour. With the ground being saturated from the previous rainfalls it wasn't long before the whole flat countryside was under water, including the roads. So the discussion began to revolve around how they might get me back to Kingsville to catch my train at 7:00 p.m. By about 4 o'clock they had devised a plan. First three fellows in a Model A Ford would stop at the teacher's home to pick up my belongings. There I had to take off my shoes and socks to wade into the home, coming back with my luggage and a towel to dry my feet. Then we proceeded down the clay roadway, staying a certain distance between fencelines and hoping the wheels would remain in the old ruts. In case we would slip out of them and toward one side, the extra two fellows were riding along to push the car back into the ruts so that we could slowly continue. We made the 4 miles to the concrete highway without incident. They dropped me off at the Kingsville parsonage. The pastor there was surprised to see me since I had grown considerably since he had been my roombuck during my first year at Winfield. So we had a friendly visit about old times until time to catch my train back to Houston and back to work the next day.

In that part of Texas the landowners were usually quite well-to-do. They would hire a family or two to take care of their fields on which they could raise two crops a year for a considerable income, while they themselves lived a kind of life of leisure. At this time of year the spring crop had been planted and the corn had already come up. In a few days the water had drained off the fields without doing any harm to the growth of the corn but assured it plenty of moisture for development.

1936 was the year of the Texas Centennial of statehood. In order to teach more about Texas history our school prepared and presented an operetta featuring aspects of their colorful early

history. Obviously I too had to learn to sing with gusto: "The eyes of Texas are upon you." Before I left for the summer the school board asked me to return for the fall season. Also the chairman of the board, who was himself a dyed-in-the-wool Southerner, made sure that I left with a Texas Centennial hat, which I have kept thru the years and was able to bring out in 1986, their Sesquicentennial year.

As I recall, I stopped at my home in Nebraska and from there drove to Wisconsin where my chances for summer employment were considerably better than in the depression-affected and drought-stricken area around my home. I have no special recollections about that summer. Though Edna continued to work in Oshkosh we usually got to see each other on weekends. But her parents graciously invited me to board with them. The types of employment I had were similar to what I had in previous summers. With that and some sports activities the summer passed by fast enough. In the last week in August I had to be back in Houston to get ready for the next school year. The congregation again paid my transportation from Nebraska where I again left my car.

I arrived in Houston about a week before school opening since I was to join the principal in canvassing the area around the church and school for additional prospective pupils. As we did this our lead question at each home was: "Do you have any children of school age?" At one home we got the prompt answer: "Hardly, we're bachelors." The result was that we again had at least half of our pupils from non-member homes, where tuition income provided some support for the school.

After school opened early in September the same procedures were in effect - \$25 a month salary and boarding in a different home each month. One morning as I was walking to school I was only a short distance from an intersection where one of my bright 6th graders was riding his bicycle to school and was struck by a car that was hurrying thru from the side street. He ended up in the hospital quite badly bruised and cut. But within a week or 10 days he was able to return to school. Otherwise I

have no special recollections until early in October.

While I lived there I often wondered what those who raised chickens meant by the sign, "Yard Eggs For Sale." Upon inquiry I learned that these were eggs laid by hens where no roosters were in the yard. Apparently these eggs were less likely to spoil at an early date in that warm climate where even room temperatures could initiate the gestation process in a fertilized egg.

Early in October was the day when I received my first call into the ministry. It was to take me to Julesburg, Colorado. At that time each District president had a list of the Seminary graduates who originated from his district and his objective was to place them into the Lord's service as a pastor as early as he could. Therefore, when a congregation in his district was willing to call a Seminary graduate, those on his list moved up a notch. In that way, without knowing it in advance, my name moved up in the Southern Nebraska District to the day when Julesburg was vacant and resolved to call a candidate. Naturally that was the moment I had been waiting for and was quite excited.

Accepting this call at that time meant that the Houston congregation had to move to get a replacement for me in a manner similar to what they had done 13 months previously when I was given this teaching assignment via the dean's office in St. Louis. So we agreed on the termination date of November 1. This gave me two weeks to return to my home and to move to Julesburg, which was about 300 miles west of my home. So the ordination and installation, which at that time was traditionally combined at the time of one's first call or placement, was set for November 15.

Before I left Houston there were several farewell get-togethers. One of them I specifically recall. It was a small affair with the pastor, principal and the three Board of Education members. Since this was close to the 1936 presidential election there was considerable talk about the candidates. FDR, the incumbent, was opposed by the Republican Alf. Landon from Kansas. The strong-minded chairman of the board mentioned earlier was

strongly opposed to Landon. His reason was related to the fact that Landon in one of his broadcast speeches had referred to the Negroes as "colored gentlemen." So he said: "Anyone who will stoop so low as to call a dumb nigger a colored gentleman doesn't get my vote."

This was the general attitude of the traditional white Southerner at that time, while to us Northerners the black was just another human being. So after these farewells I was on my way north again to begin the next chapter of my life.