
Chapter Seven
BUT IT ALL STARTED OUT SO RIGHT

Larry and Harold Sullivan came to Chicago about 10 days before the Democratic Convention in August 1968. Laughing easily and often, "Sully" was a short, barrel-chested man who didn't own a neck but was compensated with enough hair on his back to weave a rug. Landing on Anzio Beach during World War II, he fought in every front line trench for the liberation of Italy and, in consequence, was never more than a slight nudge away from a great story. His family left the Assemblies of God to help Larry begin his work in Harpersfield and his daughter, Dianne, headed the youth ministry. With a cultivated reputation for fearlessness, she was Larry's most ardent supporter, eventually becoming assistant Pastor and "prophetess." [Think nurse Ratchett in the Cookoo's Nest.] "God laid you on our hearts," they said. While I appreciated their concern, my life was going in a completely different direction, thank you very much. I was now a family man and for the first time in my life was actually beginning to put down some roots. Reporting for duty in Nirvanaburg wasn't even on my radarscope. Growing tensions in the streets of Chicago were.

While none of us envisioned Armageddon Lite in ten days, every radical group in the country was already represented. Word was starting to

circulate that bad things could happen with whispers of an assassination attempt on the life of George McGovern lacing key conversations. There was only one appropriate way to deal with that. It was time to get high. While Larry was in town Sandy decided to take her first LSD trip. It was a bad one. The drug-induced hallucinations terrified her and she came home that night thoroughly convinced the city was going up in flames, real soon. She told me she was getting out, leaving and taking Shannon to Ohio. Excuse me? There was no reasoning with her. Buffalo Springfield sang,

*“Paranoia strikes deep
into your life it will creep”*

But this paranoia didn't creep. It assaulted. She was leaving, all right and taking our daughter with her. She wasn't leaving next month or next week. She was leaving tonight. I should've held her down until help arrived but all I could think of was the sudden possibility of losing my child and the only woman I ever loved. I should've stayed. She would've come to herself eventually and a place would have been waiting for her. But I'd never seen her like that and I wasn't positive she *would* come back. The stakes were far too high and I wasn't willing to gamble the loss of that which meant most to me. Within 24 hours we had all our belongings packed in a U-Haul trailer, heading someplace I didn't want to go. I took all the marijuana I could scrape together and a bad attitude, come by a bit more easily. Just as life was beginning to level out I was confronted with starting all over again in a situation I wanted nothing to do with.

Randy, Matt and Esther went as well, the youngest because of their age. Laura and Cookie, Randy's girlfriend, followed within six months. While only fifteen, Esther was already pregnant. She thought she could identify the sperm donor but wasn't positive. Randy had his own problems. Motoring somewhere in the vicinity of the planet Neptune, he had it in his head that he was going to Ohio to become some kind of cosmic lightning rod. I would hear him muttering as he looked off into space, stroking his beard, “A prophet. Hmm. Yeah.” By now, years of non-stop drug abuse had wrecked us. We were true children of our era, dysfunctional beyond understanding and thoroughly out of touch with the real world. With the tape player blasting Jim Morrison and the Doors, “Hall of the Lizard King” -

"Burn, burn, burn
Down, down, down
Soon, soon, soon."

we pulled away - a collective mess, towing a trailer, headed east on Interstate 90 toward a destructive delusion that would cost us more than our combined imaginations could bear. Of the seven souls in that car, two would not live beyond their twenties, a third would lie on a death bed for six months and it would be thirty years before I felt my life belonged to me again.

When arriving in Ohio, Sully helped me get a job as a landfill operator working for the Engineering Department in the city of Solon. But the drive was too long and I didn't have dependable transportation. I didn't need a car in Chicago. Everything I needed, including my job, was within walking distance. More and more it was looking, early, like this just wasn't going to work. For the next several years I drifted between jobs, everything from a "marker-maker," laying out patterns for men's clothing, to three different jobs as a printer to stamping rubber parts for the automotive industry to construction. Tedious years result in tedious sentences. Somewhere early on, as a result of being surrounded by Christians, I decided to give this Christianity thing one more try. Not pretend but really. This was going to be a tough nut for me to crack. Restraint had never been part of my style.

Why doesn't Jesus just leave people alone? He's like a vampire. He can only enter if invited but, once inside, you can't seem to get rid of him and he turns you into something else. Time can reveal you were turned into something for which you hadn't really bargained. Meanwhile, there are too many wonders to be tasted and foolish adventures to be lived. I didn't make me this way. Had I been given the option I certainly wouldn't have put in a request for this person. Well, maybe I'd keep the cuteness. I decided that if God didn't like me the way I was, then He was going to have to change me. I'd already demonstrated my inability for such and pretending exceeded the limits of my tastes as well as the borders of truth. I knew such a position would put me out of step with everyone but I deemed the Church sufficiently populated with pretenders.

In years past my continual Achilles heal was music: always drawn back into “the world“ by something I drew from playing that made me feel vital. Consequently, after I recommitted my life to Christ, I set my guitar aside never touching it for several months in an effort to keep it under control. It didn’t come out again until I picked it up and wrote a piece for the closing of our Saturday night radio broadcast, “Time for the Risen Christ.” The song, “*There is still hope in Jesus*” was written on the tailgate of a red, pickup truck parked in the middle of nowhere. It was late. Comet Kahoutek was passing over that night and I wanted to see it. As I sat strumming my guitar beneath the glow of the deep night, I came up with what I felt was a reasonably good tune but the only words that would come were

*There is still hope in Jesus
Let Him pick up the pieces
of your life
And start anew
There’s so much good you can do.*

That was it. That was enough. "Pretty much says it all," I thought. Sitting in Larry's living room on Blaine Street in Geneva, I played the section with words, using it as a chorus, humming during verses. As it turned out the humming was perfect for Larry to overlay the closing words of the broadcast. Perfect. The first, two pieces of an interesting, musical synergy came together. A rolling, left handed blues piano and driving rhythm guitar can fill a room with toe tappers. Built around a local, weekly radio program on WREO in Ashtabula County, our modest aim was to win the whole world for Jesus. That’s all. We knew the first task was to preach the Good News to those in “Jerusalem and Judea,” close to home. If it doesn’t work at home, don’t export it. But how do you finance a revolution? How do you take street people of questionable report and get them in shape for spiritual warfare? If there were a top ten list of famous last words I’m certain these would be on it: “but it all started out so right.”

Every weekend, excursions were taken to the streets of “the mistake by the lake,” as Cleveland was known in those days. Motorcycle gangs from Hells Angels to the Chosen Few, prostitutes and addicts, musicians and bar patrons, we went to where the mission field was. No excuses.

The mission and the moment might never come again. Jesus was coming back. This was the unction, the holy grease that drove the entire Charismatic movement. We had no way of knowing God was in process of pouring new wine into old bottles throughout the Church in America. We believed ministry was a calling and gift from God, resident within you and one didn't wait for opportunity or place to minister. If you were called, you answered. If you were sent, you went. You created the opportunities and tools for ministry. We weren't at all concerned about growing a bigger congregation. We were concerned about turning people away from the precipice.

We produced our own literature handing out tens of thousands of a straightforward salvation tract referred to as "The Skeleton Tract" because of the picture of a human skeleton on the front cover. We were taught to begin our street ministry efforts with the question just above the skeleton: "If you were to die tonight, do you know where you would spend eternity?" Might as well jump right in. We'd always been a "way-up-in-your-face" kind of people. We were at home in the street. It held very few surprises for us. The kind of fearless aggression essential to effective street ministry was already part of our character. It had only to be redeemed, re-directed and channeled into a consistently constructive direction. Whether we were liked or our methods appreciated was of zero consequence to us. It would've been nice had everyone liked us but it wasn't necessary. We could live with you or without you but you were going to make a decision, today. In fact, it was our street ministry that began to separate and further isolate us from other Christians. The more like us you were, the more nearly correct you were and anything other than an approach like ours was considered "wishy-washy" and compromise.

Why do so many Christians base their approach to others on Biblical exceptions, clinging to the cleansing of the Temple or Apostolic denunciations as the only pattern for coexistence with other "so called" believers? I don't know but I think it must be a family trait. It's fairly endemic. For us, a rigid approach seemed natural. We came from a world in which you were either "real" or "plastic." Plastic people were those we deemed stamped from a mold living in "ticky-tacky houses all in a row." Our entire generation seemed intent on evaluating everything through an extremist bias; as if anything other than everything would

never do. Judgment was the watchword and, to a child with a hammer, everything is a nail.

In all those years we rarely ran into any other group of Christians in the street. We felt most believers were content to live out their faith as lowly beacons of restraint rather than pound pavement. Of course, our idea of “the streets” included spending the night in the back of Adele’s Bar on 105th and Euclid in Cleveland with Hell’s Angels who were taking bets on who could eat the most vomit. They drank until they threw-up and the bet was on. Our idea of “the streets” included giving gospel tracts to hookers when they asked us how much money we had to spend, or giving our jackets to heroin addicts shivering violently on a hot summer night because they couldn’t “get well.” Getting “a fix” is what the uninitiated call it. Though in the streets witnessing almost every night, we soon came to feel it just wasn’t enough. We had to do more.

We took entire towns as mission fields. Sandy and I launched a full, frontal assault on the town of Rock Creek while Major Goodenough and I surrounded the village of Andover. Describing neither rank nor character that could be a tough name to live with. Twice a week, Wednesday evening and Saturday morning, we knocked on doors. Conducting a “Church and Sunday School Survey,” we filled out a form at every stop including name, address and whether or not the family attended church or Sunday school. The conversations always moved toward the question, “If you were to die tonight, do you know where you would spend eternity?” We knocked on doors until someone accepted Christ and then attempted to set up weekly Bible studies in that home. Inviting other converts from that town to attend, we created small cells in various locations. We were simply repeating what we saw as the historic, New Testament pattern for church growth. Most evangelically minded organizations have similar programs, but few independent churches embraced it the way we did. Between 1968 and 1971 every household in the towns of Geneva, Rock Creek, Jefferson, New Lyme, Andover and Austinburg, Ohio, had the gospel hand-delivered to their door. But it still wasn’t enough. Jesus was coming back.

Every year we leased a small, circus-type tent at the Ashtabula County Fair. That became a necessity when security wouldn’t allow us to distribute literature on the fairway. Solution? Take over one end of the

fairway. Holding Church services, we invited fair-goers in for refreshments and personal work. We could pass out materials to anyone walking by. The women worked the fair during the day and the rest of us took up the evening shift after coming home from work. But that wasn't enough.

We went to the farm camps of migrant workers from Mexico who came to Northeast Ohio to pick the rather extensive grape harvest. Using someone to interpret, as well as Spanish learned while at Teen Challenge, Sandy and I held church one Sunday afternoon every month. The other Sundays were spent ministering in the Ashtabula County Jail or local nursing homes. Securing Spanish tracts, bibles and hymnals from a variety of foreign missions organizations, we labored through the end of the grape harvest. But it still wasn't enough, so we started the Saturday night radio broadcast, "Time for the Risen Christ" in another attempt to touch our community with the Good News. But we had to do more. We started a community action group called, "The Way Out," as an attempt to mobilize people of influence in Ashtabula County for an anti-drug campaign. The Board of Directors for the Way Out consisted of

- Harold Fuller, Ashtabula County Commissioner
- Ray Cowles, Director of the Ashtabula County Council on Alcoholism
- Ora Tyus, Director of Ashtabula County's shelter for abused women
- Sybil Devai, manager of the local Howard Johnson's
- Bishop Oree Keyes from the Apostolic Faith Church of God
- Dr. Herschel Rhodes, coroner of Wyandotte County

Randy, Cookie, Laura, Sandy and I were the token ex-dope fiends on the Board. In all, it was a highly respectable group. We started a business in Geneva by the same name in an effort to provide some source of revenue for the project, as well as having a public location from which to work. It occupied the entire second floor above a real estate office on the corner of the busiest intersection in Geneva. Selling bulk health food items during the day, our growing musical group used the location for practices at night. We didn't have enough room anywhere else. The location also provided a place where street people could come and hear the gospel in a harmless, non-threatening environment much

like Christian coffee houses did later. None of us, including Larry, had any background in running a business and it soon dissolved. It did serve to give us a very positive identity in the community and strengthened our beliefs that we were being led by God's hand.

Still, we felt we had to do more. True, we gave our time and money but if Jesus was really coming "soon," then our personal futures meant absolutely nothing. "Soon" was more than a relative term to us. "Soon" meant keeping your bags packed. This was not an annual emphasis on evangelism and then we could get on with our lives. This was our life. We decided the only thing to do was to give everything, literally. We began to examine the idea of securing a communal lifestyle giving our entire paychecks and all our possessions. Enabling us to marshal our resources, we felt the whole would be significantly greater than the sum of its parts. Besides that, communes weren't all that unusual at the closing of the '60's. The scope of opportunity and labor necessary for a timely, "Harvest" of souls, provided us a challenge we couldn't dismiss. With so much work to do we had to broaden our vision. The idea of a rural, training center, much like Teen Challenge but more specifically focused toward preparation for ministry, seemed a natural to us. There was no such place in the entire state. This effort would be nothing less than an all-out attempt to flood the streets of Northeast Ohio with evangelists. We believed history replete with examples of empires overthrown via nothing more than the power of a radical vision in a willing heart. We had an armory full of those.

But none of us owned any property. We barely had jobs. Had we taken one look through the prism of business sense, I'm certain analysis paralysis would've infected us. That's why revival always breaks out among the young: they don't know what they can't do. So we started with what we had and what we **could** do. We started to accumulate animals on the small farm rented by one of the families in the church. We also purchased a small, offset printing press to crank out literature. This change of focus and other rumored issues didn't sit well with everyone.

Several prominent members of the church were focused on finishing the work started in Harpersfield, in continuing the original vision of a community church with a significant, evangelistic thrust. Living in a

commune wasn't their idea of a good time. Gilbert, Larry's mother and "Sully," along with his entire family except Dianne, left the church. Larry was now the oldest person in the congregation, chronologically and spiritually. There was no one, in a natural position of respect, to correct him or challenge his thinking. I'm convinced this provided the root for his eventual corruption. Men, women and children, we were about 45 souls. A spiritualized version of Attila's hordes, we were an unlikely army mobilized for conquest, stopping for nothing. The first casualties were the General's wife and two youngest children.