Chapter 2
Origins

I was born in a cave. Let me tell you about it. But first let me go back and talk about my parents.

Mother was born in 1880, Frances Mary McDonald, the youngest of seven children in a farm family in New South Wales, Australia. Unfortunately, because we as children in a boarding school spent almost no time at home she had little opportunity to tell us much of her early life, and we learned very little of those early years. We never knew anything about how her ancestors moved to Australia, whether they were convicts sent to the terrible penal colonies there or whether they arrived as a result of business ventures.

Mother's three brothers, Allan, William and George, and her three sisters, Lena, Alice and Lizzie, worked on the McDonald dairy farm, and because her mother died when Fannie was only five years old, she learned very early to do her part in milking, cooking and housework. She told of baking bread in a stone oven out in the yard. After building the fire in the oven and watching till it became hot enough, she had to rake out the burning coals and insert the loaves and then block up the opening. She had to learn how long to leave the bread baking and, at the right time, pull the steaming, fresh loaves from the oven.

One event I remember her telling about concerned the fruit trees on the farm. It seems they had difficulty keeping parakeets from eating their peaches. There was a time when her brother George fired his shotgun into a tree to scare off the birds, and Mother, just a child at the time, stood too close and received a few pellets in her scalp, pellets she carried to the day of her death.

Early in life she committed herself to the Lord Jesus. Her oldest brother Allan was active in the Methodist Church. I have in my possession an old Bible with this inscription at the front:

"To Mr. W. A. McDonald
by the
Methodist Sunday School
Nagambi
of which he has been
Superintendent
July 31, 1905"

A note has been added on that same front page:

"Called for higher service; somewhere in France
28th March, 1917."

When I was born on August 26, 1917, five months after he died in World War I, Mother gave me my middle name, "Allan," in memory of her brother.

Mother was consistent in her faith and gave herself unreservedly to the Lord. One day as a young lady she heard James Hudson Taylor, founder of the China Inland Mission, who was speaking in a series of meetings in Australia. Sensing the Lord's call, she applied to and was accepted by the China Inland Mission and found herself in 1906 studying Chinese at the language school in Yangchow, China. She told me once that before going to China as a missionary, she memorized the entire Gospel of Mark. As further preparation she studied nursing in order to be able to help needy people. Little could she know how important that nursing skill would prove in China.

Meanwhile my father, James Hart Mellow, was born in St. Louis, Missouri, the oldest of the three children of William and Sarah Mellow, recent arrivals from England. Dad, as I remember him saying, was in the fifth grade when his father died, and he had to leave school to earn a living. Later he spoke of working at Wannamaker's in St. Louis, selling wallpaper. Although he was deprived of much in the way of a formal education, Dad had a voracious

appetite for books. In China he read widely in both English and Chinese and collected a sizeable library. He could write in Chinese better than most of the Chinese around him.

Dad's sisters, Ella and Essie (Grandma called them "Hella" and "Hessie") lived in St. Louis all their lives. I know almost nothing of Dad's early life, though I remember him telling how excited he was about the World's Fair held in St. Louis in 1904, the same year that he sailed to China. He told of standing inside the mouth of a whale's skeleton. And he told how a huge slab of wood was shipped to the Fair. It was so big that it required two railway flat-cars.

When he arrived in Shanghai and stepped off the ship, he found that somehow communications had failed, and there was no one to meet him. To this day I have no idea how, with no knowledge of the Chinese language, he managed to find his way to the China Inland Mission Home, but it seemed he could always find a way to do anything that had to be done.

After Language School the Mission assigned Mother to the city of Pingyao in the northern province of Shansi. Dad, meanwhile, had been assigned to a station in the province of Anwhei in southern China. He told of an exciting time when he had to flee from his station. He had to walk, as I recall his saying, more than a hundred miles with what he could carry in his pockets. It seems that after spending a few years in Anwhei, the climate did not agree with him, and he was reassigned in 1911 to Shansi Province where he met Fannie McDonald.

In March 1913 they were married in Pingyao where they set up housekeeping, and the first child, Ruth Helen, was born December 8, 1914. Taking Ruth, they spent a year, 1915-1916, on furlough traveling to both Australia and the United States. Dad told how their ship, as it traveled around the Australian continent always stayed in port beyond the announced time. One time, however, while he was shopping at the far end of a street that led to the wharf, he heard the steamer blow its horn. Afraid he would be left on shore, he ran out of the store, and down the

street towards the ship. It seems that the captain saw him running and just kept blowing the horn. By the time Dad reached the gangway all the passengers, laughing hilariously, were standing by the rail, encouraging him to run faster. Needless to say, Dad learned his lesson and after that experience, did not presume the ship would wait for him.

Arriving back in Shansi, they were reassigned to Sichow *(pronounced See Joe)*, a city in the hill country about a hundred miles west of Pingyao. Outside the city wall on a trip when I was 17 years old I saw the graves of missionaries who had served in that city and had succumbed to the serious health problems in the area.

The country is different from anything I have ever seen elsewhere. The soil known as "loess" *(pronounced "less")* consists of sand and dirt blown from the great Gobi Desert northwest of China during the past centuries and millenniums. A few jagged mountaintops stick up above the surface of all that compacted sand and dust. Wind and rain have sculpted steep-walled canyons, sometimes a hundred feet below that vast plain, making for extremely difficult traveling. Dad served several churches scattered over a large area in those "Western Hills."

In the canyons the loess soil forming the steep banks proved to be very easy to dig into, and for centuries folks have dug caves in the nearly vertical walls of the canyons. These caves had the advantage of being simple to construct: the home-maker simply had to dig out the dirt and erect a door at the opening of his cave, and he soon had a snug home, relatively cool in summer and warm in winter. The conventionally designed cave consisted of one rectangular room in the center, with two slightly smaller rooms, one on each side, connected by a single opening to the central cave. All three caves with their arched roofs were carved into the almost vertical canyon walls. Paper windows, paper stretched over a flimsy wooden framework, let a suggestion of light into each of the three rooms, while a heavy wooden door stood at the outside

entrance to the central cave. Usually a heavily padded curtain hung over the opening from the main cave to the side caves, making any air circulation totally impossible. One can scarcely imagine the stench of a side-cave where for year after year no fresh air could ameliorate the powerful smells produced by all the family activities. The fact that folks simply did not believe in washing or bathing intensified the powerful stench. Needless to say, the death rate was appalling.

The Chinese appreciated the cave-dwellings so much that they built many homes with the same design. Using bricks, they would build a long, narrow, arch-roofed room in the center with two other rooms parallel with it, one on each side connected with the middle room by a small door-way covered with the usual padded quilt to avoid any invasion of outside air. All three rooms would have paper windows facing the street, and the entrance to the home consisted of a heavy wooden door opening into the middle room. After the brickwork was complete the builder would cover the whole three-room brick structure with two or three feet of dirt, providing excellent insulation from the heat in summer and the cold in winter.

It was in one of these man-made "caves" that I was born in August 1917. Since there was no hospital less than ten days' travel from Sichow, a nurse came to be with Mother for a month or two. Shortly after the nurse left, my sister Ruth came down with diphtheria and typhoid fever. She died December 5. While she was so desperately sick, I managed at the age of three or four months to contract diphtheria and measles. Mother did her best to nurse me back to health, but it seemed certain there would be a second grave beside Ruth's. I had an extremely high temperature for a whole week, and Mother was already beginning to prepare for my death when a Chinese pastor came in and prayed for me, and gradually I started to improve.

A year and a half later my brother Cliff was born in the same cave. At the time he was born a typhus epidemic raged through the city. In despair the sick and dying called on Mother, the only person for miles around who had any medical training. Getting up out of bed, she left us boys in the care of an "ahmah," a Chinese woman who helped with the chores around the home, and went to look after many of the sick. She was able to snatch some from the very jaws of death.

Yes, I was indeed born in a cave, but very soon my parents saw this was no place to raise a family, and we moved down to the plain. But that's another story.

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