

Chapter 14

Hillsdale, 1958 – 1966

“Hello, Mellow!” I can’t tell you what that sign meant to us as an encouragement.

Certainly the weather remained gloomy that Saturday afternoon, and the clouds threatened to cover the whole landscape with snow, but we took that sign as God’s message to us, and instantly found ourselves in a laughing, happy mood. God is able to use even a liquor company to deliver His message to His children when He sees fit. We soon found the home of the Bevers on a farm three miles east of Hillsdale. Arthur Bever, a deacon in the church, and his wife Lillian couldn’t have treated us with kinder hospitality and consideration.

In the weeks before this trip, Bernadine and I jumped to conclusions (one of our favorite forms of exercise) and guessed that since this was a farming community, we could expect to see folks much like the poorly educated people who lived around Tadmor in the Ozarks. We expected to see them come into the church dressed in bib overalls with probably at least a little straw and mud on their feet and looking and smelling as though they had just finished milking the cows and slopping the pigs. We received a pleasant shock as everybody came into church neatly dressed, and we soon realized that these were people who had worked hard and been exposed to a good education. The gloomy weather had no effect whatever on the atmosphere inside the church.

Officially, this was a Congregational Church, but while the Congregational denomination had abandoned some of the stands they had taken years ago, the Hillsdale Congregational Church was totally independent and stayed close to the Bible.

When it came time for me to speak, I felt it was a real privilege to speak to this congregation. I told them, “I really don’t know how to thank you folks adequately for the warm

welcome you gave us. Never have I seen a welcoming committee that did as fine a job as the folks from this church who erected a large billboard a hundred miles before we got to the church, with the warm welcome, ‘Hello Mellow!’” They had a good laugh and responded graciously. Unlike our experience in Colorado, when it came time for us to go back to Illinois, Arthur Bever asked us just how much it had cost us to drive to Hillsdale, and when we told him, he doubled the amount and added a hundred dollars.

A few weeks later, after loading up the moving van with all our earthly possessions, the family piled into the car with what clothing we would need for a day or two and pulled out of McClure, Illinois, our home for the past three years. It was Wednesday morning when we left after the moving company finished packing all the rest of our earthly goods into their van. Bernadine and I with Margie and Ruth Ann with what luggage we considered necessary, plus our black and white cat, filled the car. There was no way that Ruth Ann would allow us to move without bringing the cat with the unusual name of “Kitty.” Until the day that the car lay down and died, we could never remove her distinctive fragrance.

That night, after a warm welcome at a church supper, Bernadine and I stayed with the Bevers. Ruth Ann had come to Oklahoma strictly against her will, but that evening Mr. Brown, the school principal, and Mrs. Brown, the first grade teacher, invited the girls to stay with them, and reluctantly, they went. All four of us had visions of terrible turmoil, but in the morning they went to school and had a great time, quickly finding new friends. We never heard another complaint about living in Oklahoma. The longer we stayed, the more they enjoyed living there.

The moving truck arrived that morning, and when Arthur Bever saw the bill he was horrified. Convinced the driver had made an error with the weights, he would not allow our furniture to be unloaded and demanded that the truck go to the grain elevator and be weighed

again. We felt extremely embarrassed about having such a problem as soon as we arrived, but good old Carl Bengston spoke to us, “Don’t worry about Arthur. He always finds something to complain about.”

As the folks helped us unload our possessions, Carl noticed the carpentry tools and commented, “This is one pastor who will not have to come to us and borrow a hammer every time he needs to drive a nail!”

Almost at once we saw that Hillsdale would not be a cakewalk. we were happy to see that only one church served the Hillsdale community, and the nearest church outside the town was nine miles away. That would surely eliminate some of the bickering that would go on if there were more churches close by. But we saw immediately that the Sunday school definitely needed some changes. Six classes met in the sanctuary every Sunday morning. (Of course there was an advantage in this: if my teacher was boring I could easily tune him out and listen to one of the others.) This problem must be faced as soon as possible. As we looked around we realized that for years the building had received little or no care in the way of maintenance. The windows looked as though they had never been painted since the year the building was erected. The sanctuary had been built on the “Akron Plan,” quite popular in the early days of the twentieth century. While the platform stretched across the front of the auditorium, a piano on the left-hand end, and space for the choir in the middle, the pulpit stood at the right end, with what seemed to be an unreasonable area of wasted space behind it. The seats formed a series of semicircles centered on the pulpit. The aisle ran from the entrance at one corner of the sanctuary to the pulpit at the opposite corner. A balcony on two sides added seating for those who wanted to climb the stairs. The old-fashioned, wooden theater seats, while moderately comfortable, presented anything but an attractive appearance. One or two of the ladies who were overweight had

difficulty finding a chair that would fit them, and once seated, were embarrassed as they tried to extricate themselves from the narrow confines between the arm-rests.

The “Pastor’s Study” consisted of a miserable little space just inside the door to the sanctuary. An uninsulated brick wall made sure that the room would stay cold all winter. There was little space for books or office materials. Yes, definitely, though at an indefinite future date, that too would have to be changed.

We noted also that because of the lack of indoor plumbing two outhouses stood behind the building, one for men and the other for women. Obviously, the building itself and facilities would need gallons of tender loving care if it would ever catch up with modern day living.

But – the people! They were wonderful! We found them friendly and supportive. Margie and Ruth Ann found themselves fitting in beautifully at the school, and Ruth Ann was immediately drafted into the basketball team. Each home we visited brought us new friends. And the harmony between the school and the church could not be matched anywhere, as far as I knew. Mr. Brown, the principal, was a deacon in the church. If we wished to plan for a youth activity at the church, all I had to do was to call the school on the phone and ask if that evening was free, and if so would they please mark that date on the school calendar, and we could be sure of their cooperation.

Soon we had the privilege of meeting the old patriarch of the Hoffsommer family, Mr. J. G. Hoffsommer. After visiting him in his home I knew I had spent sacred time in the presence of one of God’s choice servants. And his sons Harley and Marion walked in his footsteps. Marion pastored a church in southern Kansas when I knew him, and his children went to the mission field. Harley took his place as a leader in the Hillsdale Church. Harley’s son James became the

principal of the Hillsdale School, and the senior deacon in the church. Under his leadership that little country school became known as one of the finest country schools in the State.

We will never forget Roy and Alva James and their frequently repeated invitation, “Come over for a bowl of chili!” Nor could we ever forget their neighbors, Harry and Lena Johnson, who lived across the corner from us. We came to love their daughters, too, Marilyn and Nancy, who brightened up our home many times. There is no way we could even simply mention the names of all who meant so much to us in those years.

Because the folks brought in food from the farms so generously, the parsonage had to have a freezer, which the church had purchased for the parsonage basement some years before we arrived on the scene. Some of the folks gave us beef, and we had a place to store it. One family gave us a whole lamb each year, and we have never since then tasted such fine lamb. We soon learned that when Flap Liming took his cattle to market, he could always be sure of getting top price. And the other farmers had almost equal success.

It will never be possible for us to repay in any way the kindness of the Hillsdale folks. In December 1959 we planned to visit Bernadine’s parents in the Christmas season. A week or two before we planned to go, the engine on our ancient Plymouth breathed its last breath. Somehow the water from the cooling system leaked into the oil pan, displacing all the oil, and ruining the engine. We had no way of buying another vehicle, and were definitely at a loss as to what to do. While visiting with Harley Hoffsommer, I mentioned the fact that we were considering calling off our visit to Missouri. “Oh no!!” he said, “I’ll lend you my car. You just can’t call off your Christmas with the family.”

That week our annual Christmas Program claimed all the attention I could give it. I found myself wondering what we would do about visiting in Missouri, and also found myself a bit

disgruntled because the people who came to the program seemed to have their minds elsewhere. Finally the evening's activities came to a close, and Shorty Biggs came forward on some other business.

Calling me to the podium, he said something like this. (I have forgotten the precise words.) "Pastor, we understand you have been having trouble with your car. There's a car outside the church. See if you can find the one that this key will fit." And with that he handed me a set of car keys. We went outside and saw our decrepit old Plymouth with a big sign on it, "BUSTED!" Right beside it a brand-new '59 Plymouth with a sign on it, "ST. LOUIS OR BUST!"

We certainly rejoiced in the goodness and kindness of our friends in Hillsdale. Our main purpose for coming there, however, was to present the Word of God and we thoroughly enjoyed working with such an unusual congregation! I have long been convinced that the purpose of the church has been outlined for us in Acts 2:46 where we read that the people in the early church "*devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayers.*" I spoke as a guest in that church years later and have kept in my Bible the Sunday bulletin from that Sunday, August 27, 2000. On the back of that bulletin I was pleased to see the statement, "We devote ourselves to Scripture, Fellowship, Worship and Prayer, and to stimulate others to that devotion." I am equally convinced that the primary responsibility of the church is "*equipping the saints for the work of the ministry*" (Ephesians 4:11-12). That is, the church is given the responsibility of training her members to fulfill our Lord's commission, to "go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15). And through the years people in that church have been a radiant witness over that whole area.

We aimed to do our best to ensure that everyone in the church had the opportunity to gain a good knowledge of the Bible. In the Sunday messages, I often took one book of the Bible at a time, going through it carefully, chapter by chapter, and often verse by verse.

Meanwhile Bernadine worked with the grade school youngsters, using the system known as “Jet Cadets.” Today it seems that the backbone of the church consists largely of those who were youngsters in that program.

We found the town of Hillsdale utterly different from anything we had known before. It consisted of a cluster of houses surrounded by mile after mile of wheat farms. The blacktopped main road into town led to two or three other streets topped with red shale, shale that expressed the very personality of the State. The school stood at the northeast end of town. Then came the church block. The church and parsonage occupied the east half of this block, while the west half consisted of an acre of wheat. A seventy-five foot lawn separated the church from the parsonage, and another lawn filled the one hundred and fifty feet to the north of the parsonage. The business block southwest of the church included a hardware store, a grocery store, a barbershop, the post office, the telephone office and the filling station where the world’s problems were discussed on the “Liars’ Bench.” I don’t remember how many people were on our telephone’s party line, but the operator was privy to every conversation. If we wanted to make an announcement we could ask her to ring all the lines with five short rings, and she could get the news to everyone. Though there were some definite advantages to this friendly arrangement, we were glad when Bell Telephone installed a modern system.

According to the map we used to find our way to Hillsdale, the town boasted a population of 57, though I had a vague feeling that the cartographer had included the cats and dogs in that number. Several times friends asked us, “Whatever do you find to do in that place?” We soon

found out that the few folks in town tried to do everything that is done in a larger town, and this kept them extremely busy. I hear youngsters today saying they are bored and have nothing to do. Looking back, we cannot remember a dull moment. Something was going on all the time. Bernadine joined the M. B. Club, (*Mutual Benefit Club*), a State-connected farm extension club, and remained active during all the time we lived there.

As a family we visited Great Salt Plains Lake, a few miles to the north, and various other places of interest. Bernadine's parents came from St. Louis to visit us as often as they could. On one occasion we took them to Woodward in the northwest corner of the state. We told them about the enormous spring there, called "Boiling Springs." Expectantly they rode with us, and when we still had a few miles to go I asked them if they could hear the roar of the springs. Eagerly they expected to see a western version of Niagara Falls, or at the very least, something that would compare with Meramec Springs that we knew so well in Missouri. When we arrived at Woodward, we drove to a little building that housed the "Boiling Springs." Looking down through a glass-topped counter such as one might see in any old-time grocery store, they gawked at a few bubbles rising from the sand. "You mean you brought us all the way here just to see a couple of bubbles!" Well, . . .

One other occupation demanded our attention. Although I had never become acquainted with basketball, I soon learned that an unwritten law carved into the very foundations of Hillsdale society demanded that if a Hillsdale team played within fifty miles, every resident must attend. Margie, who unfortunately inherited some of her daddy's genes, didn't much enjoy basketball, but Ruth Ann became one of the star players.

We soon learned that some of our new friends at Hillsdale kept up with football too. Especially on New Year's Day, the Nichols family, the Biggs, the Limings, and the Bowens met together in one of the homes, and we with them, watching the college level games.

It was not only football and basketball that joined our families together in a special bond. Roy and Ruth Biggs had two daughters, Nancy and Lois, who joined with our daughters in various activities at the school and church. Chiggs and June Nichols' daughter, Linda, and Lois Biggs and our daughter Ruth Ann, always seen together, became known as "The Three Musketeers." Our tiny home became the grand central station for the kids as they ran on their noon break from the school. They rushed in the front door, through the living room, and into the kitchen to see what was cooking, and if it was not to their liking, they ran on out the back door, to the grocery store for a snack.

We thoroughly enjoyed the fine young people's group there at Hillsdale. We had abundant opportunity to teach the Word as well as having fun with parties and various activities.

There was a time when somehow we arranged for three other church groups from some distance to join with our young people for a weekend retreat at Roman Nose State Park. Excitement ran high, but the television weather report warned of severe tornados. The lady who made the TV announcement from the Oklahoma City station dramatically waved her hands in the air, and said, "I don't know just where the tornados will hit, but I am sure we will have a real storm!" While I was preparing for the excursion, a deacon of the church asked me, "Are you still planning on taking the kids out in spite of the tornado?" I replied, "We have been asking the Lord's guidance. This is the only time in the entire year when we can get these four groups together. I believe it is the Lord's will." As I drove the school bus, the late afternoon sun shone brilliantly. We arrived at Roman Nose in a perfectly gorgeous evening and had a great time with

flawless weather. When we got home I turned on the TV just as the weather girl came on, just as dramatically as she had earlier. Her hands flailing the air again, she said, “I don’t know what happened to the tornados, but they failed to materialize!” We serve a great God!

The day came when I brought up the subject of adding Sunday school classrooms to the building. All of the men on the board could remember the Great Depression, and all were reticent about spending a large sum of money. When they saw a model made of miniature two by fours covered with poster board, they could visualize the building in 3-D. They could lift off the roof and see how the upstairs could be arranged, and then they could lift off the upstairs and see the basement. Once we made the decision to build, the money came in quickly, and all the farmers joined in the work. In fact, the week the project was completed, all the cash had come in to pay for every detail.

This church had come into existence as a Congregational Church, and they still carried the name Hillsdale Congregational Church, and maintained a congregational form of government. Through the years, however, the Congregational denomination had abandoned some of its positions, while the Hillsdale Church remained true to the Word of God. In the matter of baptism, Congregational churches generally believe in sprinkling, while churches that closely follow the Bible tend to use immersion. This caused a problem, as there was no baptistry in this Congregational Church building, while the people in the church aimed to obey the Bible implicitly.

The answer came when we found that the “wasted space” behind the pulpit would be just right for the inclusion of a baptistry. We built it, and I had the privilege of baptizing many of the leaders of the church. Again I marveled at how God foresaw and planned for every detail.

At this point I was grateful for the experience I had gained in factories in St. Louis, in carpentry, plumbing and electrical work, at a period in my life when I thought I was simply wasting time. Again I was deeply grateful for the Lord's careful planning.

I found too, that working with the men of the church in manual labor provided a close contact that opened doors for leading them into a closer walk with the Lord. It is my opinion that hard-working farmers find it difficult to show much respect to any pastor whom they consider to be lazy. A pastor in Enid once told me, "Paul, you're making a mistake. Those people won't respect you any more for all the work you are doing!" Was he ever wrong! Any way I look at it, my years at Hillsdale were by far the most effective years of my ministry.

One surprise for me was that the folks expected the pastor of the church to work with them in harvest. I completely lacked the skills involved in wheat farming, but Herm Messenger invited me to work for him in his grain elevator. At once the primitive conditions of the grain elevator business struck me as amazing. I had worked in factories in St. Louis, and the methods used in the grain elevator seemed to be a full thirty years behind the times. Big farm trucks backed in to the elevator and dumped their load of wheat through a grating into a pit. The pit had an opening that directed the grain into buckets on a conveyor belt driven by a powerful motor. The belt carried the grain to the top of the elevator, and as each bucket went over the pulley high above the bins, it dumped its contents through a spout into the various bins. The operator, on the ground level, had to know when the bins, perhaps a hundred feet above or even more, were about full. At that precise moment he had to pull a rope that would direct the spout up in the head-house to a bin that had room for more grain. If he failed to change the spout in time, the bin would fill up, and then the grain would back up, clogging the conveyor belt. In a matter of seconds the belt would become overloaded and stop. To put the elevator into operation again

would take an hour of feverish work. Meanwhile other trucks would be waiting to unload, unable to return to the field. Out in the field the combines would have to stop because the trucks had not returned. All this delay was accepted as an unavoidable part of the elevator business.

Because of my experience in St. Louis factories, I could scarcely believe my eyes. I spoke to Herm and said it would be relatively simple to avoid all the down time caused by clogged belts. He offered to underwrite the cost of patenting such a system if I would build it. So once the rush was over I got to work, and before long I had the patent, and the elevator operated much more smoothly.

While we served at Hillsdale both of our girls graduated from high school and started attending John Brown University in Siloam Springs, Arkansas. While they were still in high school they did most of the work of mowing our yard, which amounted to quite a good-sized chore. For me, after they left, the yard between the church and the parsonage was quite manageable, but the half-acre of lawn to the north of the parsonage seemed more than I wanted to handle by myself. I rigged up a spool in the center of the half-acre and ran a seventy-five foot cord to the self-propelled lawnmower and let the mower run, winding the cord on the spool as it circled the lot. I hooked it up in such a way that when the mower came within eight feet of the spool, it would disconnect the wire from the sparkplug and stop the mower. It worked well, and I could simply sit in a chair reading while the mower did the work, and then, after the big circle was all mowed, I could trim out the corners. From a distance people could not see the string, and once or twice, when folks saw the mower running without anyone guiding it, they jumped to the conclusion that I had suffered a heart attack. On one occasion the mower broke loose somehow, and when we saw it, it had run into a tree on the edge of the property where it stopped. When we

left Hillsdale, Mr. James, who would be looking after the yard, made sure we left the contraption for him to use.

One day we realized that the bathroom in our home needed papering. Finances were short, and as we sat round the dining-room table, Ruth Ann remembered seeing a pile of road maps in the filling station. Without waiting to clear the table, she went up to the gas station and secured enough maps to do the job. It was great lying in the tub and looking at the map of Chesapeake Bay and imagining we were luxuriating there. We even had friends who asked us the best way to travel to certain places, and we simply invited them into our bathroom where we could show them. Crazy? Perhaps, but we had fun!

In an earlier chapter I told of our trip to Vaudreuil, close to Montreal, Quebec. That was a trip filled with problems, when we found ourselves working for a crook who amassed a fortune pretending to be involved in charitable work. I pointed out that I had rushed ahead, because the prospect seemed so inviting, but failed to seek God's will. I did the same kind of thing once again while living in Hillsdale. Somehow I heard about some folks down in Altus in the southwest corner of the state who wanted to have a Bible Church in their community. I thought it would be great to drive down and help them get started. Once again, I did not make it an urgent matter of prayer. Bernadine was not too enthusiastic about it, and when I mentioned it to Harley Hoffsommer, he tried to dissuade me. I, however, had stubbornly made up my mind. One morning Bernadine and I started out and drove about three miles down the road. Suddenly, while we were driving about fifty miles per hour, the hood of the car broke loose from its latch, flew up and crashed into the windshield, smashing it to pieces. I am glad that this time it did not take me months to give up the idea. I should have learned the lesson when we went to Vaudreuil. How slow I have been to learn to seek God's will in every situation and follow it.

Our family went through some major changes at Hillsdale. Both girls graduated from high school and went to John Brown University. Both girls found husbands at John Brown. They came home to Hillsdale for their weddings. Margie married Jim Feaster in February 1964 and moved to western New York, 1,400 miles to the east. Ruth Ann married Bill Daughaday in August that same year and moved to California, 1,400 miles to the west, leaving us with the well-known “empty nest syndrome.” This was particularly hard on Bernadine who for almost twenty years had lavished her love on the girls. For a while it seemed that a huge empty hole existed where the girls had provided activity and love.

On that gloomy day when we came through the northwest corner of Oklahoma, we could not have imagined the precious experiences we enjoyed with those wonderful Hillsdale folks. What a privilege our Lord gave us in letting us spend almost nine years working and learning with the finest group of men, women and young people that we have ever known. And what lessons the Lord taught us! Not to mention His patience with me. As I look back and remember the work Bernadine put into the work with the Jet Cadets, I thank the Lord that some of them are today the leaders of Hillsdale Bible Church. We have the assurance that He used us to bring a number of people to Himself, and we look forward to seeing them in Heaven.

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Before I close the book on Hillsdale I must tell you about an outstanding man of God who exercised a tremendous influence on Hillsdale and on me.

JAMES HOFFSOMMER

Without doubt, James Hoffsommer of Hillsdale, Oklahoma, is among the three of four most remarkable men I have ever met. When Hillsdale Congregational Church invited me to serve as their pastor, James, a young man thirty years of age was working on his masters degree

in education from Phillips University in Enid. At the same time he taught economics at the local high school. One day our daughter, Ruth Ann, surprised us by saying, "Economics is really a fun class." I knew she must have an outstanding teacher.

James' parents, Harley and Mildred Hoffsommer, lived about three miles northwest of the town, where Harley worked the family farm consisting of a square mile of wheat, and in addition, ran a herd of beef cattle. I counted it a privilege to know James and his father and his grandfather, J. G. Hoffsommer. This rugged patriarch had purchased the farm in 1898 from a man who had taken part in the famous "Run" of 1893, when the "Sooners" ran into the Cherokee Strip to stake their claims. An old man now in 1958, he lived in a separate house just about fifty yards from Harley and Mildred. I knew Harley as a workaholic. I remember one morning hearing him banging on the door of my home before five o'clock, because we were to work together in concrete that day and he wanted an early start.

James, a muscular young man with blue eyes and brown hair stood an inch less than six feet and weighed about 165 pounds. When he spoke he did so with authority, and yet with genuine humility. He loved fun and seemed ready to laugh with anyone at any time. He loved his wife Jean, referring to her as "his squaw," and was always ready to make some joke about her Indian ancestors of two or three generations back.

But Hillsdale faced some serious problems. The village, with a population of fewer than a hundred, stood on the verge of blowing away in one of the frequent dust storms. While some towns can boast of their fragrant flowers, dust filled the air much of the time, clogging my nostrils. Sometimes a howling dust storm would last three or four days or more, driving the red dust through any crack in the house, covering everything with a thick gritty coat of red Oklahoma shale dust. Worse than that, each home depended on a cistern or its own shallow well,

which would be subject to serious contamination. About the time I arrived it became evident that the town faced extinction unless the people took some decisive steps. James clearly possessed the leadership qualities that would be needed to keep the town from death. He became a driving force as we initiated a Boosters' Club, and before long the entire community pulled together and proudly installed a water system to supply the town with good quality water. To accomplish this feat one of the men in the area, by trade a well-driller, sank more than forty holes before he found a life-saving well of excellent water.

I had to marvel at how James' brain worked. He could glance at a crowd of people and tell at once how many were there. And he was nearly always right. He could rattle off the names of all the countries of Africa, starting with Egypt, and naming all the countries in order across the north, west, south and east, back up to Egypt again, and then fill in the landlocked ones in the interior. I never knew how it happened, but the day came when President Ford called on him to serve on a national committee supervising the banks of the country. While serving on that committee he demonstrated his love of simplicity. He told me later, "I did my best to make one of those big-shot financiers, when talking about money, use a word under a million. They never would. When referring to nine hundred thousand dollars they would always have to say 'point nine million!'"

For thirty years James served his community in many ways. At the school he became the principal and led that tiny school to the point where it was listed among the finest three country schools of the State. At the church he served faithfully as a Sunday school teacher, as a board member, and as the chairman of the board. His main focus centered on serving the Lord Jesus Christ, whether at home, at work or in the church. He and his wife became the parents of three boys and one girl. One son, Jeff, is a doctor in Enid, and another, Steve, still farming in the

Hillsdale area, serves on the Church Board. Monty has his own computer business in Liberty, Missouri, while Trudy has served effectively as a counselor in Oklahoma City. In spite of being so highly talented, James truly demonstrated a consistent, humble Christian life.

Yes, I count it a real privilege to have known James Hoffsommer and his fine family.

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