

Chapter 13

Starting Again

McClure IL, June 1954 to February 1958

As we drove into town that first Sunday, the cement-block church building presented a distressingly depressing appearance. Its ugliness shocked us, along with the obvious need of paint and loving care. As we stopped the car and started to look around, Bernadine looked through a mass of weeds between four and six feet tall and spotted an ugly looking square house in serious need of paint. “I’ll bet,” she said, “that’s the parsonage.” And she was right. Everywhere we looked, the entire village offered not the slightest touch of beauty except in the blossoms on the weeds. The immediate inclination, “Let’s get out of here!” But we stayed.

Far from the wealth we had observed in Canada, McClure represented the opposite end of the spectrum. One issue of McCall’s magazine actually listed McClure as one of the seven worst places in the USA to raise children.

Here again we found ourselves in touch with crooks, but on a different basis from what we had endured in Canada. We soon came to understand that when crooks had to flee from the law in Chicago and Cook County at the north end of the State, they tended to escape to Cairo at the southern tip of Illinois. When things “got too hot” in Cairo, they moved thirty-five miles away from Cairo at the south end of Pulaski County, to McClure, in the north end of Alexander, the neighboring county to the west. Here they operated taverns and gambling casinos with little interference from the law.

Absentee landlords owned most of the lush, productive farmland, which was worked by tenant farmers. While some farms concentrated on raising grain, the Mississippi bottomland could produce five crops of hay each year.

The folks explained the condition to us, “There are three classes of people here in McClure. First there are the crooks and gambling casino operators. They are the ones with all the money. Then come the share-croppers, who make their living off the productive fields, and finally the men who work at the Alfalfa Plant where they turn alfalfa hay into pellets.” Indeed we found out that when the wind blew in the right direction the whole town reeked of scorching hay.

Two churches served the community, a Bible Baptist Church and a Pentecostal Church. On one occasion while I pastored the Bible Baptist Church, a man was shot and killed. It turned out that he had lived in Chicago, but had run afoul of the law up there, so had moved to Cairo. Apparently he had committed some crime there too, and moved to McClure. When he was shot, his relatives asked me as the pastor of the Bible Baptist Church to conduct the funeral. Just in case I might fail to preach him into the pearly gates, they asked the pastor of the Pentecostal Church to have a part in the funeral service. Two preachers on the job would be more likely than one to make sure he made it! Clearly this town needed some good, solid Bible teaching.

And the need was not limited to those outside the church. One Sunday morning as I walked into the church, I heard two of the ladies talking. The one said to the other, “You know, those folks over at the Pentecost Church think they are the only ones who will get to heaven, and we here won’t make it. And you know it’s the other way round!”

Quickly we realized that McClure, as a friend put it, would be “a tough nut to crack.” On that first Sunday morning we found the Sunday school attendance very encouraging. There must have been about forty or fifty present. But as soon as the Sunday school session ended, they executed a mass exodus, leaving only ten or fifteen for the preaching service. This, we discovered, was the regular procedure. A year later we were thrilled when Dr. Pickering, the National Executive Director of the IFCA, drove down from Chicago to speak on a Sunday

morning. While we were excited to have such a well-known man in the pulpit, it made no difference to the folks who came for the Sunday school hour. As soon as that hour was over, the mass exodus emptied the building of all but the faithful few. Rarely have I seen “the wind taken out of one’s sails” so effectively. I can still see Dr. Pickering’s face as he stood there with his mouth open in disbelief. His comment, “At best this work is impossible!”

One of the problems we inherited when we came to McClure concerned the deacons. Some time earlier two men in town had accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior. The folks in the church wanted to see these men get busy serving the Lord, so they appointed these new believers to the office of deacon, hoping this would encourage them to get busy in the Lord’s service. This was in direct disobedience to the plain instructions in I Timothy 3 and Titus 1. I remember visiting one of these two men one day and commented that we had been missing him and his wife at church. “Well,” he said to me, “I started to go to church last Sunday, but when I got out on the porch, I saw a cloud and decided to stay home!”

Another deacon, David Brown, came to the parsonage one day and asked us to keep his niece Louise for a few days while he took his wife Gladys to Chicago for surgery. We were glad to help out. A week later she called us from Chicago. She had come through her surgery but was still unable to come home. Would we be kind enough to keep Louise another week? Two weeks more went by with Louise still sleeping on a couch in the living room. About that time Mr. Newton, the superintendent of the local grade school and at the same time the superintendent of the Sunday school at the Bible Baptist Church, had to make a business trip to Chicago. While there he decided to visit the Browns and was astonished to find that Gladys had not had surgery but had a steady job.

Problems filled those years at McClure, but the Lord proved Himself adequate in every situation. We found some of the old timers in the church quite adverse to any change. More than once old Mrs. Hill said to me when I suggested some small change, “But Brother Mellow, this is the way we’ve always done it,” or “Brother Mellow, we never did it that way before.” Nevertheless, she graciously accepted change as an inevitable hardship.

Finances were extremely short. I remember one Saturday in the fall as we looked forward to the winter months, the coal bin was entirely empty. I washed the walls and floor and reported to the church the next morning that the coal-bin floor was clean enough for us to eat our dinner from the floor. But by the time we needed heat, the coal was there.

Bernadine and I found it difficult to feed and clothe our two girls on my salary of \$40.00 per week. Quite often even that amount was not available. A few times when I stood up to preach on Sunday night, I forgot to take up the offering. Bernadine, who had been playing the piano, would simply keep on playing till I woke up and remembered to receive the offering.

The Lord provided some really good friends in that church. We would likely have given up if it were not for the Millers, the Girards, and the Newtons. We enjoyed frequent Sunday dinners with the Millers, who were the leaders in the church for many years, and depended on them for help in various situations. Harold and Iona Gerard operated a farm a short distance south of town. Iona quite often took Bernadine shopping in Cape Girardeau. Mr. Newton served as the principal of the grade school where Ruth Ann was prominent as the tallest girl in the school and seemed to get into trouble more than any of the other kids.

Further, we found friends outside of McClure who really helped us when things were difficult. In Cairo, thirty-five miles south of McClure, Don Hurlbert and his wife Donna served

the Washington Avenue Bible Church. And in Cape Girardeau, just across the river, a couple of old friends from St. Louis days, Tryon and Ruth Lindabury, provided much needed fellowship.

Another friend the Lord provided was a missionary from South Africa, Henry Hawkins. I do not remember how it came about, but he contacted me, asking if he could present his work at the Bible Church in McClure. We were delighted to have him come and speak, and he referred to the couch in our living room where he slept as “The Prophet’s Chamber” (II Kings 4:10-11). He visited us many times during the next twenty years, and every time he came, we could be sure of laughing over some of the situations where we found ourselves. Many a time we would sit up past midnight laughing when the alternative would be weeping over all the problems!

Next door to the parsonage, Mr. and Mrs. Johnson raised their three children. Helen and Susie were the girls and there was a boy in between them. Frequently they called in utter panic for help in various situations. “Preacher! Preacher! Come quick! Susie’s having a heart attack!” Poor Susie had suffered no heart attack; she was just throwing a tantrum! The day came when the old grandfather lay on his deathbed. Bernadine went over to help them in all their panic. The doctor came over in the afternoon and sized up the situation. Taking Bernadine aside he said, “You seem to be the only one with a lick of sense. Let me give you this syringe. When you see him struggling for breath, give him a shot. It won’t heal him, but it will relieve his suffering.” The time came, and Bernadine administered the shot. In just a few moments Grandpa died. At once Helen grabbed Bernadine and swung her around. She shouted, “Mrs. Mellow, you killed Grandpa!” We were grateful Bernadine escaped without being lynched!

Before becoming the church parsonage, our home had been a gristmill, a mill to which individual farmers could bring their grain to be ground. The four rooms had originally been quite well built, though the kitchen floor sloped badly. One evening when we had company from Cape

Girardeau, the Lindabury family, Ruth Ann had to sit on a piano stool with glass knobs for feet, and during the meal the stool slid down-hill under the table, dumping her to the floor. No, there was little attractive about that house. In fact, the water-mark could still be seen where a flood years ago had filled the house to a depth of five feet.

The house had received a modicum of good care, and was in relatively good condition. Some time before our arrival, one of the casino owners, a good friend of Mr. Miller, paid to have a bathroom installed in the parsonage. Shortly after we arrived, the St. Louis Post Dispatch did a series of investigative reports on the gambling situation in southern Illinois. I wrote a letter to the editor on the matter, and a few days later one of our neighbors spoke to Bernadine, “I heard that Bob (not his real name) punched Paul in the face!”

“I don’t know what you are taking about!”

“Well, Bob paid for the bathroom in your house, and then Paul wrote that letter to the editor in the Post Dispatch. I understand that Bob has threatened to take the bathroom out of the house.” For a few days I watched my step, wondering if a thug might attack me.

Behind the house a rickety porch about ten feet square provided a place where Bernadine could store and use her washing machine. It proved quite satisfactory until one day the boards gave way, and the machine fell to a rakish angle with its feet stuck through the floor. Yes, simply living in McClure provided a degree of excitement.

Immediately behind the lot on which the parsonage stood, a drainage ditch had been dug for the purpose of draining away the expected flood waters. Residents of the town used the ditch as a city dump, where they could discard their trash. Ruth Ann regarded “The Ditch” as the equivalent of Wal-Mart. It had the added advantage that no money was expected as payment for precious goods that lay there waiting to be picked up. She and her friend Karen demonstrated the

old adage that “one man’s trash is another man’s treasure.” Scrounging through the trash in her new-found goldmine, Ruth Ann salvaged an impressive assortment of Christmas gifts. She was an energetic youngster, always on the move. Folks in the town would see her on her bicycle with her pet white rabbit sitting in a box behind her, its paws on her back.

Margie, too, enjoyed life in McClure. It was there that she started singing solos. On a stormy night when more than a dozen tornados touched down in southern Illinois, she sang a solo, “O Holy Night” at the school Christmas program. The instructor had ordered the youngsters to stand straight without moving. The strain of standing stiff on such a stormy night proved to be too much for some of the boys and girls. Three or four of them fainted and had to be carried out. Margie, completely unaware of the excitement behind her, continued singing. As we drove home Ruth Ann put the situation in focus, “Man, oh man! When Margie sings, ‘Fall on your knees,’ they really do it!”

We never knew what kind of excitement would happen next. A young girl, six or seven years old, lived with her mother over a tavern on the highway just a block or two north of our house. One night while the mother was at work five miles away at a casino known as “The Purple Crackle,” fire destroyed the tavern and killed the child. Someone called me about one o’clock in the morning, asking me to go to the Purple Crackle and give the mother the terrible news and bring her back to town. Scared that someone would see me stop at the casino and start a rumor, I asked the Lord’s protection, drove over there, picked up the young woman and brought her back to town. (I never heard about any gossip over that event.)

The funeral for the girl was the biggest funeral in my experience. As I recall, more than three hundred people attended, overflowing the church. Frequent floods in the past had caused so much damage to structures all over town that people had become careless about spending any

more on building than absolutely necessary. I had been in the church basement many times and had been shocked at some of the shoddy workmanship. Particularly I remembered a post supporting the main beam. The post was about two inches shorter than it should have been and a careless workman had shimmed it up with a hollow tile. I held my breath as the crowd kept pouring into the building. I watched as three particularly large women sat down together in a pew directly above the faulty post. Crack! It sounded like a rifle shot. The floor dropped an inch as that hollow tile broke. Somehow, and I cannot explain it, there was no panic. The funeral proceeded with no further complications.

However, all was not work. Southern Illinois was well known for its peaches. Every year we drove to an area on the eastern side of the state and picked peaches. One orchard raised the biggest peaches we ever saw. Too fragile to ship, they gave us something to brag about, as one peach would fill a quart jar. We really appreciated those peaches and have often wished to be back there in the peach season.

The land around McClure lay so low that the Mississippi kept the whole area damp. Books in our home gathered mildew on the shelves, and shoes became mildewed in the closet. But that same moisture ensured phenomenal growth of any seeds we planted. We could throw garbage out on the ground, and in a short time beans, tomatoes or cucumbers sprouting from the garbage would completely hide the mess..

Another blessing: I was able to attend college in Cape Girardeau for three years while I lived in McClure. The cost of the first semester, I remember, amounted to \$28.00, including the loan of books! Because of the controversy over evolution, I chose to major in biology, thoroughly enjoying the privilege of college on my minimal income.

It was during this time, too, that my father, who had been struck with cancer five years earlier, went to be with the Lord. He and Mother lived those last days in Philadelphia, and, of course, we three boys, with our wives went to Philadelphia to be with Mother for the funeral.

I would like to be able to say that during the time we spent in McClure, the church grew phenomenally, and that hundreds of folks turned to the Lord. That, however, was not the case. Instead, the little church found it increasingly difficult to raise the forty dollars per week that they had promised us, and as 1957 rushed toward its end, we started looking around for another place to serve the Lord. A church in Colorado invited us to candidate, and we drove a thousand miles each way in vain. They reimbursed us to the extent of \$20.00 for the two thousand mile journey. On the way home our meals in the car consisted of bread and peanut butter. Ruth Ann would prepare the sandwiches in the back seat and announce the grand gourmet dish she imagined she was serving.

Quite discouraged, we heard about a church in Hillsdale, Oklahoma, that was looking for a pastor. Reluctantly Bernadine and I drove there in the gloomy, cold days of January 1958. Our spare tire was ruined. Our two girls, who were just recovering from two weeks with the flu, we left in McClure with Mr. and Mrs. Newton, as we did not want them to miss any more school. And we wondered what we would do if the church in Hillsdale would treat us as the church in Colorado did, in which case we would not have enough gas to drive home. At one point as we drove through the northeast part of Oklahoma, we noticed that we had not seen even one bird in nearly a hundred miles. Our spirits were almost as gloomy as the clouds that blocked out the sunshine.

We had a hundred miles to go, and suddenly we saw a big sign, erected by the then popular Jax Beer people. Two words, the Jax slogan, stood out prominently on that huge billboard, “Hello, Mellow!”

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