

## Chapter 8

### *Prairie Bible Institute, 1935 – 1938*

This time, instead of working for Uncle Tom, I moved to Tadmor and began to learn a little about life on the farm. Quite naturally I had been apprehensively wondering how I would get along with the other students, all of them strangers to me, as I faced three years at Prairie Bible Institute. A month ago I had landed in Victoria, B.C., very conscious of the fact that there was not a single person I knew anywhere in North America. O yes, there were perhaps three or four Chefoo graduates I had at least known as fellow students, but none any closer than Toronto. I thought of my initial contact with the officers at the Immigration Office that was anything but cordial. During the month I had begun to make friends with a few people at the CIM home in Vancouver. Now I would suddenly be thrust into a school consisting of more than three hundred total strangers. Chefoo was bad enough; what was I getting myself into?

As I stepped off the train onto the platform, I was amazed to see about twenty young people from the school. They had come to greet any students who happened to be on the train, and there were indeed three or four others beside me. At once I felt at home with these new friends, and was thrilled to walk from the railway station to the school with these uninhibited, happy young people who would likely become personal friends in coming days! Little did I realize the fun they were having as they lured me into talking with my weird combination of British, Australian and New Zealand dialects.

Excitedly I looked around at the flat prairie. The early afternoon sun, never very high in the sky, actually seemed to do a good job of warming up the flat countryside. Out to the west the level prairie sloped gently up to the Rocky Mountains, while to the east it reached to the horizon

and a thousand miles beyond. Three little mounds on the skyline that looked more like pimples than hills gave the town of 300 inhabitants its name, Three Hills.

At once the friendliness of the students astonished me. No longer was I a member of a second-class race as I had been for ten years at Chefoo. These people displayed a real love for each other and possibly even for me! They would never know what their Christian love meant to me.

Arriving on campus, I quickly found my assigned room, D-72, on the top floor of a four-story frame building, and met my roommate, Cyril Weller from British Columbia, a senior who planned to go to the Philippines as a missionary. That evening I found the dining room where the Kitchen Crew served abundant food three times a day to three hundred young people. I found it surprising that, just as in Chefoo, the staff made it difficult for the boys to have much contact with the girls. The staff had a good reason for the segregation of the men from the women. They assumed that all three hundred students had committed themselves to prepare for the Lord's service. If the students were to make the most of their studies in the short six-month school year, they could not allow their social life to interfere. In the east side of the dining room, the boys sat at three rows of long tables, ten at each table. The ladies were seated in similar manner on the west side of the room. In between "Egypt" and "The Promised Land," the twenty-foot-wide "Red Sea" not only provided space for servers to wheel their carts of food; it also served as a distinct line of demarcation, providing a serious challenge to any hopeful Romeos. Many of the students planned to become missionaries, and the man whom God called to go to Africa would not be happy if he became engaged to a young lady bound for South America. The school tried to discourage "entangling alliances."

Next day we began to familiarize ourselves with our new surroundings. We also had to go to the office and register and pay our tuition and board for the next six months. People today hardly believe me when I tell them the total bill came to \$98.00! Later I discovered that the staff gave their time freely, trusting the Lord to supply their needs as they helped young people prepare to serve all over the world. Mr. L. E. Maxwell started the school thirteen years earlier, in 1922, and during those years others had joined him in sacrificially giving themselves in this place of service. They embraced the motto, “Hoping for nothing!” (*Luke 6:35*) What an example our teachers set for us students!

The system of study was amazing in its simplicity. Students were permitted to use no study helps, no commentaries, not even a Scofield Bible. Rather, each student was expected to read the Bible for himself and see what God said, not what other people thought God was saying. The teachers used a “question and answer method” of teaching. Each assignment would involve reading a specific passage from the Bible or history book, and then answering specific questions on the reading. The curriculum did not include a study in Bible Doctrine until the student had studied the entire Bible himself. The student’s understanding of what the Bible taught must not be affected by the doctrines he absorbed. Rather, doctrine must stand on an understanding of the Bible.

A splendid group of workers supported Mr. Maxwell. Dorothy Ruth Miller had written a masterpiece entitled *A Handbook of Ancient History in Bible Light*, and she taught Bible I and Bible II and some other subjects as well as ancient history. Other teachers handled other basic subjects needed to equip a young man or woman, enabling him or her to serve the Lord as a missionary, pastor, or Christian worker anywhere in the world, or to serve as an effective Christian in any secular field. Opportunities in music abounded in the choir, the men’s chorus,

various quartets, solos or duets, and also in classes for conducting. One of the classes I appreciated most was called “Personal Work,” consisting largely in studying and memorizing a number of Scripture verses under various headings, so that we should be able to quote God’s Word effectively in dealing with people in all kinds of situations. Since I planned to return to China, I wrote out these verses not only in English, but also in Chinese characters copied directly from my Chinese Bible.

To keep costs low, students were assigned jobs. I was on a good-sized crew of young men responsible for washing and drying the dishes three times a day, quite a good sized job, and noisy since we served 300 meals three times a day. A crew baked all our bread in a bakery whose door bore the sign, “No Loafing!” I never knew how many worked in the school’s butcher shop. The entire operation showed all the marks of a highly efficient organization.

Two students served as barbers. One afternoon as I sat in the “Barber Shop” waiting for the barber to show up, I sat talking to Pete, a young man well known for his practical jokes. Just then another joker, Frank, came in, and took in the situation at a glance. “Herb,” he said, “asked me to take his place. Come on, Pete,” he said as he slipped on the barber’s coat.

“I don’t know, Frank. Can you really cut hair?”

“Sure, I cut hair in Saskatoon all last year.”

Reluctantly Pete sat in the barber chair as Frank threw the white cloth over his shoulders and fastened it professionally behind his neck. Picking up the clippers, Frank started at the back of Pete’s neck and cut a swath to his forehead, and before Pete could stop him he cut another swath from his left ear and over the top of his head to the right ear.

The students maintained a watch over the buildings every night. Two students took their turn from 10:00 PM till 1:00 AM. A second pair watched from 1:00 till 4:00. At 4:00 the

breakfast crew was up, and it was considered unnecessary to maintain the watch any longer. I recall that when I began my first turn as a watchman, the temperature was 30 degrees below zero, and the gale blew the snow almost parallel with the ground. When my turn was over, the temperature had dropped to minus forty!

Each night the watchman had to walk through each hall in each building, as well as check on a number of details around the campus. I heard about one fellow who decided to have some fun. He found a cat, and somehow tied each paw inside a half of a walnut shell, then turned the cat loose on the top floor of the ladies' dormitory in the middle of the night to slide noisily on the bare wooden floor.

One of the staff workers, "Pop Gowdy," assisted at times by student help, could be seen driving his team of horses, "*hay-burners*," pulling a wagon for various chores. Three Hills lacked a good water supply. One year they erected a new building, "The Tabernacle," and under the platform they constructed a huge concrete cistern, eighty feet long, forty feet wide, and I do not remember how deep. During the summer they collected rain in this new cistern, but when the time came to tap into that supply, they found the concrete had cracked and the water had all leaked out. That winter Pop Gowdy spent many days in freezing, or even sub-zero temperatures, driving his hay-burners and filling wagons with snow which he melted to meet the demand.

I'll never forget that man. The only message I remember after all these years from the assemblies held shortly after noon each day came from Pop Gowdy. With his red wind-blown face he spoke on John 2:5. He read his Scripture, "Whatsoever He saith unto you, do!" and then he added, "And don't be all day a-gettin' it did!" Pop Gowdy had skills in many different areas. On one occasion he offered to resole a pair of my shoes. He used a thick piece of leather and did an excellent job, and charged me ten cents!

A number of highly skilled men worked summer and winter to make the operation possible. At the center of the campus, a crew of men kept the heating plant going. The plant, mostly underground, provided steam to all the buildings via pipes laid in tunnels six feet under the surface. One winter a number of us students helped dig a ditch to a new building. With picks we had to chop through five or six feet of frozen prairie to construct the tunnel. After the pipe was laid, the tunnel was covered with about a foot of dirt. All through the long, cold winter the tunnels proclaimed their locations with strips of green grass showing through the snow and ice.

The Men's Dormitory, D-Dorm, provided about eighty primitive rooms with two students to a room. No insulation, and no plumbing, except for the radiator in each room. When nature called, we had to run out to the 18-hole "Golf-Course" located some forty yards from the dorm. When the temperature dipped to fifty degrees below zero, we were not likely to waste time out there. I remember one December day I held my pocketknife against the windowpane for a few moments. Immediately, it froze to the glass and I had to leave it there for six weeks before the glass warmed up enough for me to retrieve it. I still have a photograph showing a glass pitcher of water lying on its side on our desk, frozen solid.

In those cold rooms we developed warm friendships with people who would invest their lives for Christ in countries scattered all over the globe. It seemed that almost everyone on that floor planned to go to the mission field. Small groups would spend time on their knees asking God for direction and praying specifically for missionaries already on the fields where they themselves hoped to serve in just a few years.

In my third year at PBI, I served on the Missionary Committee, and while there, I heard that Mr. Leslie Lyall was coming to Canada on furlough. He had served as an excellent teacher in Chefoo. I managed to get in touch with him before he left China, and invited him to speak to

the students. Shortly before landing in Vancouver, Mr. Lyall spent a few days in Hawaii where he spent some time on the beach. It must have been a shock for him to step off the train in Three Hills, with his fresh suntan, and face the *thirty degrees below zero* temperature.

It seemed there was never a dull moment. A highlight each year focused on the Junior-Senior Banquet in the crowded dining room. I remember when we were the Junior Class; during the banquet one of our class members carried a tray with about twenty cups of hot coffee. Somehow he lost his balance in the crowded room and dropped the entire tray. How he managed it I'll never know, but he successfully guided all that hot coffee into the narrow passageway between two tables without a drop falling on a guest.

I never tired of watching the spectacular nightly shows of Aurora Borealis, as the Northern Lights flashed and shimmered, constantly changing colors and shapes. Nor did I even begin to understand some of the phenomena associated with the streetlights in that cold weather. Nor the humming of the telephone wires whenever the temperature dropped below minus twenty degrees. Nor did I understand how the weather conditions produced the "Chinook wind" that brought strikingly warm weather. In 1936, the temperature dipped to fifty-two degrees below zero, and the thermometer stayed well below zero most of January and February. Then on February 27 we saw the low arch in the clouds to the west, the signal of a "Chinook wind." This was Leap Year, and on Saturday, February 29 the temperature rose to sixty degrees. Water was running off the roof. After being cooped up with cold weather for months, we young people just went wild with excitement, running around in shirtsleeves.

Much though we enjoyed the studies at Prairie, we could not stay there the year round, as we had to earn enough money to meet the expenses of the next year. At the end of the Great Depression this was a very real problem. Dad had an uncle, Uncle Tom, in St. Louis who owned

a foundry and a factory where among other things, he manufactured Mellow Warm Air Furnaces. Dad also had a sister, Essie Huegerich, who ran a boarding house in St. Louis. Common sense dictated that I should go to St. Louis and see if Uncle Tom could give me a job, and I presumed that Aunt Essie would provide a room. Soon after finding Aunt Essie's house on McPherson Avenue, I contacted Uncle Tom. He gave me a job in his factory and I worked there two summers, learning to operate a punch press and a spot-welder and being introduced to the world of factory labor.

I marvel at the graciousness of the Lord in how He taught me even as He supplied my needs. Although I had steady work, I failed to manage my money, and when it came time to return to Prairie, I went on a proverbial shoestring. I remember writing to a girl I had met in St. Louis and was delighted when she wrote back, but when I wanted to write her again I was reluctant to spend the money for postage. My total financial assets came to seven cents. Then one day I received a notice that there was a postcard waiting for me at the post office, with five cents postage due. When I retrieved the card for which I had to pay my precious five cents, I read the card: "What's wrong? Did you break your arm?" the card was signed by the girl in St. Louis. Now I had only two cents to my name, and the postage would be three cents! Yes, the Lord was trying to teach me common sense, but I was a slow learner. In fact I would not learn how to handle my finances until I married the young lady who would be my teacher.

In the spring of my junior year, 1937, Mr. Maxwell invited the Rev. J. B. Thornton of St. Louis, to be the speaker at the Spring Conference. Through him the Lord led me to Hope Congregational Church, and that contact would once again change the course of my life. With missionary service in China in mind, I visited a doctor while attending Prairie, and he strongly recommended that I spend two or three years on a farm to build up my body. Mr. Thornton told



me about a rugged 430-acre farm in the Missouri Ozarks that Mr. Wurdack, a member of Hope Church, had bought with the idea of using it as a training ground for young people who aimed to go into the Lord's service. The name of the farm was Tadmor, taken from I Kings 9:17-18 (KJV), "*And Solomon built . . . Tadmor in the wilderness.*" The farm was located in such a remote wilderness area that Pastor Thornton could think of no name more fitting than "*Tadmor.*" I was intrigued, though at the time I had no idea what Tadmor would mean to me in the coming years.

One Sunday night after the evening service at Hope Church, I went next door to the parsonage and Mr. Thornton introduced me to his son Watson, who with his wife and four children had recently returned from several years of missionary work in Japan. He had earned degrees at college that gave him considerable knowledge of dairy farming, and he would soon take charge of the farm work at Tadmor. While I stood waiting to talk with Mr. Thornton, he turned to a lady there, and said, "Mrs. Darragh, I would like you to meet Paul Mellow."

Startled, she said, "Paul Mellow! I've prayed for you every day since you were born!" She had met Mother and Dad when they were on furlough in 1915-1916 and had faithfully prayed for us through the years.

A few days later Mr. Thornton drove me to "Camp Tadmor." Leaving old Highway 66 at St. James, we drove a few miles on a gravel road, then plunged down a steep track into Asher Hollow and drove along this creek bed several miles. The trail was so primitive that no one made the attempt unless he had an axe and shovel in the car with him. Tadmor looked exciting, but because I had to work and earn enough to see me through one more winter at PBI, I could not spend much time there that summer. My brother Cliff arrived from China, and we began to renew our relationship as brothers. We shared a room in Aunt Essie's house, and he joined me in

working for Uncle Tom. Cliff, an avid photographer, developed a makeshift darkroom behind the furnace in the basement. Although the facilities were distinctly crude, he was able to produce many acceptable pictures of activities and friends at Hope Church. About the time that I went back to PBI, Cliff enrolled at Wheaton College for one year.

The senior year at Prairie, the winter of '37 – '38, crammed with endless activities and friendships, passed all too quickly, and it was soon time to return to Aunt Essie's house in St. Louis. In Hope Church I met Bernadine Bailey and fell for her. Actually, I had a good relationship with her mother for two years before things progressed very far with Bernadine. The Bailey home, an upstairs flat on a street close to the church, became a veritable center of fun for us young people. Bernadine's father worked on the night shift and got home about midnight. By that time peanut shells littered the floor, and we made a hasty exit.

In the early summer I moved to Tadmor, and by the time I arrived there Watson was already taking charge of a little country church in the Asher Hollow School where twenty to thirty folks met Sunday morning and Wednesday night. He also developed a route where we visited country schools around us. We spent either one or two days each week in this work, visiting more than a dozen schools with between fifteen and thirty children in each school.

The farm at Tadmor included half a dozen milk cows as well as hogs and chickens. So occasionally we would drive to St. Louis, 115 miles up Old Highway 66, and peddle hams, pork sausage, eggs and butter. We would leave Tadmor about 5:00 in the morning and arrive in St. Louis about 8:30 or 9:00. I found a certain sadistic pleasure in ringing the bell at the Bailey home and ridiculing Bernadine for not being up and busy at that time of day. I kept the pressure on her and accused her of running away from me for two years till she caught me.

All this time the Lord was preparing me for service, and I couldn't see just where He was leading. I wrote to the China Inland Mission, but they advised me to continue working on the farm till I would gain more physical strength. I often thought back to the ankle-deep water as He led me at Chefoo, and then I realized He was still leading me, first at Prairie, and now at Tadmor, giving me an actual taste of what it would mean to serve Him. And I could not help looking forward, wondering what He had in store for me. One thing I was beginning to learn, that indeed I could trust the Lord to bring me through any rivers that lay ahead.

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